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**An Examination of Identity
Creation and Management Process
in New Organisational Entrants**

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An Examination of Identity Creation and Management Process in New Organisational Entrants



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ABSTRACT

The problems relating to unsuccessful organisational identity creation can affect both the individual's and the organisation's chances of attaining successful or satisfactory outcomes. Both the individual and the organisation benefit from the individual being able to carry out appropriate identity work and construct a stable identity that can be incorporated into the pre-existing contents of their "identity portfolio". This paper reports on a research programme that sought a deeper understanding of the processes involved in identity creation and management by new organisational entrants. Merging work from a variety of fields (e.g. Leonard Beauvais and Scholl, 1999; Campbell-Clark 2000; Haslam, 2003; Ashforth, 2000) the research focussed on the flow, within the individual, between one identity and another, and how this process affects the facilitation of increased levels of perceived compatibility between the identities that make up an individual's sense of self. The research also examined how an individual's self-concept/sense of self can be a motivational force that affects their behavioural choices. This involved the examination of the links between an individual's dominant motivators within a particular context in their life and how the individual constructs/reconstructs their identity within that context.

The research sample consisted of forty new organisational entrants. An initial quantitative survey was conducted, which was followed by a series of in-depth qualitative interviews over a period of seven months. This allowed the examination of the change in the structure of the participants' lives between their creation of the new context specific identity and when this identity had become established (or not). The results deliver a model that displays how proactive identity management strategies, adaptive strategies to deal with perceived dissonance, and successful management of motivational profiles were characteristics of successful adaptors. The comparative results, with those less successful, will be useful to researchers working in the areas of

new identity creation and/or identity management and would be of interest to those dealing with new entrant management.

Key Words: Identity Creation, Identity Portfolio, New Organisational Entrants

INTRODUCTION

How individuals conceptualise themselves, how they categorise themselves, as women, sons, Buddhists, teachers, athletes etc. shapes how they think, feel and behave in the worlds they perceive (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). Current literature abounds with theories regarding self, identity, and how individuals move between the different parts of their lives, however there is also much conceptual clutter and a lack of communication between differing theorists and areas of study. This paper draws together concepts from several areas of study (e.g. Leonard, Beauvais and Scholl, 1999; Campbell-Clark, 2000; Ashforth, 2001) in order to utilise their strengths while avoiding their respective conceptual weaknesses.

The goal of this paper is to produce a rich, in-depth view of the processes involved in how new organisational entrants conceptualise themselves as they attempt to incorporate an appropriate, new identity into the pre-existing portfolio of identities they already possess. The production of this in-depth view is also used as a vehicle for deepening an understanding of processes involved in identity creation and management, where identity is seen as something fluid and constantly evolving, and how these processes are involved in an individual's attempts to maintain a positive sense of self.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Identity Structures

In an individual's life early feedback from a primary reference group, e.g. a family, shapes one's orientation to the world, and stimulates the creation of the individual's global identity (Ashforth, 2001; Leonard et al, 1999). However to say that one's global identity is created is not to say that it is formed into a stable, fixed entity, rather that while one's global identity will endure throughout the lifespan it will be constantly and fluidly developing as one interacts with the elements of the world around them. An individual's global identity is made up of parts of their 'personal and social identities... that are integrated into a roughly coherent self-system or self-theory' (Epstein, 1980, Ashforth, 2001:53). To say that one's global identity is formed in response to feedback from a reference group is to acknowledge that this was the context within which identification is taking place.

Throughout the individual's life then there are many groups to which they may become affiliated as they link themselves to reference groups through the adoption of certain social identities i.e. by accepting the group's norms, role expectations etc (Alvesson, 2004; Ashforth, 2001; Leonard et al, 1999; Campbell-Clark, 2000).

The process of adopting an identity (either global or role-specific) guides the individual's behaviour for that identity (Stryker and Statham, 1985), as when an individual internalises these context specific values, norms etc., they develops an identity tied closely to membership of that context, i.e. the importance that a certain role-specific identity has is a function of the social and emotional commitment the

individual gives to that role (Stryker and Serpe, 1982; Van Dick, Christ, Stellmacher, Wagner, Ahlswede, Grubba, Hauptmeier, Hohfled, Moltzen and Tissington, 2004). As an individual adopts the traits etc. associated with a desired identity they must then justify the adoption of these attributes, which reinforces the identity, and this again, in turn, reinforces the associated behaviours.

Identification Contexts

If one examines an individual's life then, they may be observed to have a global identity and a number of role-specific identities, with these identities being associated with different behavioural norms, dress codes, ways of conversing etc. Due to these differences it may require effort, on the individual's behalf, in terms of psychological, physical and/or temporal factors for an individual to go from utilising one such identity or mode of being to utilising another. Each of these identities may be cued by different elements, which can again be psychological (being at work but thinking of the activities planned for later in the evening), physical (arriving at the building you work in) or temporal (seeing it is time to finish the work-day). These elements may come together in the form of perceived contexts, to which individual's may assign labels such as 'work', 'family' etc. It is within these contexts that identification, that is to say the adoption of an identity (global or role-specific), takes place and within this paper they will therefore be referred to as identification contexts.

The complexity of any identification context depends on the individual's perception. As an individual perceives an identification context they create something from which they will perceive their entrance and exit, as 'to define something is to mark its boundaries, to surround it with a mental fence that separates it from all else' (Zerubavel, 1991:2). This allows individuals to perceive themselves as having identities at differing levels of abstraction, for example one may define oneself as a human being, a male human being, an academic, a philosophy teacher and an expert on ancient Greek philosophy, depending on the context involved. When one examines a particular identity, created/utilised due to the presence of a particular identification context, one may find that the identity itself, for example a perceived work identity, may itself contain multiple identities such as those mentioned above, academic, philosophy teacher, expert on ancient Greek philosophy.

Identity Hierarchy

The global and role-specific identities can be viewed as existing in a hierarchy of identities (Leonard et al, 1999) starting with the 'global identity', which endures across the individual's life, regardless of situation or variable change, and then on through the role-specific identities. Due to the enduring nature of the global identity it influences the role-specific identities that the individual adopts, however a role-specific identity may also feedback to and change the global identity, and thus effect all the individual's other role-specific identities. An example of this would be where an individual adopts a role-specific identity such as becoming a member of a martial

arts school where they subsequently internalize norms to do with meditation, dedication, focus and strength of will. This individual values their new role-specific identity to such a degree that it becomes part of their core self-definition and in this way changes their global identity. As their global identity has influence over all the individual's role-specific identities this change subsequently impacts on all aspects of the individual's life to a greater or lesser extent.

The processes outlined above are not formulaic; they are continuous/fluid as the individual moves through life, reflecting on "who they are" and "who they want to be". It is through this fluid process that an individual builds up their identity portfolio, that is to say the 'identity resources' (Haslam, 2002) that the individual may draw upon when they need to utilise an appropriate identity for a particular context.

The Self-Concept as a Source of Motivation

The identity structures discussed above are a source of motivation to the individual in that the individual is motivated to preserve and further their perceived identity(ies) (Leonard et al, 1999). This allows an individual to maintain a positive sense of themselves. In this way one can see that an individual is constantly motivated to facilitate as high a level of perceived identity compatibility (i.e. how easy the individual finds the flow between their identities) as possible, and also to avoid circumstances where this facilitation would be hampered and thus the levels of perceived identity compatibility diminished.

It is important to explore how identity structures act as sources of motivation, in addition to traditionally proposed motivational sources, in that there may be a great difference between two individual's taking on seemingly similar role-specific identities as organisational members where one is motivated by a need to prove themselves externally to people around them and another who is motivated by living up to their own, internally held standards. Leonard et al (1999) propose such a metatheory of integrated motivational sources. Five motivational sources are proposed: intrinsic (having fun); extrinsic/instrumental (Gaining extrinsic rewards e.g. money); external self-concept (Gaining positive social feedback, relative to others); internal self-concept (Being able to perceive a tie between identity and group success. It is not important that others recognise the tie, only that the individual perceives it); and goal internalization (Ensuring that the goals of the group/team/organisation are attained).

What is of greatest importance here is that for each identity (global and role-specific) an individual possesses they will have a motivational profile. Each motivational profile reflects the relative strength of the five motivational sources. Also within each motivational profile there is a dominant source of motivation that becomes a focal point for decision-making and behaviour. Where there is conflict between motivational sources, the dominant source will come out on top with regard to the course of action the individual chooses. If an identity possessed by an individual and the dominant motivational source the individual holds for that identity

are at odds, this would motivate the individual to attempt to either change the circumstance so that they are no longer at odds or discontinue the use of that identity. An example of this would be if an individual works purely for financial gain (extrinsic motivation) and they are then told that they may continue to work but they will no longer be paid, the individual will be motivated to change that fact (Leonard et al, 1999), or if this is not possible to leave that work and it's associated role-specific identity (Ashforth, 2001).

The Flow between Identities

As an individual flows from one identity (global or role-specific) to another in their life, i.e. they cease to react to one identification context as they then come into contact with another (psychologically and perhaps also physically and/or temporally), a number of factors may be at play. The individual may have proactively altered their identity and its associated behaviours, language etc to suit the next identity, in order to receive affirming feedback from all the reference groups involved, so that all identities involved are strengthened. However this proactive identity management is not always possible and dissonance (Festinger, 1957) may occur as two identification contexts (or elements from two identification contexts), perceived to be inconsistent, meet within the individual's perception resulting in an uncomfortable state of cognitive distress, the individual not knowing which identity to utilise or utilising an inappropriate one and receiving disaffirming feedback. It is here that an individual may employ an adaptive strategy (such as those described in Leonard et al, 1999) in an attempt to eliminate or minimise the dissonance. Through proactive identity management and/or adaptive strategies used to minimise/eliminate dissonance, an individual attempts to facilitate the highest level of perceived identity compatibility possible while flowing between the identities in their life.

As discussed above an important component in facilitating increased levels of perceived identity compatibility is the idea of proactively managing one's identities. This is in order that dissonance is avoided and hence identity flow is as effortless as possible. There are different strategies that individuals may employ in their proactive identity management and a number of factors that influence the choice of which strategy to utilise.

One form of proactive identity management is seen in the fact that individuals vary with respect to their preference for the degree to which they psychologically (and perhaps physically/temporally) integrate or segment the identities within their life (Nippert-Eng, 1996; Ashforth, 2001). Identity segmentation allows an individual to psychologically divide some or all of their identities. This facilitates a reduced risk of the occurrence of incidents of dissonance as there is then less chance of the identities "contaminating" each other providing a degree of "peace of mind" (Nippert-Eng, 1996; Ashforth, 2001). Identity segmentation may mean that identities develop in parallel, the most extreme state of which being that identities, within the one individual, are 'mutually exclusive and perhaps even antithetical' (Ashforth,

2000:476). Identity integration allows an individual to psychologically merge some or all of their identities. This facilitates a straightforward identity flow between the associated identities, within the individual. However there is increased risk of the occurrence of dissonance as elements from more than one identification context may be psychologically or physically present at the same time (Nippert-Eng, 1996; Ashforth, 2001). Extreme examples of identity integration would be isolated members of monastic orders (Nippert-Eng, 1996; Ashforth, 2001). These types of individuals perceive their life to be ‘a single, all purpose-mentality; or one way of being, one amorphous self’ (Nippert-Eng, 1996).

An individual’s preference and choice of identity integration or segmentation is also influenced by a number of cultural factors, i.e. collectivism, femininity, low uncertainty avoidance and/or low power distance encourages identity merging, whereas individualism, masculine, high uncertainty avoidance and/or high power distance tend to encourage identity division.

Identity Creation and Management in the New Organisational Entrant

Also of importance, in this research, is the process by which an individual enters a new organisational context, and therefore creates a new identity for this new identification context. This process is important because it allows one to view the previously discussed concepts “in action”. Not only does a new identity need to be created but it then needs to be integrated into the portfolio of identities the individual already possessed as it is this ‘identity work’ (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003) that needs to be carried out successfully if high levels of perceived identity compatibility are to be facilitated.

Summary

In summary this paper focuses on identity creation and management processes, the individual’s flow between the different contexts that exist in their lives; and how these processes impact on the individual as they attempt to enter a new organisational context, create a new context-specific identity, and integrate in into their pre-existing life. There is also a focus on how these processes impact on the individual’s ability to avoid dissonance and to facilitate high levels of perceived identity compatibility, through the utilisation of certain pro-active or adaptive strategies.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The unit of analysis, within the research, were individual, first year, mature students within two Irish Universities. The thirty-four participants were from a range of different first year courses and varied with regard to age (twenty three to seventy-four years of age) occupational history and educational background.

A phenomenological, longitudinal, and idiographic approach was adopted, in that the research focused on the subjective experiences of the participants and not on the

exploration of an objective “reality”. Similar methodologies have been utilised by Beyer and Hannah (2002) and Smith (1999). Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used to collect data, a written answer booklet was developed to collect initial information about how the participants perceived themselves and their lives and this was then followed up by in-depth, semi-structured interviews.

The data collected was fully transcribed and inputted into the QSR Nvivo software package and was analysed using a methodological framework involving discourse analyses (Potter, 1997), and more specifically Edwards and Potter’s (1992) Discursive Action Model approach (Discursive Psychology), as this was found to be the most appropriate method of analysis (Edwards and Potter, 1992; Wetherell, Taylor and Yates, 2001). This involved the careful reading and rereading of the data and then coding the data into categories, giving careful consideration to how data should be coded, examining the data for alternative ways to read the text, counterfactuals etc. Theoretical saturation was reached within the data gathered from the thirty-four participants.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Through the collection and analysis of data the research explored what emerged in the participant’s constructions of themselves and their lives, in terms of what they described as contributing to their being successful or unsuccessful in creating and managing their new organisational identity and incorporating it into their pre-existing identity portfolio.

Entry Shock

Firstly the participants’ constructions of their entry into this new organisational context portray an event in their lives which was, for the majority of the participants, a difficult and stressful time, which impacted on their attempts to create a new and appropriate identity. Several of the participants, at phase one, were experiencing entry shock (Ashforth, 2001) and subsequently described having high levels of anxiety.

“oh coming into the class I was a nervous wreck definitely” (P25)

“college is just a huge huge fear factor emmm you know I really am I’m still finding it extremely challenging, I’m still looking searching for my brain to be honest I feel I have zero concentration and zero powers of retention...so I panic and I’m fearful” (P15)

Looking at the above quote from P15 it is interesting to note that before this participant entered full time education she had been a manager for many years in a semi-state company yet for her this new context brings with it fear and panic and so we see a high level of anxiety that was typical of many of the participants as they entered this context.

Having recently entered this new organisational setting the participants were still getting to grips with what their place was to be within the organisation, and whether it matched their pre-conceived ideas and expectations of what it would be like

“I'm wondering is it for me or is it not for me even though I did have that preparation and I did really genuinely think this is what I want to do ... I am terrified that I'll get to the end of the year and fail” (P33)

For some entering the new organisational context was part of a major (macro) transition from a previous salient context and identity, for example from an occupational sphere or life as a full time home-maker, to this new one, for example the first participant quoted below decided to go to university after taking early retirement following an industrial dispute at her former workplace:

“the first morning I came down here I cried all the way down the road because its just so emotional because you're leaving people who you know, who you've grown up with basically for twenty-five years” (P15)

“I never would have been pressured into thinking about the family but it was just that the family was always there and were important to me that was all part of my life it wasn't that they wanted to take over my life it was because that was what I did that was part of my life I couldn't get away from that not that I wanted to you know what I mean but when I got away, it was so different to think like I'm, I'm me kind of and I don't have to think like they do and don't have to be like they are and I don't have to do it like they want me to do all the time I can think for myself” (P29).

The above quote from P29 also indicates how several of the participants, for whom entering this new organisational context reflected a major transition from a previous salient identity, constructed their experience of such a transition as providing a valuable opportunity for identity exploration/personal growth and development, as well as being stressful.

Motivational Profiles in the New Organisational Context

That which motivated the participants within the new organisational context also impacted on the form their new identity took. For the majority of the participants their entering this new organisational context was connected to their sense of personal achievement or self-esteem.

“So far I feel as if I've underachieved in most aspects of life,...I've returned to education to improve everything.” (P9)

However it became apparent that there were differences between participants with regard to the motivations that lay behind their decision to attend university. Some participants constructed their coming to college as something that would advance their careers and therefore their lives. These career orientated participants tended to be younger and many of them constructed themselves as having been on a path to university for quite a while.

“I finally realised what I want to do with my life and how I can go about achieving it, so I applied to two colleges and was accepted for both which surprised me but also gave me more confidence in what I’m about to do.” (P1)

Other participants perceived their entrance into the university as something they wished to do, purely for themselves, more related to self-esteem than to becoming more qualified. These Participants tended to be older and saw the process as a fulfilment of something they had not had the chance to do or passed up the chance earlier in their lives. As one participant who recently turned 75 said

“people keep asking me what I’ll do with the degree when I get it and I keep telling them I’ll probably be buried with it!” (P11)

A common feature in the evolution of the participants’ new identities was that a strong need for approval and recognition (which is associated with an external self-concept motivational source) from family, friends or partners with regard to the new organisational context was expressed in many participants’ motivational profiles at time one.

“the relationship that I’m in it’s a brilliant relationship don’t get me wrong but it’s I’ve been talking about this for so long, being where I am now, and achieving it and to be it’s just I need that bit of approval to go yeah you were right” (P3)

However for many of these participants this had changed by phase two, where in retrospect this no longer made sense to them and they perceived their presence in the new organisational context to be more associated with their own standards and goals (associated with an internal self-concept motivational source) and they constructed family, friends or partners as being part of a support network

*“well definitely approval in relationship doesn’t come into the equation at all I’d have to say emmm, ... it’s kind of different stuff ... I don’t know I’d say it’d be totally different to what I have written there anyway ...that one the approval...I think that would be gone anyway,
I: and... what kind of thing would be the most important thing there now
P3: understanding maybe...or support” (P3)*

Incorporating the New Identity with the Pre-existing identity Portfolio

The participants in this study all had a pre-existing life within which the new organisational identity had to be incorporated (this could be achieved by either identity merging or segregation). If conflict between these identities was to be avoided careful preparation was needed on the participant's behalf.

“ you have to juggle there you know or, it's not an issue for me because I'm used to it... like there's some women on my course who haven't worked for many years and, they're all saying god how are we going to get all this work done, ...but it's not that big an issue for me because I know I'll just get it done... it may mean you know being up late at night or being up extra early in the morning but I'll get it done somehow” (P15)

Some participants constructed themselves as being extremely pro-active in their preparation for the inclusion of this new context into their lives by, for example, restructuring their family life so as to be able to give maximum possible attention to both contexts.

“at the minute in the household I have a girl coming in to do the jobs around the house so it's done on Thursday before I get home and so then all I've to do is a bit of shopping” (P8)

There were a minority of participants who were working full time jobs or were engaged in other time consuming activities, for example religious activities, voluntary work or lobby groups, in addition to attending university full time and yet these individual's didn't perceive these different salient and time-consuming contexts as interfering with one another.

“ I'm doing like forty fifty hours work and then college at the moment is only about thirty hours so...that's seventy hours it's a hell of a lot of hours but it's just it just kind of comes natural” (P12)

However, there were things that hampered the ability to integrate the new identity, as many participants also described the ways in which the different elements within their lives would “clash” with or disrupt each other causing dissonance within the individual, which then need to be dealt with if that dissonance is to be minimised or eliminated. This can be in terms of a lack of preparation that could help avoid dissonance.

“Balancing the study and the work you know I'm just doing something fundamentally wrong there, I can't sort it out...my lack of time management” (P7)

Often the participants described themselves as being torn between the new organisational identity and another salient identity in their life. A strong example of this was where some of the female participants' constructed themselves as being torn between their perceptions of themselves as parents and their new identity as mature students

"I just find it difficult to detach like even here some of the lecturers would say to us as mature students right you're coming back to college you have to learn to put yourself at number one you have to detach yourself from what's going on around you I don't know if I can do that actually...to put it on a very basic language people would say just don't do their washing let them do it themselves you know but I couldn't because I know if I didn't there's be five school shirts on the floor in the bedroom like and on Monday morning there'd be arghhh like I've no school shirt and I'd be stressed out the whole weekend thinking there's going to be killing here Monday morning even though I might have said I'm not doing your washing anymore get it sorted yourself" (P15)

For those participants how were experiencing or had experienced dissonance, some appeared to have no solution

*"I: and do you see any way of solving the things that are clashing at the moment
P13: There's nothing I can do...it's just having to live with it that's it" (p13)*

However, it was more common for the participants to construct themselves as then attempting to minimise or eliminate this dissonance. Examples of the types of processes or adaptive strategies that the participants described themselves as using were:

- Attempting to plan or organise better in order to avoid future problems
- Prioritising the most important parts of their life over the other parts
- Normalising the dissonance causing variable for example some of the participants described that over time their family structure changed to facilitate the new part of their life.

"you have to take a step back and take an objective look and eh an overview like and see you know where you have to ease off a little and where you have to put a little bit more work into that's it

I: so just a question of priorities

P1: yeah" (P1)

The Importance of Feedback

Differences emerged between the participants of University 1 who had official semester one exams and the participants of University 2 who were yet to have official

university exams in terms of the amount and quality of feedback they received with regard to their new roles as mature students. However amongst all the participants the importance of receiving feedback from the organisation as to their progress as stressed as being highly important to the development of their new identity (as this satisfied those that tended towards being motivated by external self concept and external self concept motivational sources). To quote participant three as he spoke of his experience of the semester one exams:

“it verified the reason for me that I have earned my place here it wasn’t just luck and that I have a future here...for me that was massive I know it was only the first set of exams of semester one but after fifteen years of no study to come back and for me to do that...for me that was a major achievement” (P3)

The majority of participants in University one found the semester one exams gave them a concrete sign of their competence (or incompetence) in their new organisational context, whereas the other participants, while they had received some feedback during the academic year, had to wait for the end of the year for official feedback from formal university exams.

“ there's no major exams there's only the end of year exams...so I think that'll be a good gauge of how I'm doing when I get the results of those tests” (P31)

Those that Stayed...

At phase two of the data collection, which was seven months later, towards the end of the participants’ second semester, the majority of the participants had established this new organisational context as a part of their life that would continue to be there into their future

“I’m adapted to things better, I’m kind of adjusted and used to things now so things are for me things are running a lot smoother I’m a lot more clear in my own mind so therefore everything kind of slots into place after that” (P3)

The typical characteristics of the participants in this outcome category were that they had realistic expectations of the new organisational context, they were highly committed to their new organisational identity, they were open-minded with regard to their place within that context, their motivational profile was congruent with their new identity and they had a high degree of control over all or most parts of their lives. This allowed them to effectively use pro-active and/or adaptive strategies, which facilitated high levels of perceived identity compatibility.

The typical characteristics of the participants in the second outcome category are that they had moderately realistic expectations of the new context and they were highly committed to their new identity. However while being committed to having the new organisational context as part of their lives, at least for the moment, they were

experiencing low levels of perceived identity compatibility. This was possibly connected with the fact that they described having low to moderate degrees of control in some parts of their lives. In these cases reduced low levels of perceived identity compatibility was seen as a trade off against progressing through university. Something had to give but it was going to be something other than the new organisational identity.

“The education is kind of taking over not because I want it to you know what I mean I don’t sit down and say well emmm I’m only going to do this but it just seems to be I mean I was here all day Saturday and I had three grandchildren in my house on Saturday and I was in here you know what I mean I should have been at home with them and that’s kind of education is taking over in that sense” (P29)

A large reason for this outcome was that the participant’s motivational profile was congruent with their new identity, i.e. the reason they were in the new context still made sense, their perceived goals were being achieved, even if there was some amount of perceived dissonance occurring.

“I’m achieving a little bit more and it’s there in results and it’s there in black and white so it’s grand whereas before I had ideals but I couldn’t achieve them because I was pulling myself in four different areas” (P27)

And Those that Didn’t

There were also the minority of participants, in the third outcome category, who were unsuccessful in creating a resilient identity for the new organisational context that could be incorporated into the rest of their lives. This resulted in the organisation not being able to retain these new members. Again the participants here perceived that something in their lives had to give but in this case it was the new organisational identity that was eclipsed by the importance of other salient identities for example as family members or parents.

“well I thought I was ok at the start of the year but then you get into it and there’s so much work so many hours on your own studying that I felt oh it was taking over my life and it did take over my life for a good few months but now I’m kind of a little I’ve kind of eased off you know because emm I feel I’m not going to continue with this” (P5)

Other participants found that they simply didn’t identify with the course they had entered, to quote one participant “I realised I don’t want to be an engineer” (P21). These participants found, either initially or over time through receiving feedback, that their motivational profile was incongruent with their new organisational identity. For example an older participant who was purely in the new context to achieve the personal goal of attaining a third level qualification decided, after receiving feedback

that led her to perceive that it would be very hard for her to advance through to the second year of the degree course she was pursuing, to leave the new organisational context and pursue an easier course in a different organisation, where her dominant motivational source would again be congruent with her identity as a mature student who would attain a qualification.

“P5: there was a moment when I said so that's it now and it was emm at Christmas after the exams I felt that I had put in a lot of work into this and I didn't do so well, as well as I had expected and ehheh also when I went into the exams I just froze it was like going back in time going back in the years...and I just looked at the paper I couldn't spell, I'd just, kind of lost it and I just said to why am I putting this pressure on myself when I don't need to...this was suppose to be fun you know, and that's where I kind of said well for the second semester I am going to work as much as I can if I get it I get it if not...and that's when I applied to (name of other academic institution) because I thought that would be more enjoyable, more enjoyable

I: that the hours down there would be less

P5: yeah and the pressure down there wouldn't be as much with just having two subjects each year, I felt nine subjects was too much, especially when you haven't been at school in years and years” (P5)

These participants did not have realistic expectations of the new organisational context, they were moderately to highly committed to the context initially but there were also other highly salient and/or time consuming identities in their lives, and some had low levels of control in most or all parts of their lives. This meant that they had difficulty in utilising pro-active or adaptive strategies and hence were unable to facilitate high levels of perceived identity compatibility in this way.

These results allow a model to be developed that relates the connections between identity structures, the ability to utilise certain strategies to facilitate high levels of perceived identity compatibility, and outcomes regarding the utilisation or abandonment of identities as sources of self-definition and whether to remain part of the contexts associated with these identities (see fig. 1).

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has explored how an individual creates a new organisational identity and integrates this into their pre-existing identity portfolio, in this way the individual is contributing to a process whereby they “must articulate a narrative thread that connects possibly disparate experiences into a coherent story about themselves” (Weick, 1996).

The participants in this study entered a new organisational context that was anticipated to be the major focus of their lives for the next few years, and this brought with it the need to create and manage this new identity. This identity had to be incorporated into their pre-existing life with its pre-existing role-specific identities if levels of perceived compatibility between their identities were to be facilitated and achieved.

The study found that the participants who were successful in doing this, in that they did perceive this compatibility, had realistic expectations of the new context, had motivational profiles congruent with their role in the new context, and had employed certain strategies, either pro-actively or adaptively in response to dissonance causing events, that had allowed the individuals to feel that they could flow relatively easily between the different identities in their lives.

If the use of these different types of strategies could be encouraged in new organisational members through socialisation tactics, training etc they could facilitate successful outcomes for both the individual and the organisation. This is due to the fact that if the organisation can facilitate the integration of the new organisational identity into the portfolio of identities the individual already possesses it will facilitate, within the individual, a sense of compatibility between the different parts of their life that will allow them unfettered participation in the new organisational context and further allow them to commit to remaining there into the future.

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TABLES AND FIGURES

Figure 1: Proposed relations between identity structures, utilisation of proactive and/or adaptive strategies, and outcomes regarding likelihood of remaining in associated contexts

