

# Psychological Ownership in Corporate South Africa: An Ubuntu and Social Identity Perspective

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**Abstract** Ubuntu is an Afrocentric ideology that honours human dignity and moral quality. However, when reviewing its premise, Ubuntu in the corporate environment struggles to find its place. Apart from Ubuntu, South Africans live out different non-organisational social identities. Corporate South Africa is challenged by Westernized principles and systems which include more individualistic-related orientations. This is the opposite of the premise of Ubuntu. Psychological ownership falls in between all of these factors. It shows that feelings of ‘me’ and ‘we’ depends on what the targets are. *Purpose:* This chapter aims to explore how Ubuntu and employees’ social identities facilitate psychological ownership in corporate South Africa. *Motivation:* Employees develop feelings of individual or collective possessiveness or association with elements in the organisation they find important and valuable. *Methodology:* A literature review was conducted where relevant references were analysed in order to make the necessary inferences. *Results:* Corporate South Africa has a long way to go before a collective constructive environment for all employees can be established. In this chapter various challenges were identified that may hinder psychological ownership research because of this country’s strong colonial influences. It is recommended that psychological ownership act as the bridge between westernized and Ubuntu ideologies in corporate South Africa. *Contribution/value add:* This chapter provided insight into the current corporate South African environment, and how psychological ownership can be a great asset when a combination of individual and collective possessiveness is facilitated.

**Keywords** Corporate South Africa · Psychological ownership · Social identity theory · Ubuntu

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# 1 Introduction

South Africa's diversified workforce poses great challenges for researchers in order to accurately measure, and identify appropriate interventions, for psychological ownership (Fig, 2005; Olckers, 2013; Olckers & Du Plessis, 2012a, b). This country's corporate environment showcases diverse perspectives and ideologies which induce a variety of employee outcomes, which may disparage or compliment corporations (Finestone & Snyman, 2005). Apart from research on psychological ownership, it is also vital to understand what corporate South Africa entails. After the first democratic elections in 1994, the Employment Equity Act (EEA no 55 of 1998) was amended in order to provide access for previous designated groups to the corporate world. According to Booysen (2013) designated groups are categorise as black individuals, women and individuals with disabilities. Even though top positions are still primarily occupied by white males (Henderson, 2016) the inclusion of previous designated groups in the employment system provides an assortment of religions, cultural backgrounds, linguistic diversity and socio-economic upbringing. These elements bring forth multiplicity in outlooks at work and differences in the experience of everyday duties (Booyesen, 2013, 2015). According to Oosthuizen and Naidoo (2010), even though years passed since the first democratic elections, corporate South Africa still harvest pre-1994 stagnated perceptions which challenge the development of an inclusive organisational culture. Therefore it seems vital to view corporate South Africa from an indigenous lens in order to provide a comprehensive and relevant picture of psychological ownership research in this diverse context (Booyesen, 2015).

From above it is also evident that various perspectives may play a role in the analysis of corporate South Africa. In 2002, Hanneke Louw discovered that westernised corporate governance models are restricted in their application to South Africa. She found that the continuing failures of large listed and unlisted companies in South Africa are because of ideology differences between Eurocentric models vs Africentric perspectives. Mindlen (2013) found that corporate South Africa is still challenged by various westernised ideologies, even though Louw (2002) found the same results a decade before. Therefore, this chapter will focus on two concepts, Ubuntu and the Social Identity Theory in order to provide a clearer understanding of corporate South Africa. Ubuntu because of its Afrocentric, indigenous existence, and the Social Identity Theory because various collective identities are prominent in South Africa which will be discussed later on in the chapter. The inclusion of psychological ownership is also vital since it encompasses various elements of attachment and belongingness towards an organisation, and the role of self-concept. This seems to correspond with the two approaches (Ubuntu and Social Identity Theory) to be discussed later on in the chapter.

In the following sections of this chapter the author aims to address the following research purposes: (1) To provide background to corporate South Africa, (2) Provide a brief overview of psychological ownership research, (3) Define and describe background of Ubuntu, (4) Define and describe background the Social

Identity Theory, and to (5) Provide practical implications for psychological ownership.

## 2 Corporate South Africa: Legislation and Background

Corporate South Africa is governed by various legislations (i.e. Employment Equity Act no. 55 of 1998; Labour Relations Amendment Act No 12 of 2002) which assist employers to manage employees fairly, and to sustain constructive employer and employee relations. While the Employment Equity Act and Labour Relations Act are important to direct non-discriminatory conduct with diverse employees, the most prominent legislation to guide appropriate structural processes and procedures in corporations in South Africa is the Companies Act No 71 of 2008 which was recently amended and reinforced in 2011. The Companies Act aims to congruent the South African corporate environment with international standards and to endorse other relevant South African legislations.

Other than larger and profitable-preference corporations, the Companies Act incites growth in the economy and aims to make it more flexible for smaller businesses and non-profitable-preference companies. However, this flexibility pertains to certain, specified functions which include corporate governance and the way financial reporting is done (Scholtz & Smit, 2012). Corporate governance for smaller business in South Africa is flexible in the sense that they may be dependent on numerous stakeholders external to the company, therefore they are not only dependent financially on internal stakeholders (i.e. directors), and may still retain independence from external institutions. It leads to various consequences in how smaller companies built relations with other institutions and with their immediate communities (De Graaf & Stoelhorst, 2013). Non-profitable companies in South Africa are already seen as the cornerstones of community building and providing social and economic assistance to those less fortunate. Consequently, this forms the essence of corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Fig, 2005). This element is the closest to the concept of Ubuntu (Mbiti, 1989), which reinforce the ideology that community boosting is the essence of African management which will be discussed later on in this chapter.

On the other hand, profitable companies are seen as the global competitors that seems to honour organisational-interest more than contributing solely to community-building which is the premise of CSR (De Graaf & Stoelhorst, 2013). In South Africa, these companies are strongly influenced by the amended Companies Act and the King Report on Governance for South Africa 2009 (King III) which enforces companies to be seen as socially relevant by their peers in order to emphasise social relatedness with communities. However, approximately a decade ago, Fig (2005) observed a tendency in corporate South Africa. He found that the majority of companies in South Africa generally prefer the notion of corporate social investment (CSI) to that of CSR. CSI may include projects external to the everyday work conduct of the company and these projects are employed without

expecting profit even though resources of the company is utilised. Usually CSI and CSR were interlinked (Fig, 2005), but are now seen as two separate activities. CSR is more focused on fulfilling the companies' obligation to the specific industry they are functioning in and usually employ the triple-bottom-line of the 3Ps (i.e. profit, people, and planet). It means most companies focused on CSR are more restricted in their community development projects (based on their industry) and also include making a profit, as opposed to companies who utilise CSI. This still seems to be the trend in corporate South Africa (Noyoo, 2016).

Although research on the effects of social responsibility of companies were mainly focused on financial trends and consumer behaviour (Aguilera, Rupp, Williams, & Ganapathi, 2007; Brammer, Millington, & Rayton, 2007), the effects of social responsible involvement on employees was investigated as well (Gond, El-Akreimi, Igalens, & Swaen, 2010). It was found that community involved companies include employees who are more committed and engaged towards their company and are prone to develop a better organisational identification and a 'we' attitude (Gond et al., 2010). The 'we' attitude demonstrates the social relatedness of South African companies, who by law, need to develop and retain an inclusive culture for all employees. This forms the link towards psychological ownership which encompasses both elements of self-concept enhancement and social acceptance or belongingness (Jafri, 2016). The concept of psychological ownership will be discussed in the next section.

### 3 Psychological Ownership in Corporations

According to Bullock (2015), employers exclusively provided overt ownership elements (i.e. stocks in the company; bonuses; increase in salary) to employees to motivate them, but it soon became clear that covert elements should be regarded as well. Furby (1978) define psychological ownership as the sense of possessiveness an employee experience towards an object, entity or idea. The premise of psychological ownership resides toward employees producing contingency and strategic decisions and plans that should not only benefit the company but also generate attachment feelings for the employees towards the outcomes of these decisions and plans (O'Reilley, 2002). Therefore employees develop a stronger connection towards the corporation and their role in achieving beneficial organisational goals. Van Dyne and Pierce (2004) also argued that when individuals have psychological ownership, they will experience their work or task as an extension of themselves, and generate higher organisational identification.

According to Wagner, Parker and Christiansen (2003), elements affecting psychological ownership for employees relates to the perceived organisational climate of the organisation, and the social norms of the employees. The balance between the perceived organisational climate and the social norms of the employees captures those factors deemed relevant to render association and attachment towards work or specific tasks (Avey et al., 2012). These factors are known as belongingness,

self-efficacy, and self-identity (O'Reilley, 2002; Wagner et al., 2003), and were found to be salient measures of psychological ownership in various studies abroad (Buchem, 2012; Jafri, 2016; Lee & Suh, 2015) and studies in South Africa (Boers, 2014; Olckers, 2013; Olckers & Du Plessis, 2012a, b, 2015; Olckers & Van Zyl, 2016). According to Pierce, Kostova and Dirks (2003), these elements represent three basic human needs, namely 'home', efficacy and effectance, and self-concept. Employees only experience psychological ownership when these needs are met. The first need (to have a home or a standing in a community) pertains to a sense of belonging, therefore a 'place' in society and to feel indispensable (Van Dyne & Pierce, 2004), while self-efficacy is seen as a general human need where an individual wants to feel competent and proficient in specific areas (Buchem, 2012). Self-identity is the final need which means that individuals developed a strong sense of themselves and develop knowledge of their strengths and growth areas (Van Dyne & Pierce, 2004).

When reviewing research from different countries in the last five years pertaining to the concept of psychological ownership in the corporate environment, it was evident that this concept can perform both the role of an antecedent and the role of an outcome for various elements. These elements include (and are not restricted) towards integrity and value driven variables (i.e. ethical leadership, trust, psychological contract) (Avey, Wernsing & Palanski, 2012; Brown, Crossley & Robinson, 2014; Jafri, 2016), spiritual and emotional intelligence (Kaur, Sambasivan & Kumar, 2013), consumer behaviour and marketing strategies (Jussila, Tarkiainen, Sarstedt & Hair, 2015; Kirk, Swain & Gaskin, 2015), organisational citizen behaviour, organisational commitment and engagement (Gond et al., 2010) and organisational performance (Pan, Qin & Gao, 2014). In South Africa attention was centred towards talent preservation (Olckers & Du Plessis, 2012a, b, 2015) and well-being (Boers, 2014) research. Remarkably, in the study by Boers (2014) she found that psychological ownership seems to be a component of well-being rather than an antecedent. Apart from this specific study, research surrounding psychological ownership in the corporate environment showcase the various individual, organisational and social fundamentals that influence essential outcomes for employers and employees.

It can be construed from the above arguments that psychological ownership encompasses individualistic and collectivistic notions (Hofstede, 2010; Pierce et al., 2003). Research found that with psychological ownership, employees develop 'mine' and 'our' possessiveness of targets (Pierce et al., 2003; Van Dyne & Pierce, 2004). Pertaining to the 'mine' ideology, employees will be proactive in their approach to retain and maintain ownership of a target and to sustain it on the long-term, while with the 'us' ideology, employees may feel empowered by the corporation (as a social unit) for contributing to their overt and covert needs (Bullock, 2015). Therefore, they will develop an attachment towards the organisation and be more proactive to reach organisational goals. This 'us' ideology from psychological ownership seems to touch on the indigenous African concept of Ubuntu since employees acknowledge the contributions of their company. Ubuntu's premise is centered towards a 'we' perspective which showcases an

inclusive ideology with low priority for self-achievements (Mbiti, 1989). Therefore, group achievements are seen as the norm, while individual contribution to these achievements are minimised. This means psychological ownership as a whole has a partial connotation with the ideology of Ubuntu which will be further explored in the following section.

## 4 Description and Background of Ubuntu

From an academic perspective, Ubuntu was found to be difficult to conceptualise since it cannot be easily expressed in English (Jackson, 2016; West, 2014). An earlier scholar, Mbiti (1989) attempted to describe the phenomena of Ubuntu, which he viewed as togetherness and collective tranquillity where an individual exists and functions as a human being because of others. Therefore, an individual does not serve him- or herself, but serve for the good of the community. Their life purpose is not to live life for personal gain and pursuing own achievements, but to build, enhance, foster and preserve constructive and healthy relations within the social environment. Furthermore, according to Gade (2012), Ubuntu encompasses the moral quality, ethical worldview, and African humanness of a person. According to Jackson (2016), Ubuntu is an important relational value where you need to express compassion for others and show a sense of being through others. This is best described in isiXhosa with the statement: *Ubuntu ungamntu ngabanye abantu* which mean that ‘people are people through other people’ (Jackson, 2016).

It was during the post-apartheid era that individuals called for South Africans to detach themselves from colonialism and to restore human dignity and humanity (Booyesen, 2015; Matolino & Kwindigwi, 2013). Colonialism and the apartheid era were viewed as derogatory against specified ethno-cultural groups in South Africa, and should be recanted. Matolino and Kwindigwi (2013) further stated that because of these standpoints, the concept of Ubuntu resurfaced more prominently the last twenty years. Back in 2004, authors Luthans, Van Wyk and Walumba identified the notion of Ubuntu as an ideal intervention for diversity management in South African corporations, since it will assist to effectively socialise previous designated groups in the world of work, and denigrate colonial elements.

When considering the description of Ubuntu from above, it seems not to correspond with westernised individualism (which is the premise of colonialism) (Jackson, 2016). However, the earlier build-up and inscrutability (Matolino & Kwindigwi, 2013) of the concept post-apartheid diminished in recent years (Jackson & Nzepa, 2016). The reason is that the relevance of Ubuntu for ‘modernised corporations’ are challenged and are seen as outdated and taking a step back (Jackson, 2016). Researchers see this as ‘workplace alienation’ (Biswas, & Bhatnagar, 2013; Rosa, 2014), since many corporations in South Africa view their employees as resources, and as a ‘means to an end’ rather than valuing intrinsic humanity of employees (Jackson & Nzepa, 2016). Although most South African corporations show social responsible behaviour towards their communities and the

industry they function in, most employees feel it is because corporations are required by law (Companies Act No 71 of 2008) to do so (Jackson, 2016). It can be construed that South African corporations may demonstrate 'Ubuntu' towards their external environment, while their employees may feel colonial influences are still strong with the corporations themselves.

Thus far, only one African-based company demonstrated a successful integration of Ubuntu values externally and internally. Afriland First Bank (based in Cameroon) has been operating since 1987 and developed a strong, and healthy reputation as a company who showcases social identification and relatedness outside the corporation and inside the corporation (Jackson & Nzepa, 2016). For instance, they include all employees in decision-making, solely because it is an African tradition to make group decisions rather than individual decisions. It is viewed that group decision-making is the norm in Ubuntu and in African traditions, while individual decision-making is a deterrent to make mistakes. Group decision-making will ensure continuity and survival for African corporations, which can be substantiated by Afriland First Bank's performance in recent years which showed massive financial gains in revenues (Jackson, 2016; Jackson & Nzepa, 2016). Although this company made sure they are socially relevant towards their industry and their community, they developed an inclusive culture (a clan culture; Kreitner & Kinicki, 2014) for their employees. Although Afriland First Bank demonstrated that it is possible to be an Ubuntu corporation and thrive, the opposite was observed as well. According to Jackson and Haines (2007) non-governmental corporations operating in social corporate investments showed signs of Ubuntu in their culture, but they lose those elements when westernised involvement increase. In his study of the Postcolonial theory within South African corporations, Jackson (2016) found that it is quite challenging to keep corporations 'colonial-free' because of the long-term effects of historical conditions and the recent emergent of hybrid forms of knowledge. Jackson (2016) suggested that informal African economies should rather be researched (rather than those countries with heavy colonial influences) in order to capture the true meaning of Ubuntu in corporations. Additionally, Taylor (2011) found that more research is needed to determine how ethical values and moral principles (which are staples of Ubuntu) can guide corporate South Africa. It seems the King III report does not include clear guidelines pertaining to these elements. However, Metz (2011) argued that Ubuntu can still be a moral compass for corporations since human rights are linked with human dignity (which is also a premise of Ubuntu).

Although Ubuntu demonstrates a collectivistic view of corporations and their challenges, other elements also are at play. As mentioned before, employees in corporate South Africa are diversified in terms of ethnic, language, religion and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, apart from the corporation, the employee belongs to different social units. This has an effect on the premise of psychological ownership since the prevalence of personal or self-identity versus social identity needed to be researched in order to identify its effect on employees in corporate South Africa. As stated earlier, psychological ownership include features of self-concept enhancement and social acceptance or belongingness (Jafri, 2016). This is explored in the next section.

## 5 Description and Background of Social Identity Theory

The feeling of possessiveness an employee has for his/her corporation (which is part of the premise of psychological ownership) is different from wanting to stay with the corporation (which measures organisational commitment), to identify oneself with the corporation (organisational identification), and to accept the values of the corporation (internalisation) (Pierce et al., 2001). Organisational commitment and internalisation are seen as components of self-identity since they share similar theoretical frameworks, while organisational identification is seen as the social identity component of psychological ownership (Pierce et al., 2001). A question an employee usually asks themselves when identifying with a social group (in this case their workplace) is “Who am I in my corporation?” (Abrams & Hogg, 1988; Pierce et al., 2001).

Individuals tend to categorise themselves into social groups based on aspects they have in common, such as their places of work or industry they work in, ethnicity, culture, gender and faith (Jenkins, 2014). Jenkins (2014) further states that individuals are made up of different social identities, which they adapt to suit the environments they exist in (for example, family, church, workplace and community). It seems that people choose whether to adhere to or ignore the rules put down by the specific social group they are functioning in. For instance, when an employee attempts to adapt to their company’s organisational culture a form acculturation is at play (Engelbrecht, 2017). Enculturation happens when an employee’s social affiliation towards their religion or cultural group are so strong that they rather integrate those values into their workplace (Johnson & Fendrich, 2002; Pierce et al., 2001).

The social identity theory is based on two premises. First, people categorise themselves according to how they view themselves (self-categorisation) and secondly, people categorise themselves according to the social groups they belong to (Abrams & Hogg, 1988). There may be clashes or similarities between an individual’s self-categorisation and social group categorisation. In addition, the type of social environment plays a role. On the one hand there are individualistic-orientated environments comprising mostly individuals who focus on their own purposes, ambitions and growth, and on the other hand there are collectivistic-orientated environments comprising individuals who are more focused on social dynamics, the retention and maintenance of social relations and social dependence. In a study conducted by Adams, Van de Vijver and De Bruin (2012), it was established that both these orientations are found in South Africa. The White ethnic group was found to be more individualistic-orientated (but containing some collectivistic elements), while the Black ethnic group was found to be more collectivistic-orientated. The Coloured and Indian groups seemed to possess equal elements of both orientations. From a social point of view South Africa seems to adhere more to the notion of collectivism (Adams et al., 2012), whereas its corporate environment (in which competition with international organisations is important) is more individualistic-orientated and focused on achieving and retaining a global market share (Jackson, 2016).

According to Kreitner and Kinicki (2014), an individual's categorisations pertaining to the self and to a group may differ depending on the individual's internal and external dimensions. Internal dimensions refer to those elements about themselves that individuals cannot change. These qualities are fixed and are usually qualities a person is born with or born into. These elements relate to (but are not limited to) a person's ethnicity (for instance, Black, White, Asian, Coloured), ethno-cultural group (for instance, Latin American, African American, Afrikaner, Zulu), linguistic group (for instance, English, Dutch, Sepedi, isiZulu) and religion (for instance, Christian, Islam, Jewish, Atheist). External dimensions are those elements people have control over and can change and which may span different aspects, such as time, level or place. Individuals can have an impact on their external dimensions, for instance, their careers, marital status, parental status, the place where they live, the positions they hold in an organisation and the type of organisation they work for.

It is clear from the discussion above that social groups are formed based on both the internal and external dimensions of people and it can be assumed that people can belong to numerous social groups during the course of their lives. The social identity theory posits that an individual's identity is a reflection of the social group which they associate themselves with most (Abrams & Hogg, 1988). Therefore, individuals may decide their ethnicity determines the main social group (or the dominant part of their being) they belong to and whose norms, associations and/or beliefs they uphold. Although social groups share similarities and differences, social identity clashes can happen, in which case individuals tend to revert back to their personal identities and to the social identity which they associate themselves with most (Abrams & Hogg, 1988; Jenkins, 2014). They can also develop sub-categories within this social identity (Jenkins, 2014), which means they adapt the social identity which they associate themselves with most by incorporating elements of other social groups into the dominant social group. An example would be when a person who identifies strongly with being a Muslim also sees himself/herself as a man/woman. Therefore, this person will integrate all the social groups he/she associates himself/herself with and refer to himself/herself as a Muslim man/woman.

## **6 Practical Implications of Ubuntu and Social Identity Theory for Psychological Ownership and Future Directions**

This chapter identified a few implications for psychological ownership in corporate South Africa, especially keeping in mind the concept of Ubuntu and the social identity theory. Corporate South Africa is still heavily influenced by colonial elements that challenge the successful acculturation of previous designated groups in the workforce (Engelbrecht, 2017). This has consequences for capturing the true

spirit of Ubuntu in corporate South Africa (Jackson, 2016). The struggle to develop an all-inclusive corporate culture leads to some employees feeling alienated and challenged to develop feelings of 'home' in the company (Engelbrecht, 2017; Pierce et al., 2001). Contemplating psychological ownership in this regard, it seems that the first basic need of employees is not met in their workplace. This means that developing a sense of belonging for employees are challenged by the current corporate environment of South Africa (Jackson, 2016). This has ripple effects towards obtaining the second basic need, namely self-efficacy since strong associations were found between sense of belonging and self-efficacy in previous research (Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007; Lewis, Stout, Pollock, Finkelstein, & Ito, 2016). Although Ubuntu cannot be viewed as a model or theoretical approach (Taylor, 2011) in order to lead corporate South Africa, Metz (2011) did argue that Ubuntu can be grounded as a moral theory that may direct actions in corporations. Although this can be debatable further, Ubuntu as an ideology can still be viewed as compass for ethical deliberation in corporate South Africa.

This has also implications pertaining to social identity in South Africa. When reviewing the premise of the social identity theory and psychological ownership, it seems that individuals will increase their possessiveness of a target if that lead to their membership or association with a group to increase as well (Dommer & Swaminathan, 2013; Pettit & Sivanathan, 2011). It means that when an employee feel possessive about a task, that may increase their organisational identification with their corporation (Dommer & Swaminathan, 2013). However, the other way around may be true as well. According to Johnson and Fendrich (2002), if a person identify strongly with a specific social group outside the workplace (i.e. culture, religion), then a process what is called enculturation may take place. Therefore, it may happen that even though a person identify strongly with a target at work, the likelihood that the person's membership for the corporation to increase is not always the case. What is learned in an individuals' social group outside the workplace may become a guideline in how they conduct themselves in all social settings (i.e. workplace, social functions, family) (Hofstede, 2010). It may happen that an individual associate themselves so much with an external group, that their organisational identification may be effected by this, especially if clashes between work values and social norms take place.

According to Engelbrecht (2017), in order to establish healthy relations between the diverse workforces and to sustain psychological ownership, management needs to develop a culture that encompasses mutual respect and countering current prejudice. Managers also need to be aware of strategies employees utilise to enculturate or acculturate to the current corporate culture. This may facilitate more understanding of the efforts some employees apply to be accepted by their peers in their workplace and to be a productive worker.

## 7 Conclusion

Corporate South Africa has a long way to go before a collective constructive environment for all employees can be established. In this chapter various challenges were identified that may hinder psychological ownership research because of this country's strong colonial influences. Challenges pertain to the effects of enculturation, identifying the correct acculturation strategy for each employee in order to develop an adequate organisational identification, and the struggle to develop a form of togetherness for a diversified workforce. Therefore a combined westernised and indigenous ideology (i.e. Ubuntu) should be established in order to act as guide to develop an inclusive corporate culture. Although psychological ownership aims to enhance employees' sense of belonging, their belief in their capabilities and their own personal identity, the social identities of employees play a significant role in how they perceive a target which may hinder or enhance feelings of possessiveness. However, psychological ownership as a social construct showcases both social and personal principles. For that reason, this concept may be used as the bridge to overcome the challenges of juggling both colonialism and Ubuntu in corporate South Africa.

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