

# Chapter 2

## Work Identity: Clarifying the Concept

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### 2.1 Introduction

The introductory chapter provided the context for the Work Identity Research Project. Research objectives of the project were also stated. Central to these research objectives is the concept *identity*. The focus of this chapter is therefore to introduce the concept identity and to explain the process of identity formation which finally results in an identity prototype.

The first section of the chapter introduces the reader to the identity phenomenon with the focus on the role-players and the distinct process involved in identity formation.

The second part of the chapter introduces literature on the two prominent theoretical streams, namely, social identity theories (SIT) and role identity theories (RIT), which aim to explain the identity formation, activation and outcome process.

The third part of the chapter unpacks the work-identity prototype or standard that consists of a structural, social as well as an individual-psychological dimension. This prototype provided the basis for conceptualising and operationalising the work-based identity (WI) construct.

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## 2.2 The Identity Phenomenon

Identity as a root construct in social science forms part of different terms that describe and explain individual and group behaviour. As a key independent variable, identity is widely used in social and behavioural research (Albert et al. 2000; Hogg et al. 1995). Although identity has been receiving a lot of research interest that includes a vast array of conceptualisations (especially since 1990), there is no consensus on the meaning of the term identity (Abdelal et al. 2001). The term identity is used in different contexts:

Firstly, the term identity refers to the existence of something that displays one or more attributes (characteristics). For example, organisational identity is a reference to all the attributes an organisation may possess where attributes can include the values, goals, actions or descriptions of the organisation or its members (Lane and Scott 2007). Secondly, identity is used as a reference to the self, the answer to the question “Who am I?” Thirdly, identity is used with reference to a social category that contributes to social identity, the answer to the question “Who are we?” (Ravishankar and Pan 2008: 222; Stryker and Burke 2000).

Understanding the identity phenomenon is not straightforward, as it involves many different complex concepts, processes and role-players. Established theories suggest that an identity develops through the interaction (complex cognitive identity formation process) between an individual (with a distinctive self, self-concept and personal identity) and specific social foci or life spheres (e.g. the social and/or work-related environment). It also leads to a set of behavioural and cognitive outcomes. Figure 2.1 depicts these preceding and evolving from the identity formation processes (Bothma 2011).

## 2.3 Different Life Spheres

The key role-players in the identity formation process are individuals, each with their own unique characteristics and capabilities. The literature suggests that working individuals operate in three core contexts, namely, life spheres, life roles and

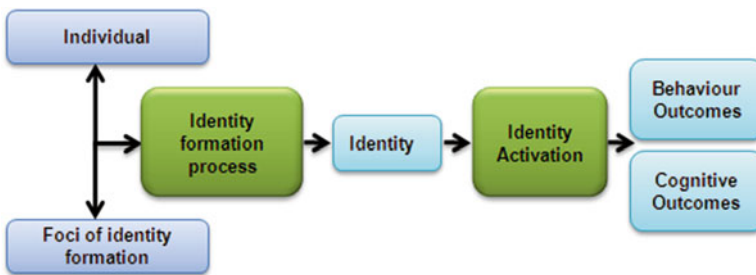
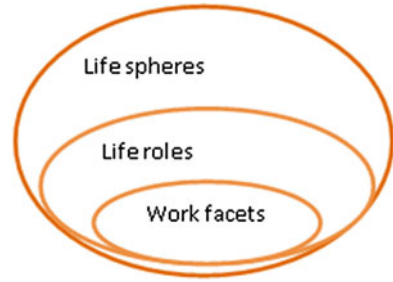


Fig. 2.1 The role-players and three distinct processes in the identity phenomenon, namely, identity formation, identity activation and resulting behaviour

**Fig. 2.2** The three-layered onion model (Adapted from Lloyd et al. 2011, Art #894, page 2 of 15. © The Authors 2011, Licensee: AOSIS Open Journals)



work contexts. Based on the impact assessment wheel of Duke and Greenblat (1979), a three-layered onion model (see Fig. 2.2) was constructed which proposes an outward-in dynamic.

It is evident from Fig. 2.2 that this model proposes that outer layers have an impact on inner layers and eventually influence the construction of a WI depending on the importance and salience of specific life spheres, roles or work facets. These layers will be discussed in more detail in the following sections.

### 2.3.1 Life Spheres

According to Lloyd et al. (2011), life spheres refer to the prominent contexts in which individuals function (be they cultural, political, religious, financial or economical spheres). It is from these life spheres (life interests) that individuals draw significant discourses and discussions in their struggle to maintain a balance between their personal and a number of their social identities. Social identities in this context refer to *categorisations of the self* into more inclusive social units to which they may belong (Tajfel and Turner 1985). Researchers conceptualise the self as a multifaceted cognitive core structure within which social identities that are hierarchically organised as distinct entities that are constructed, transformed and maintained (Amiot et al. 2007; Brook et al. 2008; Van Knippenberg et al. 2004). One part of the self is the self-concept, a description of how individuals define and view the self (Pescitelli 1996; Stets and Burke 2003; Van Staden 2005). The *individualised self* or personal identity is defined by Hewitt (1989: 179) as "...a sense of continuity, integration, identification and differentiation constructed by the person not in relation to a community and its culture but in relation to the self and its projects". According to Van Staden (2005: 74), the term personal identity "...defines the characteristics that set one apart from another as a unique being".

Work can be viewed by individuals as central to their being. Therefore, work as a central life interest is defined by Kahn (1990: 692) as the extent to which it is viewed by individuals as a main part of their life. Lloyd et al. (2011) cited various researchers to illustrate the importance of work to individuals. Amongst those aspects of importance cited are work as a central life interest, work's psychological meaningfulness, conditions for employees to engage in their work,

psychological safety and the psychological availability of work. The most important and salient life spheres reported by SA participants in the Lloyd et al. (2011) study are the political, cultural and family spheres. As a legacy of apartheid, the political life sphere is, for instance, characterised by oversensitivity about *race* resulting in the workplace frequently being politicised along racial lines. This politicisation also carries over to social memberships and categories in the cultural sphere.

### **2.3.2 Life Roles**

The second layer of the onion model is life roles. Super (1990) argues that individuals occupy various roles over the course of their life, including career, work, home and family, community, study and leisure roles. Accepting a (work) role implies taking on an identity that will assist the individual to integrate into a (work) community where one group can be distinguished from the next. The identification with a role consequently results in the identification with the associated social group.

A work role may be a central role compared to the other life roles of an individual. Work-role centrality and work identity therefore become key constructs in explaining job involvement and consequently also work performance.

The life roles that were identified as most important and salient according to the Lloyd et al. (2011) study in SA are religion, breadwinner and political/change agent roles. Religion is central to a person's value and belief system and assists in preserving the "me-ness" in the workplace. Breadwinner or provider roles are also central to supporting the salient family sphere. The political/change agent roles links with the political life sphere in the outer layer – which explains political activist behaviours in the workplace.

### **2.3.3 Work Facets**

The third layer of the onion model refers to specific work facets or social foci. These facets describe specific aspects of the work context that individuals choose to identify with. Social foci (e.g. own career, work group, organisation, profession) are used by individuals to derive parts of their identities through identity formation processes (e.g. social-categorisation or identification) as explained by the different theories. The two primary foci used in identity formation are social groups and the work environment (called workplace). Individuals are born into different structured societies which results in unique sets of social categories, e.g. cultures, race groups and social groups. Social groups are formed by individuals who hold similar social identifications, e.g. organisations or work groups (May et al. 2004; Stets and Burke 2000; Van Dick et al. 2004).

The workplace is a location where employees in the employment of different organisations are busy with work-related activities. Each work environment is unique with its own characteristics. Individuals are employed in different roles by organisations, making labour one of the organisation's key resources (Ballout 2007; Simpson 2008). Through the identity formation process, certain meanings, norms, expectations, beliefs and core values are derived from specific social foci (e.g. careers, professions, organisations, work groups and job characteristics), which are cognitively and hierarchically stored in the self, in order of importance, ready to serve as behaviour guides (Kirpal 2004b). In response to perceptions received about a specific social situation, the most appropriate identity (behaviour guide) is selected and activated to guide behaviour (Hitlin 2003; Hogg and Ridgeway 2003; Hogg and Terry 2000; Olkkonen and Lipponen 2006; Stryker and Burke 2000; Stryker and Serpe 1982; Tajfel 1981; Tajfel and Turner 1985).

WIs are central in this proposed onion model. The importance and salience of spheres on one level impact on the importance and salience of roles on the next level and eventually on the work-based identity facets that individuals choose to identify with. This leads to uniquely constructed WIs for different individuals. The Lloyd et al. (2011) study identified the following work facets, namely, job identification, professional identification, workplace role and team roles as being salient in the SA workplace. While the job and profession provides the link to professional and/or occupational identification, the workplace and team roles provide the anchors for attachment to the workplace. The behaviour guides determine cognitive or behaviour that is displayed in reaction to a specific social event and its content. Over the years, the different research streams develop theories with the purpose of explaining and predicting identity phenomena.

## 2.4 The Identity Formation Processes

There are three distinct processes in the identity phenomenon, namely, identity formation, which includes the formation of an identity prototype, identity activation and resulting behaviour as reflected in Fig. 2.3. Social identity and role identity theories are the two prominent theoretical streams, which aim to explain the identity process.

As shown in Fig. 2.3, the different identity theories conceptualise different identity formation processes. Depending on the theory used, the identity formation process outcome is referred to as a prototype, a role identity or an identity standard (Burke 1991; Burke and Stets 2009; Hogg 2001; Johnston and Swanson 2007; Stets and Burke 2000, 2003; Stets and Harrod 2004; Stryker and Burke 2000). Prototypes or identity standards are activated through categorisation in reaction to a particular event to guide perceptions, self-conception and behaviour. In reaction to the social event and its content, new prototypes are formed, and existing ones are modified (Hogg 2001).

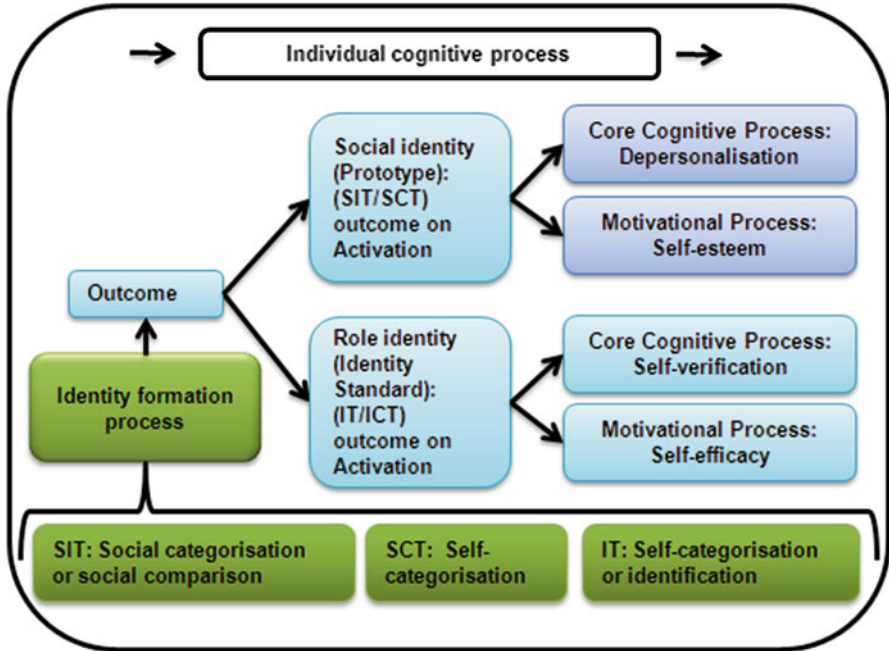


Fig. 2.3 The identity theories, formation, activation and outcomes

### 2.4.1 Identity Theories

Kerlinger (1986: 9) defines a theory as “...a set of interrelated constructs (concepts), definitions and propositions that present a systematic view of phenomenon by specifying relations among variables, with the purpose of explaining and predicting phenomena”. Identity was introduced and developed within the social sciences by two research streams focusing on identity, namely, the psychoanalyst tradition and the social psychology tradition (Kirpal 2004b). Different theories were developed and deployed by these disciplinary roots that aim to understand and explain the structure of the self-associated with the identity phenomenon. The theories “... use similar words and similar language – but often with quite different meanings for example, identity, identity salience, commitment” (Hogg et al. 1995: 255).

Social identity (SIT) and role identity theories (RIT) are the two prominent theoretical streams, which aim to explain the identity formation. The first stream includes social identity (SIT) (Hitlin 2003; Hogg and Ridgeway 2003; Hogg and Terry 2000; Olkkonen and Lipponen 2006; Tajfel 1981; Tajfel and Turner 1985) and self-categorisation theories (SCT), which is an extension of SIT (Turner 1987). The second stream includes identity (IT) (Stryker and Burke 2000; Stryker and Serpe 1982) and identity control theories (ICT) (Burke 1991). Social identity and role identity theories are two perspectives on the socially constructed self-concept – a product of individual behaviour and social structure that developed parallel to

each other in the different disciplinary roots of psychology and sociology or social psychology. The two theoretical streams deal mainly with components of a structured social environment (Hogg et al. 1995; Stets and Burke 2000, 2003) and give similar perspectives "...on the dynamic mediation of the socially constructed self between individual behaviour and social structure" (Hogg et al. 1995: 255).

#### 2.4.1.1 Social Identity Theories

The two categories of social identity theories (SIT) are the following:

##### Social Identity Theory (SIT)

The SIT, which focuses on the categories, collective self, groups and intergroup processes, has evolved across the entire social and behavioural science disciplines with an array of manifestations (Brewer 2001; Hogg and Ridgeway 2003; Hogg et al. 1995; Korte 2007; Stets and Burke 2000; Stryker and Serpe 1982). The theory assumes "...that social identity is derived primarily from group membership" (Brown 2000: 746).

For SIT, the basis of identity is vested in the categories, collective self, group and intergroup processes. The group is regarded by SIT as a collective of similar people (Hogg and Ridgeway 2003; Hogg et al. 1995; Stets and Burke 2000). Having a social identity refers to the individual being a member of a specific group where the members of that group see things from the same perspective and holds similar views. The individual will behave like others in the group. Possessing a social identity is an indication that an individual belongs to a specific social category or group (Korte 2007; Stets and Burke 2000). Social identity also gives the individual a sense of belonging somewhere (May et al. 2004).

##### Self-Categorisation Theory (SCT)

Closely related to the social identity theory is the self-categorisation theory. The categorisation-based differentiation (stereotyping and discrimination) between individuals, as explained by the social identity theory, is expanded by the self-categorisation theory to include the self. The self-categorisation theory aims to explain the phenomenon where a person based on perceived criteria tends to place himself or other people cognitively in some grouping (Turner 1987). The self-categorisation theory "...specified precisely how social categorisation caused people to perceive, think, feel and behave as group members" (Abrams and Hogg 2004: 102).

Individuals adopt the norms, beliefs and behaviours of the in-group through depersonalisation and self-stereotyping processes, while they distance themselves from the norms, beliefs and behaviours of out-groups. These perceived groups can be perceived in a hierarchy form of abstraction where social groups are perceived to

be from a lower or higher level. Individuals strive to become members of higher social groups while behaving in a discriminating and even hostile manner towards perceived lower groups.

#### **2.4.1.2 Role Identity Theory (RIT)**

The two categories under role identity theory are identity theory and identity control theory:

##### **Identity Theory**

The IT has developed into two closely related research directions (Stets 2005). The first focuses on how social structures influence identity and how identity, in turn, influences social behaviours (Stryker 1980; Stryker and Burke 2000; Stryker and Serpe 1982). The second direction focuses on the internal dynamics of the self that impact on social behaviour (Burke 1991; Stets 2005; Stets and Burke 2003; Stets and Harrod 2004; Stets and Tsushima 2001).

The basis of identity in IT is vested in individual role-related behaviours (roles). Possessing a particular role identity means, firstly, acting out role expectations; secondly, controlling the resources the role is responsible for; and, thirdly, managing the relationship and interaction between role partners (Hogg and Ridgeway 2003; Hogg et al. 1995; Stets and Burke 2003). From an IT point of view, the group is defined "...as a set of interrelated individuals, each of whom performs unique but interrelated activities, sees things from their own perspective and negotiates the terms of interaction" (Stets and Burke 2000: 228).

The difference between the two theories is that SIT focuses "...more on the meanings associated with being a member of a social category", while RIT "... focuses more on the meanings associated with performing a role" (Burke and Stets 2009: 4). These two theories provide the link, through identities, between social group structures, processes and the psychology of the individual, referred to as the self (Brewer 2001; Hitlin 2003). People are tied organically through social identities (SIT) to their groups and mechanically within their groups through their role identities (RIT). An identity study must include both the mechanical (role) and organic (group) identity forms (Stets and Burke 2000).

##### **Identity Control Theory (ICT)**

The outcome of the identity formation process is an identity (Stryker and Burke 2000). The ICT stems from the second research direction of RIT that focuses on the internal dynamics of the self and its impact on social behaviour (Stets 2005). Burke's (1991) version of IT, referred to as the ICT, conceptualises the identity process as a control system. The identity process is continuously self-adjusting. According to



the ICT, a feedback loop is established when an identity is activated in a situation (Burke 1991; Stets and Harrod 2004).

The identity processes as a control system continuously adjust behaviour to keep the appraisals reflected from the social situation congruent with the identity prototype. Any process or event that impedes an individual's ability to perceive reflected appraisals or to display behaviour aimed at influencing reflected appraisals to match their identity prototype causes an identity process interruption (Burke 1991). The disruption of the adjustment process results in stress (Burke 1991) or even an identity crisis (Scholes 2008). If job resources exceed job demands, it may turn into job stressors that over time may lead to burnout (Demerouti et al. 2001, 2009). Kirpal (2004b) found evidence that conflicting work demands created a major crisis in the occupational identity of nurses. It resulted in lack of motivation and burnout that impacted on their work performances, personal life and turnover.

## 2.4.2 Identity Formation

According to Kroger (1997), men and women use similar psychological structures and development processes in identity formation. However, contextual or situational factors (variables) in the social structure affect the identity formation process which results in differences between the genders (Kroger 1997; Solomontos-Kountouri and Hurry 2008). In the SIT, the identity formation processes are referred to as social categorisation or social comparison and the outcome is referred to as a *social identity*.

The two most important social identity formation processes are social categorisation (also referred to as social comparison) and self-categorisation, best described by the SCT (Brewer 2001; Hogg 2001; Stryker and Burke 2000).

### 2.4.2.1 SIT Identity Formation Processes

The different steps of the SIT identity formation process are explained below:

#### SIT Identity Formation

In the social environment, people tend to classify others and themselves into different social categories. These include gender and age groupings, group memberships (e.g. members of an organisation, religious affiliation), social roles and abstract classes (e.g. ethnicity and social status). Social categorisation plays an important role in the identity phenomenon. Firstly, it segments and orders the social environment providing a methodical means for defining others, and secondly, it helps individuals to find their place and define themselves in the social environment (Ashforth and Mael 1989; Burke and Stets 2009).

The categorisation-based differentiation (stereotyping and discrimination) between individuals as explained by the social identity theory was expanded by the self-categorisation theory to include the self. The SCT as an extension of SIT describes the self-categorisation process best (Olkkonen and Lipponen 2006; Stets and Burke 2000). The theory "...specified precisely how social categorization caused people to perceive, think, feel and behave as group members" (Abrams and Hogg 2004: 102). Burke and Stets (2009: 9) define self-categorisation as "...cognitive groupings of oneself and an aggregate of stimuli as identical, in contrast to another group of stimuli". People that are perceived to differ from the self are classified as members of the out-group and those similar to the self as members of the in-group (Burke and Stets 2009).

### SIT Prototypes

Through the identity formation process, certain meanings, norms, expectations, beliefs and core values are derived from specific social foci. These are cognitively stored in the self as prototypes, hierarchically in order of importance ready to serve as behaviour guides. Hogg et al. (1995) define a prototype as "...a subjective representation of the defining attributes (e.g., beliefs, attitudes, behaviours) of a social category, which is actively constructed from relevant social information in the immediate or more enduring interactive context" (p. 262).

In SIT, the prototype is conceptualised as a cognitive abstraction of the central characteristics of the category membership that individuals use as the category standard to compare themselves with (Burke and Stets 2009). According to Hogg (2001), "...the process of social categorisation perceptually segments the social world into in-groups and out-groups that are cognitively represented as prototypes. These prototypes are context specific, multidimensional fuzzy sets of attributes that define and prescribe attitudes, feelings, and behaviours that characterise one group and distinguish it from other groups" (p. 187).

### Identity Defined in Terms of SIT

Tajfel (1981: 251) defines social identity as "...that part of the individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership".

### SIT Activation

Through the identity formation process, certain meanings, norms, expectations, beliefs and core values are derived from the specific social foci (e.g. careers, professions, organisations, work groups and job characteristics), which are cognitively and hierarchically stored in the self, in order of importance, ready to serve as behaviour guides (Kirpal 2004b).

Prototypes or identity standards are activated through categorisation in reaction to a particular event to guide perceptions, self-conception and behaviour. In reaction to the social event and its content, new prototypes are formed, and existing ones are modified (Hogg 2001). There is a consequential difference between SIT and IT with regard to the activation of an identity. SIT uses the concept salience to describe the activation of an identity in a situation. IT separates the concepts salience and activation and defines salience as the probability that an identity may be activated in a situation (Burke and Stets 2009). The identities are organised into a salience hierarchy, determined by the probability that an identity will be invoked in a specific situation. The higher the salience of an identity, the more time and effort will be invested (Cassidy and Trew 2001). Identities linked to positive outcomes tend to be located higher in the salience hierarchy (Stets 2005). Identity activation outcomes are depicted in Fig. 2.3.

### SIT Resulting Behaviours

According to Burke and Stets (2009), SIT focuses more on cognitive outcomes, while IT focuses more on behavioural outcomes. When activating an identity, there are certain cognitive outcomes that become active. For SIT, the core cognitive process is depersonalisation and the motivational process is self-esteem (Stets and Burke 2000). For IT, the core cognitive process is self-verification and the motivational process is self-efficacy (Stets and Burke 2000).

In SIT, the outcome of the social and self-categorisation processes, in terms of a group or social category, is a social identity. Once a social identity is activated, the core cognitive process of depersonalisation and the motivational process of self-esteem become active (Stets and Burke 2000). Depersonalisation means the self is not viewed as a unique individual but as a personification of the in-group prototype (collective view). In this context, the term depersonalisation refers to the change in the basis of perception with no negative connotation to its meaning. In-group members have a collective interest; they think, feel and behave in the same way, share group interests and concerns and share a collective social identity (Abrams and Hogg 2004; Ashforth and Humphrey 1993; Edwards 2005; Hogg 2001; Hogg and Terry 2000; Stryker and Burke 2000; Van Knippenberg et al. 2004).

The consequence of self-categorisation (also referred to as social categorisation of the self) is not only the depersonalisation of self-perceptions but also the transformation of self-conception into that of the in-group prototype (attitude, feelings and behaviours) which results in a change in what individuals feel, think and do (Hogg 2001; Van Knippenberg et al. 2004).

Group membership is an important source of self-esteem (Burke and Stets 2009). Self-esteem is defined as the "...extent to which workers believe themselves to be valued and competent as organisational members" (Bowling 2007: 3). Individuals experience work as meaningful when it enhances their self-esteem (Scroggins 2008). Positive self-evaluation and receiving good appraisals from others about role performance will enhance an individual self-esteem, making the individual feel good (Burke and Stets 2009).

### 2.4.2.2 RIT Identity Formation Processes

In RIT, the IT and ICT refer to the identity formation process as self-categorisation or identification and the outcome is referred to as a *role identity* (Hogg and Terry 2000). The following steps are followed in identity formation according to role identity theory (RIT):

#### RIT Identity Formation

In terms of the social structure, individuals are involved in a process of “...recognising one another as occupants of positions (roles)” (Stets and Burke 2000: 225) that they act out. In identity theory, the identity formation process, called self-categorisation (also referred to as identification), is conceptualised “...as the categorisation of the self as an occupant of a role and the incorporation, into the self, of the meanings and expectations associated with that role and its performance” (Stets and Burke 2000: 227). This implies that a role identity is the outcome of self-categorisation (Burke and Stets 2009).

Researchers use the term identification to describe both a cognitive state and a process (Rousseau 1998; Steers and Porter 1991). As a cognitive state, identification means that part of a person’s social identity is derived from a social group or categorisation identity (Kreiner et al. 2006). As a process, identification means the acceptance of “...influence in order to engage in a satisfying role-relationship with another person or group” (Steers and Porter 1991: 214).

#### RIT Prototype

The building blocks of the structured society are roles and the requirements attached to them. Role identities are conceptualised as socially constructed definitions of self-in-role (referring to the role occupant) that consist of core and peripheral features. The core features are the important and necessary characteristics of the specific identity, for example, self-reliance and objectivity. Peripheral features refer to intelligence and charisma (Ashforth et al. 2000). According to Stets and Burke (2000), “...having a particular role identity means acting to fulfil the expectations of the role, coordinating and negotiating interaction with the role partners and manipulating the environment to control the resources for which the role has a responsibility” (p. 226).

#### Identity Control Theory Prototype

Burke (1991) later used the term identity standard. A role identity is tied to a cognitive social structure called the identity standard, which functions as a behaviour guide. The identity standard contains (stores) the meanings, norms, expectations,

beliefs and core values associated with a specific social role (identity) (Burke and Stets 2009; Johnston and Swanson 2007; Stets and Burke 2000; 2003; Stets and Harrod 2004; Stryker and Burke 2000). According to Stets and Tsushima (2001), the identity standard defines "...what it means to be who one is in a situation" (p. 283). Individuals have an identity standard for each role they occupy (Stets and Burke 2003).

### Identity Defined in Terms of RIT

Burke and Tully (1977: 883) define a role identity as "...the meanings a person attributes to the self as an object in a social situation or social role". This role defines what it means to be who one is. Burke and Stets (2009) in their unified theory of social identity theory and identity theory define an identity as:

A self-categorization in terms of a social category referring to a class, group, or role as represented in the prototype or identity standard (p. 20).

A specific identity is shared between members of a specific social group who display different levels of commitment towards that identity referred to as identity commitment.

### Identity Commitment

The concept identity commitment has quantitative and qualitative dimensions. The quantitative dimension refers to the number of persons tied to each other through a specific identity. The qualitative dimension refers to the strength of the tie. The number of persons tied by a specific identity determines the identity's importance, level in the identity hierarchy and probability of possible selection and activation as a behaviour guide (Stets and Burke 2003). Varying strengths of identity commitment (identification) with specific social foci exist between individuals and may range from low to high (Abdelal et al. 2001; Coster et al. 2008; Ibarra 1999; Rousseau 1998; Van Dick 2001). The strength can be conceptualised as a value on a continuum. The strength of identity commitment (identification) with different foci may result in a conflict of interests, for example, stronger career identification than organisational identification (Van Dick 2001).

One school of thought, using a motivational baseline, conceptualised work commitment as a bipolar continuum (*cf.* Roodt et al. 1994). The one side of this continuum represents under-commitment (work alienation) with the middle representing balanced commitment and the opposite side representing overcommitment (workaholism) (Janse Van Rensburg 2004; Kanungo 1979; Kilduff et al. 1997; Roodt 1991, 1997; Roodt et al. 1994). Schaufeli et al. (2006) classify workaholism into positive (good) workaholism (closely related to work engagement) and negative (bad) workaholism. Schaufeli et al. (2008) define workaholism as "...the tendency to work excessively hard in a compulsive way" (p. 204). Such a bipolar

continuum could also be described as "...a cognitive predisposition of alienation from a work focus at the one end and extreme identification with a work focus at the other end" based on a particular work-related focus's potential to satisfy salient needs (Janse Van Rensburg 2004: 52).

Any form of withdrawal behaviour such as job burnout, absenteeism or turnover will tend to manifest towards the under-identification side on the continuum (Janse Van Rensburg 2004; Roodt 2004; Senter and Martin 2007).

### Identity Activation According to RIT

There is a consequential difference between SIT and RIT with regard to the activation of an identity. SIT uses the concept salience to describe the activation of an identity in a situation. RIT separates the concepts salience and activation and defines salience as the probability that an identity may be activated in a situation (Burke and Stets 2009). The identities are organised into a salience hierarchy, determined by the probability that an identity will be invoked in a specific situation. The higher the salience of an identity, the more time and effort will be invested (Cassidy and Trew 2001). Identities linked to positive outcomes tend to be located higher in the salience hierarchy (Stets 2005).

In the work context, performing any job (acting out a role) generates a certain level of identification with that job (Kirpal 2004a). The process that leads to the perception of oneness with the job (role) is referred to as identification (Ashforth and Mael 1989; Kirpal 2004a; Stets and Burke 2000). It is important to note that identification "...describes only the cognition of oneness, not the behaviours and the effect of that may serve as antecedents or consequences of the cognition" (Ashforth and Mael 1989: 35).

### RIT Resulting Behaviours

According to the RIT, the outcome of the identity formation process of self-categorisation (also referred to as identification) in terms of role is a role identity (Hogg et al. 1995; Stets and Burke 2000). A change in identity is an indication that the meanings within the identity standard have changed (Stets and Burke 2003). Once a role identity is activated, the core cognitive process of self-verification and the motivational process of self-efficacy become active (Stets and Burke 2000). According to Burke and Stets (2009: 5), "...role membership and performance in identity theory have consequences for self-esteem and self-efficacy".

Through a central cognitive process called self-verification (similar to depersonalisation in SIT), individuals strive to keep their role behaviours in line with the identity standard content (Stets and Burke 2003). Self-verification is defined "...as people's tendency to seek evaluations and interaction partners that confirm their self-views" (Ibarra 1999: 767). Rothmann (2003: 23) describes self-efficacy as "...a general, stable cognition (trait) that individuals have and carry with them and that

reflects the expectation that they possess the ability to perform tasks successfully in a variety of achievement situations". Self-efficacy refers to individual performance that relates to specific job performance (Kirkman and Rosen 1999).

## 2.5 Importance of Identities

The successful construction, transformation and maintenance of an identity are regarded as an achievement that enhances an individual the feeling of belonging somewhere and having an identity (Agostino 2004; Ashforth and Mael 1989; Hogg and Terry 2000; Kirpal 2004b). The higher the number of role identities a person holds, the stronger the sense of meaning and existence and its effect on mental health (Lang and Lee 2005). Work-related identities have a significant influence on employee behaviour (Amiot et al. 2007), which in turn has an impact on subjective work outcomes and objective organisational outcomes. This implies that a collective labour force work-based identity indirectly has a significant impact on organisational performance (Agostino 2004; Aryee and Luk 1996; Ashforth and Kreiner 1999; Wayne et al. 2006). People are tied organically through social identities to their groups and within their groups mechanically through their role identities (Stets and Burke 2000).

The above-mentioned body of research that is linked to the identity phenomenon provides the theoretical base for exploring work-based identity as a potential construct in employee identity research.

## 2.6 Work-Based Identity

Against the background of the previous discussion, WI is therefore a multi-identity, multifaceted and multilayered construct within the self that develops through the above-mentioned identity formation process. The meanings, norms, expectations, beliefs and core values associated with WI are stored cognitively as behaviour guides, also referred to as prototypes. An identity prototype can be divided into three different dimensions, namely, a structural, social and individual-psychological dimension. The structural dimension is culturally embedded and includes concepts of work, patterns of employment and training systems. The social dimension develops through interaction (identity formation process) between the individual and work-related foci, e.g. careers, professions, organisations, work groups and job characteristics. The resulting identities are, for example, career, occupational and professional identities. The individual-psychological dimension includes aspects such as the individual's attitude towards work, perception of the work content, level of career or professional development, occupational history, work centrality and person-environment fit. These different dimensions will be discussed below as dimensions of the WI prototype.

### 2.6.1 Work-Based Identity Prototype Dimensions

Burke and Stets (2009) suggested that the identity standard (according to RIT) and prototype (according to SIT) should be treated equivalently to cognitive representations. Burke and Stets (2009: 19) define the prototype (identity standard) as "...a cognitive representation of a social category containing the meanings and norms the person associates with the social category". For the purpose of this study, the term work-based identity (WI) prototype is used. The conceptualisation of the prototype is reflected in Fig. 2.4.

Figure 2.4 shows that the work-based identity prototype can be divided into three different dimensions, namely, a structural, social and individual-psychological dimension (Kirpal 2004b), which will be discussed in the sections that follow.

#### 2.6.1.1 Structural Dimension

The structural dimension is culturally embedded and includes concepts of work, patterns of employment and training systems (Kirpal 2004b). The identity formation process is influenced by situational or contextual factors (variables) inherent to the specific social or historical setting (Kroger 1997). Individuals are born into different

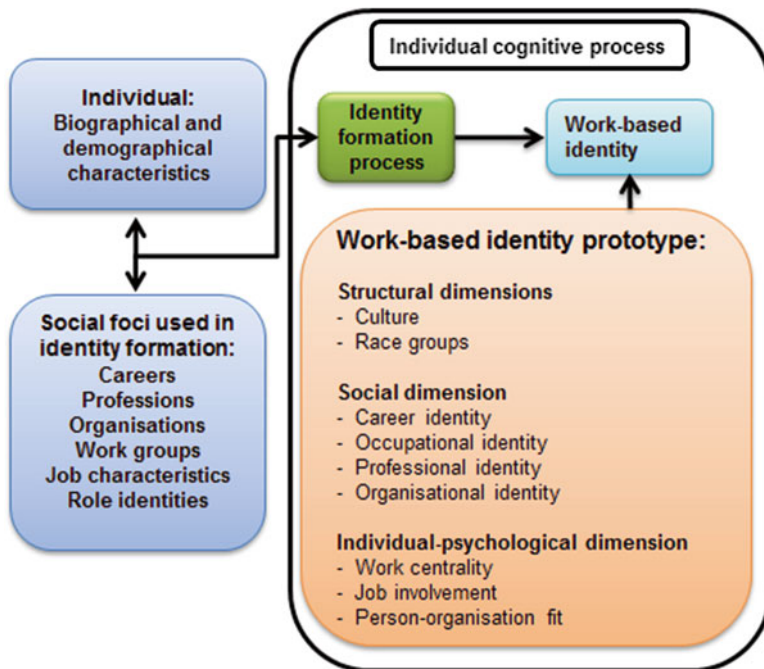


Fig. 2.4 The work-based identity prototype



structured societies that are the product of unique sets of social categories, e.g. cultures, race groups, social groups, organisations or work groups (Stryker and Burke 2000).

Changes in the structural dimensions created a crisis in the work identity of South African employees. Since 1994, the opening of South African markets to global competition, along with the introduction of legislation to ensure equal employment, has been bringing new challenges to the South African workplace. This imposed major changes to the post-1994 work role that employees were accustomed to in South Africa (Thomas 2002). The more diverse deployment of labour by organisations brings its own unique set of problems to the workplace (Van Zyl and Lazenby 2002). As the workplace becomes more diverse, problems experienced have included, differences in value perspectives as well as the way work is viewed (Béteille 2002), all of which impact on the performance of organisations (Thomas 2002).

To define race from a social point of view can be problematic. For the purpose of this study, the primary race groups of the South African population (Asian/Indian, Black, Coloured and White) were used.

### 2.6.1.2 Social Dimension

The social dimension develops through interaction between the individual and social groupings which results in the formation of collective social identities. Social foci that are the primary antecedents of work-related identity formation are careers, occupations, professions, organisations, work groups, job characteristics (task significance and variety of skills needed) and role identities (technical and general business roles) (Buche 2003, 2006, 2008; Kirpal 2004a, b; Walsh and Gordon 2007). From these social foci, individuals derive, through a cognitive identity formation process, different identities that are incorporated into the self-concept. For example, referring to an individual's professional identity denotes that part of his identity that is derived, through a process of identification, from the profession the individual is a member of (Kreiner et al. 2006).

The work-related identities selected for the purpose of this study are career, occupational and professional identity as well as organisational identification. These identities refer to the different ways in which individuals define themselves within the context of work (Fugate et al. 2004). The work-related identities selected are discussed next, starting with career identity:

#### Career Identity

Career identity represents how individuals define themselves in career contexts. Acting as a "cognitive compass" career identity assists the individual in realising, creating and using opportunities (Fugate et al. 2004: 17). A career identity is longitudinal, as it makes sense of one's past and present, and gives future direction. It is not the sum of past work experiences but the incorporation of those experiences into meaningful and useful structures (Fugate et al. 2004). The term career is

interchangeable with the term vocational identity which refers to the self-perceptions an individual have over the course of their careers about their long-term skills, abilities and job needs (Thomas and Feldman 2007). Career identity is one of the dimensions of the concept employability (McArdle et al. 2007).

Vocational identity is defined as "...the possession of a clear and stable picture of one's goals, interests and talents" (Holland et al. 1980: 1191). For this study, the definition of McArdle et al. (2007) is used which defines career identity as:

The ability to gain and maintain employment, both within and across organisations (p. 248).

### Occupational Identity

Organisations tend to be structured around specific occupations, e.g. lawyer firms, human resources, procurement, construction, information technology and telecommunications businesses. Job titles, which are descriptive of an occupation, e.g. human resource specialist, technician, nurses, engineer, etc., serve as identity badges. Each occupation develops its own distinct culture, different from those of other social groups (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999; Brewer and Pierce 2005; Solomontos-Kountouri and Hurry 2008; Walsh and Gordon 2007). Occupational identity is derived from work experience where the knowledge, skills and abilities are not easily learned. With time, work shapes the individual, and in turn, the individual influences work structures and processes (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999; Kirpal 2004a, b). Occupational identity is relatively stable over a period of time (Brown 2004), and an employee's occupational role impacts on their attitudes, values and behaviours (Martin et al. 2006). Solomontos-Kountouri and Hurry (2008) reported that there are significant differences between the genders perceptions of occupational identity amongst young Greek Cypriots. "In occupational identity, males were more likely to belong to diffusion status and females were more likely to belong to achievement status" (p. 255). The loss of an occupational identity is a source of depression and anxiety that can have a devastating effect on the individual (Brown 2004; Peteet 2000).

Occupational identity, as one of an individual's many social identities, is defined by Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) as "...the set of central, distinctive and enduring characteristics that typify the line of work" (p. 417). For this study, the definition of Kirpal (2004b) was used which defines occupational identity as:

A multi-dimensional phenomenon, with structural, social and individual-psychological components (p. 274).

### Professional Identity

Professional identity is one of an individual's many social identities (Ibarra 1999). The term professional identity describes both the "...collective identity of a profession and an individual's own sense of the professional role" (Feen-Calligan 2005: 122). The

development of a professional identity takes a long time during which the individual learns to become an expert in the field of the specific profession. This involves the acquisition of technical skills and the learning of behaviour associated with the profession through formal and informal learning processes. The identity is relatively stable over time (Beckett and Gough 2004; Coster et al. 2008; Crawford et al. 2008; Dobrow and Higgins 2005; Empson 2004; Feen-Calligan 2005; Hotho 2008; Marhuenda et al. 2004; Miller 1998; Pratt et al. 2006; Quinones and Mason 1994).

Quinones and Mason (1994: 136) define professional identity "...as the acknowledgment and concern for improving the knowledge, skills and values of the profession". For this study, the definition of Ibarra (1999) was used which defines professional identity as:

The relatively stable and enduring constellation of attributes, beliefs, values, motives and experiences in terms of which people define themselves in a professional role (pp. 764–765).

### Organisational Identification

Organisations are defined as "...internally structured groups that are located in complex networks of inter-group relations characterized by power, status and prestige differentials" (Hogg and Terry 2000: 121) each with unique attributes (values, goals and actions) referred to as the organisation's identity (Pratt and Foreman 2000).

Organisational identity is often confused with related concepts such as organisational identification, organisational membership and organisational commitment. Organisational identity refers to the attributes of an organisation which can include values, goals and actions, as well as descriptions of the organisation or organisational members (Lane and Scott 2007). Organisational identity is a fluid concept that changes with the organisational life cycle or change in response to external influences (Miller 1998). Organisational identification on the other hand is a cognitive identity formation process – the link between the individual and the organisation they identify with (Dutton et al. 1994). This implies that the person's self-concept contains some of the organisation's identity (attributes), derived through a process referred to as identification. A person's organisational identification will be more salient than alternative identities if identification with the organisation's organisational membership identity is strong (Dutton et al. 1994).

Organisational membership indicates belonging to a specific organisation. An individual may be a member of the organisation, but not all individuals identify with their organisation. Organisational membership is also not a prerequisite for identifying with the focal organisation, e.g. an art museum (Bhattacharya and Elsbach 2002). A person's organisation may constitute an important source of an individual's identity (Hogg and Terry 2001; Olkkonen and Lipponen 2006). Organisational commitment "...is regarded as a psychological state of attachment or the binding force between the individual and the organisation" which is a reference to the strength of the attachment (Macey and Schneider 2008: 8). In Japanese culture,

work-identities revolve around organisational identity rather than work-role (job) identity (Ishikawa 2007). Dutton et al. (1994) define organisational identification as "...the degree to which a member defines him- or herself by the same attributes that he or she believes define the organization" (p. 239). This definition is based on self-perception and not the perception the individual has of the organisation. For this study, the definition of Mael and Ashforth (1992) was used to define organisational identification as:

Perceived oneness with an organisation and the experience of the organisation's success or failure as one's own (p. 103).

### 2.6.1.3 Individual-Psychological Dimension

The individual-psychological dimension includes aspects like the individual's attitude towards work, perception of the work content, level of career or professional development, occupational history, person-organisation fit and work centrality (Kirpal 2004a, b). The individual-psychological dimension includes aspects selected for this study such as work centrality, job involvement and person-organisation fit. In the next section, the work-related facet, work centrality is discussed.

#### Work Centrality

Paullay et al. (1994) support Kanungo's (1982) finding that there is considerable confusion between the concepts job involvement and work centrality. To address the problem and provide guidance the following conceptual and operational distinctions are suggested. Kanungo (1982) argues that the term work involvement should be used when referring to the value of work (e.g. as a central life interest). The term job involvement should be used when referring to the need-satisfying potential of a specific job (Rotenberry and Moberg 2007). Paullay et al. (1994) found evidence that job involvement and work involvement (what they call work centrality) are two distinct constructs.

According to Snir and Harpaz (2005) work centrality has two major theoretical concepts, namely absolute work centrality that "...involves a belief or value orientation towards work as a life role and relative work centrality that involves a decision orientation about preferred life spheres for behaviour" (p. 2).

Ishikawa (2007) defines work centrality as "...the extent to which people regard work as important in their life" (p. 317). For the purpose of this study the definition of Paullay et al. (1994) was used which defines work centrality as:

The beliefs that individuals have regarding the degree of importance that work play in their lives (p. 225).

## Job Involvement

Paullay et al. (1994) found evidence that work centrality and job involvement are two distinct constructs. They conceptualised the notion that job involvement has two sub-dimensions namely job involvement role and job involvement setting. Job involvement role is defined as "...the degree to which one is engaged in the specific tasks that make up one's job". Job involvement setting is defined as "...the degree to which one finds carrying out tasks of one's job in the present job environment to be engaging" (Paullay et al. 1994: 225). Brown (1996: 251) describes a job-involved person in terms of the following three salient personality traits: "He or she strongly endorses the work ethic and is high in both internal motivation and self-esteem. However, the job-involved person is not identifiable in terms of demographic characteristics. Job involvement does not depend on age, gender, education, length of service, or salary".

Paullay et al. (1994) found evidence that job involvement is a construct distinct from work involvement which has a concept with a wider meaning. This finding is supported by Hallberg and Schaufeli (2006) who presented evidence that job involvement and work engagement are two empirically distinct constructs. The term job involvement should be used when referring to a specific job a person does, as suggested by Kanungo (1982) and supported by Paullay et al. (1994). Job involvement in this sense refers to an aspect associated with the identification process, a "cognitive or believe state" (Schaufeli et al. 2002: 74). Schaufeli et al. (2002) use the term dedication, which in a qualitative sense refers to a very strong involvement that includes an affective dimension.

Lodahl and Kejner (1965: 74) define job involvement as "...the extent to which a person psychologically identifies with his/her work and the importance of work for his/her total self-concept." This approach focuses on how a job can influence the self-esteem of a person (Hallberg and Schaufeli 2006). For the purpose of the study, the definition of Paullay et al. (1994) was used who define job involvement as:

The degree to which one is cognitively preoccupied with, engaged in, and concerned with one's present job (p. 225).

## Person-Organisation Fit

The term person-environment fit refers to the match between a person and the social environment. In the work context, a distinction is made between person-team fit and person-environment fit (Ballout 2007; Van Vianen et al. 2007). Person-organisation fit "...pertains to how an individual matches an organisation's values, goals and mission" (Lauver and Kristof-Brown 2001: 455). It is an indication of the compatibility between the individual and the organisation (Kristof-Brown et al. 2005). Organisations try to attract individuals that match the company values, and individuals, in turn, search for career opportunities with companies with values similar to their own (Ballout 2007).

High levels of person-organisation fit minimise high turnover intention and actual labour turnover (Kristof-Brown et al. 2005). Values are conceptualised as latent constructs of a general nature that serve as a standard to guide and evaluate socially acceptable behaviour (Barnea and Schwartz 1998; Elizur 1996; Klenke 2005). Values are defined as "...a generalized, enduring organisation of beliefs about the personal and social desirability of modes of conduct or end-states of existence" (Klenke 2005: 51). A high level of shared values is an indication of a good fit, while a low level of shared values is an indication of a discrepancy between what management and employees see as important (Alvesson and Willmott 2002; Watrous et al. 2006). Person-organisation fit is defined by Kristof-Brown et al. (2005) as the "...compatibility between an individual and a work environment that occurs when their characteristics are well matched" (p. 281). For the purpose of the study, the definition of Kristof (1996) was used who defines person-organisation fit as:

The compatibility between people and organisations that occurs when at least one entity provides what the other needs, they share similar fundamental characteristics, or both (pp. 4–5).

The next section explains the different life spheres and roles individuals are engaged in and how this may potentially influence their choice of work facets they want to identify with.

## 2.7 Work-Based Identity Defined

The term *work-based identity* (WI) was created for this research project to describe a set of work-related identities, as no suitable term was found in the literature. Different identity definitions that define parts of WI are presented below. Work identity is defined by Buche (2003: 11, 2008: 134) as "...a socially constructed representation of an individual's self-perception of his/her own interactions within the employment environment". Agostino (2004: 26) defines workplace identity as "...the sense of individual identity that an employee derives from being part of a particular workplace". Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001: 180) conceptualised work identity as "...partly cognitive that describes the attributes and the more holistic conception that people have of themselves at work. At the same time, individuals make claims about what work is and what it is not, making work identity a set of actions as well as a set of cognitions".

Witt et al. (2002: 488) define work identity as "...the work-relevant target with which the individual primarily identifies". Other researchers conceptualised work identity as a multilayered and multidimensional phenomenon that describes one's self-concept and understanding of it in terms of the work role (Baugher 2003; Kirpal 2004a). Walsh and Gordon (2007) define individual work identity as "...a work-based self-concept constituted of a combination of organisational, occupational and other identities that shape the roles individuals adopt and the corresponding ways they behave when performing their work in the context of their jobs and/or careers" (p. 2). Against the backdrop of the previous discussion on the

work identity dimensions, the definition of Lloyd et al. (2011) was used for the purpose of this research project. They define WI as:

A multi-identity, multi-faceted and multi-layered construction of the self (in which the self-concept fulfills a core, integrative function), that shapes the roles that individuals are involved in, in their employment context (p. 65).

For the purpose of this project, the term *identification* will be used for the identity formation process and the term *prototype* will present behaviour guides. These meanings, norms, expectations, beliefs and core values associated with a specific identity are “stored” in identity prototypes (according to SIT) or identity standards (according to IT).

## 2.8 Guidance on the Following Chapters

From 1988 to 1999 alone, more than 12,000 articles were published on identity in general. Based on the extent of the topic, it was not possible to review all research manuscripts on the identity concept for this study. Emanating from the discussion in this chapter are a few important points to consider when reading other chapters in this book:

1. For the purpose of this project, the term *identification* will be used to describe the identity formation process
2. The term *prototype* will present behaviour guides on the identity formation process. These meanings, norms, expectations, beliefs and core values associated with a specific identity are “stored” in prototypes (according to SIT) or identity standards (according to RIT).
3. The conceptualisation of WI according to the said prototypes includes structural, social and individual-psychological dimensions which in turn incorporate the different work-related identification foci.
4. This said conceptualisation was used to operationalise the WI construct which provides (according to our view) as sound theoretical base for the WI construct. This strongly embeds WI in social identity and role identity theories.
5. The said conceptualisation does however not include the dynamic component of *identity work* which forms an important component for understanding WI formation. This identity work process will be described in more detail in the next chapter.

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