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The Impact of Professional Identity on Organisational Identification: A Comparative Study of Academics and Managers

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to detail findings of a study examining the relationship between employee professional identity and the impact that this has on an employee's level of organisational identification. This is examined using two comparative groups of employees, namely academics and managers. The findings suggest that there are significant differences between the professional identities of academics and managers through their level of participation in their industry, their belief about their value to the community, and their sense of calling to their profession. Findings also suggest that this has a significant impact on their level of organisational identification. The implication of this research includes greater understanding into the impact that professional attributes have on different types of employees.

Keywords: Professional, Identity, Identification, University, Managers, Academics

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to detail findings of a study examining the impact that professional identity has on employee's organisational identification. In particular, this study examines professional employees operating within the Australian public sector. The Australian public sector has experienced significant organisational changes, replacing the traditional model of public administration with private sector practices to achieve managerial notions of great efficiency and accountability (Mok, 1999: 118; Dixon, Kouzmin, & Korak-Kakabadse, 1998: 165). According to Hood (1995: 97) some of the changes include increased contractual employment and non-monetary rewards, and a higher emphasis on outcomes and output (Dixon et al., 1998: 165). These process and structural changes have also created many changes to the culture of the public sector. In particular, it has created a greater divide between professionals and bureaucrats (managers) due to the competing demands being placed on each party. One outcome is that the beliefs and attitudes (termed professional identity) held by each of the different types of employees may be changing.

This study examines the impact of professional beliefs and attitudes on the employee's ability to identify with their organisation (termed organisational identification). Possessing a high level of organisational identification is vital to the culture (Schrodt, 2002: 193), organisational trust, and effectiveness of an organisation (Shockley-Salabak, Ellis, & Winograd, 2000: 42). Therefore, the primary research question in this study is:

What is the impact of professional identity on academic and managerial employee's level of organisational identification?

This paper begins by examining the relevant literature from which the secondary research questions emerge. It then details the findings of the study and discusses these by pattern-matching with previous research. The results of this study are relevant to organisations employing a number of different types of employees, particularly in the public sector.

BACKGROUND

Professional Identity

A professional is a particular type of employee who holds a higher occupational status because of the characteristics of their discipline and occupation. These disciplines, termed professions, are considered to be prestigious because the knowledge within it is considered too complex for lay people to understand and consequently, society rely on these professionals for their knowledge (Boyt, Lusch & Naylor, 2001: 322). Because of this, professionals must abide by strict standards both whilst entering and remaining in the profession. Examples of professionals include law, clergy, medicine and university academics (Kearney & Sinha, 1988: 572). However, there is continued debate as to whether this is accurate or not. Furthermore, as more careers and positions are created throughout society, further decisions are being made as to what exactly a profession is. For example, Toren (1969: 143) argues that managers are professionals, where' as Friedson (1994: 135) argues that they are not.

In addition to examining the professions themselves, there are many different sociological definitions of professionals in the literature. Greenwood (1957: 45) states that professionals exhibit five characteristics: systemic theory, authority, community sanction, ethical codes, and a culture. Ferlie et al (1996: 168) argues that an analysis of the literature in more recent times suggests that professionalism is characterised by the following similar aspects. They are that an area of expertise and knowledge is monopolised; the profession controls standards of training and entry; the professionals relate to one another on a collegial basis; and they exercise some degree of autonomy over their work. Each of these aspects is now discussed.

Professionals are characterised as possessing an area of expertise or knowledge. This is usually obtained by completing complex and lengthy training in an academic environment (Greenwood, 1957: 45). They hold a position of authority because society is unable to accurately judge their work, and the profession itself strictly controls entry into this field. Because society is unable to accurately judge the work of a professional, they are held to high ethical and moral standards through a code of ethics. This reduces the ability to misuse their authority (Greenwood, 1957: 45). In addition, they are required to use their knowledge and expertise to the benefit of the community by regular liaison through activities such as reading journals, newsletters, participating and presenting at conferences and seminars, and general contact. "Calling to the field" is also considered to be a characteristic of professionals. Calling refers to the level of professional dedication of the individual because of the complexity of their field and the high standards of work sought after (Schaefer, 1984: 271). Greenwood (1957: 45) explains it as the belief that this is the individual's purpose in life where it transcends into all aspects of the individuals professional and personal life, and they seek psychological satisfaction rather than monetary rewards. Because of the many requirements of being a professional, they are frequently described as collegial. Collegiality refers to the sense of closeness and similarity experienced by individuals in the same occupation/profession. This creates a culture where loyalty is given to their profession rather than their employed organisation.

The last and most important aspect of being a professional according to Friedson (1994: 173) is the autonomy that professionals enjoy. According to Boyt et al. (2001: 322) autonomy is the desire and ability of professionals to make their own decisions rather than being told what to do. According to Elston (1991 as cited in Ferlie et al., 1996: 169) professional autonomy can be classified into three types. The first type is political autonomy where professionals may use their expert status to influence policy. The second type is economic autonomy, which allows professionals to determine their own remuneration. The third type is technical autonomy, which allows the profession to set standards and maintain control of these. Unfortunately, the autonomy experienced by professionals is slowly eroding with increased governmental controls and regulations (Harrison, 2003: 15; Freidson, 1994: 130). This is one of the causes of conflict between professionals and their employing organisation (Wallace, 1995: 229).

Academics

The first type of employee chosen for examination is academics. Academics are professional employees employed to conduct a combination of teaching, research and service related duties. According to Lafferty and Flemming (2000: 263) academics usually fall into one of five groups. First are the upper managers purely responsible for management and administration through restructuring and budgetary tasks. Second are the heads of department who are described as middle management and action the budgets given by upper management. Thirdly are the full-time or tenured academics that undertake teaching, research and some administrative roles. Fourth are contract staff for first year, high demand courses, and fifth are casual staff that are mainly postgraduate students for daily teaching activities. In addition to one of these five groups, academics perform a number of different job roles. These can include improving the institutions research profile, teaching undergraduates and postgraduates and demonstrating the practical relevance of the course content, consultancies, collaborative research (Macfarlane, 1995: 6) and other administrative tasks such as institution representation, committee's and taskforces. However, academics typically consider their most important work to be research and see teaching as a chore or interference (Jones, 1976: 78). Promotion is increasingly becoming dependent on research related activities, and academics are being held to stricter controls that inhibit the quality of their work. They have experienced an increase in pressure on their time, have to cope with more students, incompatible amounts of resources and staff to manage these students, and the added pressure to generate additional incomes through means such as consultancies (Light & Cox, 2001: 5). Because of this, many argue that an academics role is slowly moving away from the traditional notions of an academic, and they are now expected to attain skills reserved to modern entrepreneurs (Light & Cox, 2001: 5).

Managers

The second type of employee chosen for examination is a manager. They are defined as individuals who strive to achieve organisational objectives by working with and through other people, by balancing effectiveness and efficiency, and fully utilising limited resources (Kreitner, 2004: 5). Managers are most commonly believed to perform four basic functions as pioneered by Henri Fayol in 1949. These functions are used in Dresslers (2002: 3) definition of a manager as a person who plans,

organises, leads, and controls the people and work of an organisation in order to achieve the organisations goals. These functions are outlined here according to Dressler (2002: 3). Planning involves deciding on courses of action, setting goals, and forecasting future possibilities. Organising involves delegating and coordinating the work of employees and identifying what needs to be done. Leading people involves motivating employees to do their roles, communicating effectively and resolving conflicts. Finally, controlling involves continually checking performance against standards set.

As mentioned previously, public sector managers have experienced many changes to their job roles in recent years. They are now responsible for guiding the new culture of high performance and ethical behaviour as well as increasing accountability and justification for use of finances (Mascarenhas, 1993: 325). These changes have created a culture of managers who must abide by bureaucratic ideals for success in their occupation, which is contradictory to the values of a professional employee.

This study examines the professional identity/characteristics of professional employees. Two types of professional employees have been chosen, namely academics and managers. This produces the following secondary research questions:

S.R.Q.1. *"What is the professional identity of academic employees?"*

S.R.Q.2. *"What is the professional identity of managerial employees?"*

S.R.Q.3. *"Are there any significant differences between the professional identities of academic and managerial employees?"*

Organisational Identification

Organisational identification is defined by Dutton et al (1994: 240) as an experience that occurs when an individual perceives that organisational and individual attributes combine to create a sense of unity. This feeling increases the individual's level of job satisfaction, intraorganisational cooperation and citizenship (Dutton et al., 1994: 241), as well as the organisations culture (Schrodt, 2002: 193) and effectiveness (Shockley-Salabak, Ellis, & Winograd, 2000: 42). Furthermore, employees are more adaptive and willing to accept organisational demands and changes because it is seen as a positive outcome for the self (Siegal & Seleshi, 1997: 152). The secondary research questions to be examined are:

S.R.Q.4 *"What is the level of organisational identification of academic employees?"*

S.R.Q 5. *"What is the level of organisational identification of managerial employees?"*

S.R.Q.6. *"Are there any significant differences between the level of organisational identification of academic and managerial employees?"*

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a mixed method design to test the professional identity of the two groups of employees. This was chosen as the most effective method to incorporate more generalisable statistical findings with in-depth findings (Patton, 1987: 9). Once all the completed questionnaires and interviews were collected and analysed, findings were compared with previous research through the use of pattern-matching (Yin, 2003: 116).

Quantitative Measures and Instruments

Questionnaires were used to determine the professional identity of the two groups of employees. This questionnaire used a seven-point likert scale ranging from 1=very strongly disagree to 7=very strongly agree. To test the professional identity of employees, a validated instrument termed Hall's Professionalism Scale (1968) was used. This consisted of five variables totalling 25 items with alphas ranging from .64 to .76. These variables included "Organisations as a major referent", "Service", "Self-regulation", "Calling", and "Autonomy". In addition, using 1 item, participants were also asked whether they believe they are professional. To test the employees level of identification, a five-item instrument by Smidts, Pruyn and Van Riel (2001) was used. This instument also used a seven-point likert scale with one variable of "Identification" and an alpha of .84.

Qualitative Measures and Instruments

Convergent style interviews were conducted to determine why participants did or did not believe that they were professional. This consisted of one open-ended question, which created the opportunity to ask several questions in order to zero in on the main issue (Dick, 1990: 8). Responses to questions were examined and refined after each interview through the use of manifest and latent content analysis to ensure consistency (Babbie, 2004: 319).

Sample

A higher education institution was used in this study because of its typicality as an organisation possessing different types of employees in a large quantity. Academics and managers were chosen as two suitable types of employees to examine. Participants were randomly selected from a list of employees obtained from the institution and were contacted to complete the questionnaire and/or interview. A total of 86 employees participated in the study consisting of 57 academics and 29 managers who completed the survey, and 10 academics and 10 managers who participated in the interview.

RESULTS

Demographics

The demographic composition of the two groups of academics and managers who participated in this study include a greater number of female employees compared with males with 58% of academics and 67% of managers were female. Of the academic employee sample, the majority of respondents were aged between 26-35 years, have been employed by the institution for between 2-5 years (39%) and possess a PhD (58%). Of the managerial sample, the majority of respondents were aged between 46-55 years (52%), have been employed by the institution for more than 10 years (34%) and possess a masters degree (31%). For more detailed results see table 1 in appendix no. 1.

Results from Quantitative Analysis

To collect data in response to the first of the secondary research questions which asked "*What is the professional identity of academic employees?"* and the second of the secondary research questions which asked "*What is the professional identity of managerial employees?"* standard means were taken from the following independent variables: "Referent", "service", "self-regulation", "calling", and "autonomy". Results of the "Referent" variable suggest that academics (m = 5.34) place a greater importance on the role of professional associations in their discipline than managers (m = 4.28) do. Results of the "Service" variable suggest that both academics (m = 4.44) and managers (m = 3.74) believe that their occupation does not provide a valuable service to the community. Results of the "Self-regulation" variable suggest that both academics (m = 3.98) and managers (m = 4.15) feel that their ability to self-regulate their work is poor. Results of the "Calling" variable suggest that "calling

to the field" is not important for either academics (m = 4.69) or managers (m = 4.19). Results of the "Autonomy" variable suggest that both academics (m = 4.62) and managers (m = 4.42) experience similar low levels of autonomy. As supporting information, when asked "Overall I believe that I am professional" both academics (m = 6.30) and managers (m = 5.93) indicated a positive response.

In summary, in response to first of the secondary research questions, "*What is the professional identity of academic employees?"* academics indicate a slightly higher level of professional identification than managers. They are actively engaged in their professional community ("organisation as a major referent") to a great degree, however they perceive that they are not providing a valuable service ("service"), do not possess a high degree of regulation over the work in their discipline ("self-regulation"), do not feel a strong sense of calling to the field ("calling"), and do not experience a high level of autonomy in their daily work ("autonomy"). Similarly, in response to the second of the secondary research questions, "*What is the professional identity of managerial employees?"* managers feel it is important to be engaged in their professional community ("organisation as a major referent") however, do so to a lower level compared with academics. They also do not perceive that they are providing a valuable service ("service"), do not possess a high level of control over the work in their field ("self-regulation"), do not experience a sense of calling into the field ("calling"), and report lower levels of autonomy in their daily work ("autonomy").

In order to examine the third of the secondary research questions, which asked "*Are there any significant differences between the professional identities of academic and managerial employees"*, an independent T-Test for 'equality of means' was undertaken (see tables 2 and 3, appendix no. 1). The findings suggest that a significant difference exists for the independent variables "referent" (t=5.638, p<.000, academics mean=5.34, managers mean=4.28), "service" (t=3.807, p<.000, academics mean=4.44, managers mean= 3.74) and "calling" (t=2.670, p<.011, academics mean=4.69, managers mean=4.19). In summary, significant differences exist between academics and managers in terms of their attitudes in relation to "referent", "service" and "calling". In summary, in response to the third of the secondary research questions about any significant differences between the two subcultures, results indicate that there are significant differences between academics and managers in terms of the result

that managers do not value and identify with professional norms and values to the extent indicated by academics.

In response to the fourth of the secondary research questions which asked "*To what extent are academic employees identifying with the organisation?"* and the fifth of the secondary research questions which asked "*To what extent are managerial employees identifying with the organisation*?" standard means analysis was undertaken (academics m = 5.26, managers m = 5.32). Academic and managerial employees agree that they feel "meaningful ties" (academics = 5.32, managers = 5.28) and a "sense of belonging" with their organisation (academics m = 5.23, managers m = 5.14). Both subcultures are "proud" to work for their organisation (academics m = 5.42, managers m = 5.59) and felt that they are somewhat "acknowledged" within the organisation (academics m = 4.72, managers m = 5.07).

In addition, to determine the impact that professional identity has on employee's level of identification, a linear regression was undertaken. The linear regression tested the impact of the independent variables "referent", "service", "self-regulation", "calling", and "autonomy" on the dependent variable "identification". The findings suggest a significant relationship for both academics and managers (academics $F=3.53$, $p<.008$, $r^2=26\%$, managers $F=3.62$, $p<.015$, $r^2=44\%$). The significant independent variables in the equation for academics were "calling" ($b= .327$, $p<.042$) and "autonomy" ($b=.328$, $p<.016$) and for managers it was "autonomy" ($b=.339$, $p<.059$). In summary, the independent variables explained 26% of academics and 44% of manager's identification.

In response to the sixth of the secondary research questions which asked "*Are there any significant differences between the level of identification of academic and managerial employees?"* an independent T-Test for 'equality of means' was undertaken (see tables 2 and 3). The findings suggest that no significant differences exist between the level of organisational "identification" between academics and managers ($t=-2.80$, $p=.780$).

Results from Qualitative Analysis

In response to the first of the secondary research questions which asked "*What is the professional identity of academic employees?"* and the second of the secondary research questions which asked "*What is the professional identity of managerial employees?"* participants were asked in the

convergent interview why they believe they are or are not professional. Responses to this question were analysed using Yin's (2003: 120) emerging themes. Results indicate that academics believe they are professional because of three emerging themes. Firstly, they possess a large amount of skills and experience a long duration of study for a PhD qualification. Secondly, they possess a level of control over knowledge in their discipline, including the ability to mentor and pass on knowledge. Thirdly, their research must abide by ethical standards. Results from managers suggest that they do not believe they are professional and two emerging themes for this response were evident. Firstly, managers feel that they do not have any professional expertise or affiliations, and secondly, they indicate that a manager's job role is too broad to define as professional.

DISCUSSION

This paper examines the impact that professional identity has on employees' level of organisational identification. This is conducted on two comparative groups of employees including academics and managers. Firstly, the findings suggest that there are significant differences between the professional identities of these two groups of employees. The first significant difference is in the role of professional associations as examined by the variable "organisation as a major referent". Academics play a much larger role in professional associations than managers do by regularly attending conferences and events, and reading trade publications to remain up to date with new research. The second significant difference was in the "service" variable with academics more strongly reporting that their occupation is not valuable to the community and is dispensable. The third significant difference was the "calling" variable with managers indicating that "calling to the field" does not occur to the extent that it does for academics. These significant differences suggest that different types of employees experience different beliefs and attitudes towards their occupation. Furthermore, it suggests that academics experience more professional characteristics than managers do confirming research by Friedson (1994: 135) that academics are professional where' as managers are not. However, this contradicts Friedson's (1994: 173) other assertion that "autonomy" is a key characteristic of being professional.

The findings also suggest that professional identity does impact on an employee's level of organisational identification. The most significant variables for academics are "calling" and

"autonomy" and for managers the most significant variable is "autonomy". This finding does support Friedson's (1994: 173) assertion that "autonomy" is the key characteristic of being professional. These results provide preliminary evidence of the need to examine the professional characteristics of different types of employees in order to gain greater understanding of their beliefs and values. In addition, more research is required to examine how organisational identification impacts on numerous organisational aspects. The results of this study may only be generalised to the two types of public sector employees examined, and therfore more research examining the professional characteristics of different types of employees is required to further validate these outcomes and extend the research.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the impact that professional identity has on organisational identification by examining two groups of employees. These preliminary findings suggest that professional identity does impact on an employee's level of organisational identification. Furthermore, it has highlighted the difference that professional identity has on different types of employees. Hence it is likely that perceptions of professional identity will impact on employee's level of job satisfaction, commitment, and productivity.

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APPENDIX

TABLE 1. Demographic Characteristics.

Demographic Characteristic	Academics	Managers
GENDER	M = 1.58	M = 1.67
Male	24	9
Female	33	18
AGE	M = 3.6	M = 3.21
<25 yrs	0	0
26-35 yrs	8	9
36-45 yr	19	5
46-55 yrs	15	15
>56 yrs	15	0

LENGTH OF EMPLOYMENT	M = 2.8	M = 2.9
<1 yr	3	3
2-5 yrs	22	7
5-10 yrs	16	9
>10 yrs	16	10
HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION	M = 7.4	M = 5.7
Year 10 / 12		
TAFE		3
Diploma		
Degree		9
P/G Dip	3	7
Masters	17	9
PhD	33	1

TABLE 2. Independent T-Test Means and Standard Deviations

Variable	Academic mean and standard deviation	Manager mean and standard deviation
Identification	5.2561 (1.12)	5.3241 (0.94)
Referent	5.3404 (0.75)	4.2759 (0.96)
Service	4.4386 (0.88)	3.7379 (0.63)
Self-regulation	3.9789 (0.72)	4.1517 (0.76)
Calling	4.6947 (0.82)	4.1862 (0.86)
Autonomy	4.6211 (0.81)	4.4207 (0.82)

TABLE 3. Independent T-Tests for Equality of Means.

	Levine's for equality of variance		T-Test for equality of means		
Variable	F	Sig.	T	DF	Sig. 2-tailed
Identification	0.391	0.533	-0.280	84	0.780
Referent	2.189	0.143	5.207	45.930	.000
Service	1.935	0.168	4.248	75.008	.000
Self-regulation	0.152	0.698	-1.032	84	0.305
Calling	0.123	0.726	2.628	54.079	.011
Autonomy	0.159	0.691	1.077	84	0.284