

# EXPLORING THE IDENTITY AND 'SENSE OF IDENTITY' OF ORGANISATIONS

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## ABSTRACT

During the past two decades a steady increase in scholarly contributions in the area of organisation identity have been observed – to the point that the phenomenon is now the subject of a sustainable discourse in several disciplines. Many theoretical and conceptual dilemmas however remain, largely as a result of the low incidence of empirical research in the area. This study reports the results of an exploratory investigation that adapted Schley and Wagenfield's (1979) concept of identity for use in an organisational setting. Interviews were conducted with 152 top managers representing 10 companies. The results indicate that organisational responses to the question "who am I?" elicit distinctive organisational self-descriptions and some awareness of identity issues.

### Key words

Organisation, organisation identity, sense of identity

The vast majority of contemporary scholarly contributions on the matter of identity within organisational settings address two forms of *identity* namely *corporate identity* and *organisation identity*. These concepts emerged from distinctly different intellectual traditions with the former originating from within the corporate communications and marketing disciplines (cf. Alessandri, 2001; Balmer, 2001; Van Riel & Balmer, 1997), while the latter is a more recent artefact of the organisation theory and management disciplines (see for example the Special Issue of the Academy of Management, volume 25, issue 1). Although rare, organisational identity has been approached also from the discipline of psychology and in this regard mostly from within a systems psychodynamic (cf. Czander, 1993; Diamond, 1993) or social psychological framework (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Haslam, 2001; Haslam, Van Knippenberg, Platow & Ellemers, 2003; Hogg & Terry 2000a). During the past two decades scholarly contributions in the corporate and/or organisation identity areas have increased steadily (cf. Balmer & Stotvig, 1997; Kiriakidou & Millward, 2000), to the extent that the Academy of Management Review, The European Journal of Marketing and the British Journal of Management have devoted focused attention to the notions of corporate and organisation identity. Identity in and of organisations is now a well-established, but diversified discourse.

Both corporate identity and organisation identity of course are derivatives of the root concept "identity" (Van Tonder, 1987) although the contribution of the latter is rarely, if ever, acknowledged. It is nonetheless useful to note that the term *identity* is generally assumed to be a derivative of the Latin word "idem" meaning "the same" (Abend, 1974), while contemporary Oxford dictionaries of English in addition describe it as *the fact of being who or what a person or thing is*. The concept's first known occurrence in colloquial language however dates back to approximately 1570 AD when it was used as an expression to convey the quality or condition of being the same, being absolutely or essentially similar and to embody a sense of unity (Van Tonder, 1987). Erikson (1959) described it as the person's inner sense of sameness and continuity of character. It was really Erikson (1956, 1959, 1968) through his enduring work with identity development during childhood and adolescence that ensured that identity became a household term. These definitions are an important point of departure as they informed the tacit meaning generally associated with the term and legitimise the very general and often cited view that identity is a response to the question "who am I?" (Schley & Wagenfield, 1979). However,

the term is more often used to refer to a person's uniqueness, solidarity, autonomy, continuity over time, and discreteness (Van Tonder, 1987). This author postulates that these attributes are manifestations of a dynamic, self-referential cognitive gestalt or schema, which is best referred to as the "fact of identity". The latter is differentiated from the "sense of identity", which refers to a person's sense of having or possessing an identity i.e. his/her identity awareness (Abend, 1974; Van Tonder, 1987; 1999). To an extent the fact of identity can be viewed as a more descriptive and empirically observable account of the identity phenomenon (for example John's identity as seen from an interpersonal and outsider-looking-on perspective), whereas the sense of identity constitutes the subjective awareness of possessing an identity or otherwise (e.g. John's identity as sensed by him from an intrapersonal, reflective perspective).

Applications of the identity concept within organisational settings however is substantially removed from this individual identity perspective and although elements of an individual psychological theory of identity may be surfacing in the theoretical accounts of corporate and organisational identity, this is not acknowledged by scholars in the marketing and management sciences.

### Application of identity in organisational settings: Alternate intellectual frameworks

Distinct literature streams have developed in respect of both the constructs *corporate identity* and *organisation identity* and both are characterised by the co-existence of several alternate intellectual frameworks.

With reference to the popular and highly commercialised notion of *corporate identity* Balmer (1995) initially identified seven conceptual groupings within the corporate identity literature, but views of corporate identity have since clustered around three (Van Riel & Balmer, 1997) and more recently two literature streams or groupings (cf. Balmer & Wilson, 1998; Van Tonder, 1999; Van Tonder & Lessing, 2003). From this analysis of the literature it will be argued that these two perspectives are differentiated on the basis of where they place the emphasis and are therefore not considered to be mutually exclusive. The first, which is also the more traditional, established and prominent view, accentuates the visual and design elements of the organisation as being the essence of corporate identity. It is typically defined as the visual manifestation and projection of a desired identity – notably through means such as the company's name, logo, corporate colours, tagline, slogans, and symbols, but also the physical

<sup>1</sup> Helpful comments by Prof Alexander S. Haslam on an earlier draft of this paper, and the constructive comments of the anonymous reviewers are gratefully acknowledged.

facilities of the organisation. These visual elements or components provide the leverage through which the perceptions of various stakeholders can be intentionally influenced and it is argued, perhaps over simplistically, that when stakeholders identify and accept the organisation's visible identity, sales of its products and services (in fact its market position in general) are greatly improved, which in turn enhances medium term success prospects. The second school of thought equates corporate identity to the organisation's innate or distinct personality or character (cf. Balmer, 1995; Glover, 1993; Olins, 1996; Van Rekom, 1997; Van Riel & Balmer, 1997) and tends to emphasise the organisation's mission, philosophy and culture as core components of the corporate identity. Those who support this view argue that the visual attributes of the organisation (the primary focus of the first school of thought) are merely manifestations of the underlying, distinctive character of the organisation and consequently alignment and congruence between innate organisation character and outward appearance is a central concern. Generally though, corporate identity is viewed as those attributes of the organisation that are purposefully employed to project and portray the organisation to various stakeholders, predominantly through planned and persuasive visual means.

Calls for a greater emphasis and focus to be placed on the organisation's innate or distinct personality or character (the second school of thought) have been made regularly and it has been argued that who and what the organisation is, is more than the mere visual attributes of the organisation (Balmer, 1995), ... that too much emphasis has been placed on the world outside the company and not enough on the world inside it (Olins, 1996, p. 18). Glover (1993) suggested this relationship between the two distinct schools of thought with his metaphor of a "reversible raincoat"; the external surface of the raincoat relates to the visual elements of corporate identity (the first school of thought) while the internal surface is concerned with the innate character of the organisation. Apart from the relatedness of the inside and the outside, which conveys absolute alignment and seamless integration between the foci, the author also suggests that the "internal" should enjoy precedence when he argues that the inside should become the outside.

The second organisational application of the identity concept is centred on the construct organisation identity, which is captured by the "inside" of Glover's "raincoat". Theoretical diversity is also a hallmark of the literature stream associated with this application of the identity concept. Four salient streams of thinking were initially identified from the sparse organisational identity literature base (Van Tonder, 1999) but more recently these were narrowed down to three i.e. the psychoanalytic, social identity, and classical approaches to organisation identity (Van Tonder, 2004a). The psychoanalytic approach, for example Czander (1993), Diamond (1993), and more recently Brown and Starkey (2000), is probably more appropriately referred to as a

systems psychodynamic perspective that applies psychoanalytic concepts and theories to the organisation and views organisation identity *inter alia* as the unconscious foundation of organisation culture, an interpretative framework from which the organisation can be analysed and the motivation and behaviour of its members can be understood, and an unconscious defence against anxiety. The social identity approach (cf. Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Haslam, 2001; Haslam, Van Knippenberg, Platow & Ellemers, 2003; Hogg & Terry, 2000a) argues that the individual and by implication also the organisation (when viewed as the unit of analysis) seeks a positive social identity and does so by attempting to affiliate with a group or groups (or industries or associations if at the organisational level) that are sufficiently attractive to seek belonging to it. The classical approach (which comprises work by Albert & Whetten, 1985; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Van Tonder, 1987, 1999) was described as such (cf. Van Tonder, 1999; Van Tonder & Lessing, 2003) because it more closely approximates (and is grounded in) one or more of the psychological parameters of Erikson's (1959, 1968) original concept of identity, and is more pertinently concerned with the identity of the organisation-as-organisation (as unit of analysis). Most scholars residing within this category typically take Albert and Whetten's (1985) definition of organisation identity as point of departure and it is usually defined as those features of the organisation that are considered core, distinctive and enduring.

Contemporary organisational and management practice invests heavily in corporate identity and increasingly in the related concept of corporate branding while awareness of organisation identity is exceptionally limited (Van Tonder, 2004b). From the extant literature, however, several parallels can be observed for example between those corporate identity scholars who view identity as the innate personality or character of the organisation, and those proponents of the classical approach who equate organisation identity to the core, distinctive and enduring features of the organisation (see Table 1). Indeed, Alessandri (2001) has commented on the "striking similarity" between Van Rekom's (1997) view of corporate identity and the widely accepted definition of organisation identity proposed by Albert and Whetten (1985) approximately two decades ago. Hecht's (1993) communication theory of identity, which views organisation identity as a process of organisational communication and self-expression through which the organisation exchanges messages about itself, was initially viewed as a separate theory stream (Van Tonder, 1999). When compared to the existing theory streams, Hecht's theory appears to represent a bridge between the more polarised theory platforms of corporate and organisation identity.

**Relevance of identity concepts in an organisational setting**  
Identity within organisational settings has become a consequential issue for several reasons. With corporate identity

**TABLE 1**  
**TWO PRIMARY LITERATURE STREAMS AND THEIR RESPECTIVE SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT**

Literature Stream 1: Corporate Identity			Literature Stream 2: Organisation Identity		
1. <i>Visual &amp; design focus</i>	2. <i>Innate or distinct personality</i>	Bridging perspective	1. <i>The psychoanalytic school</i>	2. <i>Social identity school</i>	3. <i>Classical school</i>
Halloran (1985) Olins (1990) Balmer & Stotvig (1997)	Ackerman (1984) Abratt (1989) Balmer (1995)	Hecht (1993)	Diamond (1993) Czander (1993) Brown & Starkey (2000)	Ashforth & Mael (1989) Haslam (2001) Haslam, Van Knippenberg, Platow & Ellemers, (2003)	Albert & Whetten (1985) Dutton & Dukerich (1991); Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, (1994)
Melewar & Navalekar (2002)	Kiriakidou & Millward (2000)			Hogg & Terry (2000a)	Van Tonder (1987, 1999)

changes more often than not commanding astronomical financial resources (cf. Kohli & Hemnes, 1995), the risk of ineffectual utilisation of otherwise valuable corporate resources would certainly warrant more attention. A particularly strong argument is the taken-for-granted and implicit association of corporate and organisation identity with improved performance, financial rewards, and organisational success and failure (e.g. Ackerman, 1984; Balmer & Dinnie, 1999; Chajet, 1989; Labich, 1994; Melewar, Saunders & Balmer, 2001; Simões & Dibb, 2001). One of the more prominent assertions in this regard is that which argues that identity performs a critical role in organisational survival and could facilitate hyper longevity (De Geus, 1997; Van Tonder, 2004b, 2004c). These views accord a more profound role to identity in organisational settings than has previously been the case and clearly underscore the relevance of organisational concepts of identity. Except for preliminary empirical observations (De Geus, 1997; Van Tonder, 1999) support for this identity-performance relationship is yet to be demonstrated (Van Tonder, & Lessing, 2003).

Following in part from this generally assumed relationship between notions of identity and organisational functioning and performance, we furthermore note a significant upsurge of interest in identity in both scholarly and business quarters, evidenced in part in the prolific writing on the subject (Balmer & Stotvig, 1997; Christensen & Askegaard, 2001; Kiriakidou & Millward, 2000). Several reasons have been proposed for this heightened interest in corporate identity. Balmer and Gray (2000) for example argued that this greater “identity” awareness among senior business managers follows from environmental trends such as accelerating product life cycles, deregulation, privatisation, an increasing competition, and several others. Most scholars however view it as a response by companies to differentiate themselves in a changing and increasingly competitive environment, and through which the many benefits assumed to be associated with a positive and strong corporate identity in the marketplace, can be secured (Balmer & Gray, 2000; Melewar & Navalekar, 2002; Melewar, Saunders & Balmer, 2001). An equally plausible reason for the salience of the identity issue in managerial quarters has been suggested by Christensen and Askegaard (2001), who argued that marketing scholars and practitioners have worked consistently at keeping identity on the managerial agenda. The reasons for a similar upsurge of interest in organisation identity, in turn, were suggested to relate to the rediscovery of the importance of “meaning” in organisational functioning (Albert, Ashforth & Dutton, 2000), and the insight into the character and behaviour of organisations that the identity and identification concepts offer (Gioia, Shultz & Corley, 2000). While the reasons for this upsurge in interest are diffuse and multifaceted, the fact remains that identity is beginning to occupy a level of prominence in corporate settings that calls for increased scholarly attention.

#### **Inherently problematic identity concepts: The need for empiricism**

Regardless of the reasons advanced, the rapidly growing interest in identity within organisational settings is posing a substantial challenge, for it is accompanied by a mushrooming yet largely anecdotal and quasi-theoretical literature base (Balmer & Gray, 2000; Melewar, Saunders, & Balmer, 2001) which is substantially deficient in the area of empirical research (Alessandri, 2001; Melewar, 2001; Van Riel, Van den Ban, & Heijmans, 2001). This is of concern as it suggests that organisational applications of identity are premised on assumptions and a weak scientific platform. This is in fact borne out by the literature... scholarly work in both the areas of corporate identity and organisation identity are beset with conceptual and definitional problems, which Van Tonder and Lessing (2003) asserted, stemmed largely from the inherent

ambiguity of the root concept “identity” but also arise from the lack of a coherent and integrative theory framework.

Divergent views on the meaning of the *corporate identity* concept and definitional problems were a consistent feature of contributions past and present (Balmer & Greyser, 2003; Balmer & Wilson, 1998; Burrows, 1988; Shee 1988, Van Rekom, 1997; Van Riel & Balmer, 1997; Van Tonder, 1999). These criticisms are also noted for the *organisation identity* concept, which is not only abstract and inherently ambiguous but lacks an adequate theoretical framework to guide research and practice (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Contemporary scholars acknowledge the complexity of the organisation identity concept (Gioia et al., 2000; Hogg & Terry, 2000b), and comment on its ambiguous nature (Albert et al., 2000; Pratt & Foreman, 2000a), as well as the lack of clarity on the role and purpose of the organisation identity concept in a broader theoretical framework (Van Tonder & Lessing, 2003). The observed diversity in perspectives is probably the most consistent point of concurrence among contemporary organisation identity scholars (Hogg & Terry, 2000b; Pratt & Foreman, 2000a), who are essentially still concerned with the meaning parameters of a complex, abstract and vague organisation identity concept (Albert et al, 2000; Hogg & Terry, 2000b; Scott & Lane 2000; Van Tonder, 1987, 1999; Van Tonder & Lessing, 2003).

The ambiguity and formlessness of the identity concept were restated with monotonous regularity over the past two decades and inconsistency in the meaning and application of identity concepts in organisational settings persist (Christensen & Askegaard, 2001). The lean empirical harvest in both the corporate and organisation identity fields is a major contributing factor to the observed theoretical diversity and the proliferation of a variety of identity definitions that differ substantially in meaning. To escape from the somewhat sterile conceptual debates that have characterised the identity discourse to date (and with it the tendency to become ensnared in these debates), a concerted focus on empirical research appears to be needed most (Van Tonder & Lessing, 2003).

Focusing on organisation identity in particular, it is clear that the dilemma, with which the researcher wrestles, is one of an increasingly popular yet abstract and vague concept. This situation is further complicated by the existence of multiple theoretical positions and interpretation perspectives for which very little in the form of an empirical platform is available. It is reasonable to conclude that these considerations would have severely hampered the operationalisation of the organisation identity concept and hence inhibited empirically oriented research. Ultimately the search for appropriate theoretical parameters and a focused and coherent theory leads through empirical confirmation and disconfirmation i.e. the process of ‘selecting’ and ‘deselecting’ theoretical claims on the basis of empiricism. Judging by the current state of the extant literature, it seems that an appropriate point of departure would be to empirically explore and delineate the meaning parameters of the organisation identity concept. Mindful of the diversity in the theoretical perspective, this is bound to entail a series of studies. The latter in turn should provide the platform from which to consider the structural relations of the concept and in this manner pave the way for the development of empirically-substantiated theories of organisation identity. Against this setting the modest purpose of this study was *to engage in an initial empirical exploration of the organisation identity phenomenon*. As such, it represents one attempt at introducing some empiricism in the predominantly conceptual character that has become a hallmark of the discourse on the subject. The ensuing discussion further elaborates on the scope, methodology and findings of the study.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

### Approach to the research

The paradigmatic framework from within which the study was approached derives predominantly from the interpretive sociological research paradigm (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Although not entirely clear from the theoretical positions highlighted earlier, most of these theoretical positions suggest, indeed some implicitly assume, that organisation identity is concerned with *meaning* in and of organisations. It is therefore primarily a social phenomenon – one that is construed and enacted through the perceptions, cognitions and interactions of organisational members. It is presumed to be constructed, more specifically, during social discourse and interaction among colleagues in the organisational setting. Consequently, and as Morgan (1997) argues, reality is more a result of members' (employees') actions than they may recognise. Accordingly, whether an organisation possesses an identity (or otherwise), depends on how it is viewed by those who constitute the "organisation" and who are engaged in its activities. Evidence of the organisation identity phenomenon is encapsulated in employees and other stakeholders' views and feelings about the organisation and will manifest in the statements, comments or expressions they provide, for example, in response to broad open-ended questions relating to the organisation and the research topic. Subjectivity in the traditional sense is not a concern as it is precisely the idiosyncratic meanings that each employee constructs from repeated exposure to social interactions within the organisation over time that ultimately converge to define the *collectively shared meaning structures* from which an organisation and therefore organisation identity is defined and enacted.

From this vantage point the research objective is best pursued in a naturalistic setting where the phenomenon is "lived" and reified (assuming it exists). The support base on which conclusions with regard to the existence of organisational identity (or otherwise) will hinge, can be strengthened by engaging more rather than less organisational "respondents". Methodologies that generate identity-relevant data and enable the identification of socially constructed meanings that have a bearing on the phenomenon, supplement this approach. Consistent with a modernist value-framework (cf. Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), the study combines an open-ended, semi-structured interview technique with careful and rigorous quasi-statistical analysis of the data so obtained (cf. Becker, 1958; 1998).

### Operationalising organisation identity

Our theoretical point of departure is informed by the 'classical' school of thought as it more closely approximates the time-honoured and well-established psychological tradition with regard to the meaning of individual or personal identity, and the more common meaning ascribed to it in colloquial language. Of particular importance, is that this approach focuses on the organisation as unit of analysis and not the individual or group. From within this tradition organisation identity has been defined variously as those *features of the organisation that are distinctive, core, and enduring* (Albert & Whetten 1985), and the organisation's distinctive character (Van Tonder, 1999). Closely related to this position, is the school of thought hailing from the corporate identity tradition (cf. Table 1), that views identity as the organisation's *distinctive or distinguishing attributes* (Balmer & Gray, 1999; Balmer & Stotvig, 1997; Elsbach & Kramer, 1996). None of these definitions were previously subjected to formal testing or used in an empirical setting. Indeed, although conceptual parameters of the phenomenon are suggested by these scholars, the essential nature of the phenomenon and indeed its existential position remain unclear.

Of the definitions residing within the classical tradition, that of Albert and Whetten (1985) is more clearly structured and popularly subscribed to. However, given the fairly specific boundaries that this definition imposes on what identity is and is not, it was considered as potentially too delimiting at this preliminary stage – given the broad exploratory objective of this study.

Schley and Wagenfield's (1979, p. 20) open-ended view of identity as the totality of the response to the question "who am I?", applied to the organisation, is widely accepted by both corporate identity and organisation identity scholars as a valid definition of identity (Albert et al., 2000; Badaracco, 1998; Balmer, 1995; Pratt & Foreman, 2000b; Van Tonder & Lessing, 2003). It is sufficiently open-ended to avoid imposing any meaning parameters on potential respondents (for example those implicit in the Albert et al., 1985, definition) yet may prove too broad to be of any practical or theoretical significance. The Schley and Wagenfield (1979) definition was consequently used as base definition and modified to incorporate the notion of "distinctive character" (Van Tonder, 1999). For this study organisation identity was consequently defined as *the organisation's distinctive character as conveyed by its (the organisation's) response to the question "who am I?"*. Other than limiting the "who am I"-answer, to statements that convey "distinctive character", this articulation does not impose constraints on how the respondent wishes to define or articulate this distinctiveness.

### Respondents

Organisation identity is considered an organisation-level phenomenon i.e. an attribute of the system-as-whole (Wells, 1980) or the holistic organisation (the organisation as unit of analysis). To establish whether organisations do possess such identities, a number of respondents or organisations are required. Being a social collective, an organisation cannot be substituted for or indeed be represented by any individual employee. The latter, technically, cannot provide a valid perspective on an organisation-level phenomenon (e.g. identity) that hitherto has been unknown, with uncertain parameters and which previously has not been demonstrated to exist in any convincing empirical sense. Moreover, conducting interpretive phenomenological interviews with an entire organisation is unpractical. The closest approximation of an organisation in holistic terms would be a constituency that is part of the organisation and who, in focus and activity, engages and hence understands the organisation to some extent in this holistic sense. It was argued that the top management team of an organisation (the group Chief Executive/Managing Director and immediate subordinates) best fit this requirement. By virtue of their position and role these individuals have an overarching view of the entire organisation and interact on a daily basis with the broader operating context (e.g. similar institutions, competitors, stakeholders and regulators). When compared to less senior employees, they are in a better position to perform valid inter-organisational comparisons – a necessary platform for arriving at conclusions about organisational distinctiveness or otherwise.

Using a purposive sampling method, the current study attempted to secure a sample of organisations from excellent and poor performing stock exchange listed companies. A list of possible participating companies was compiled on the basis of the financial performance rankings provided by the Business Times Top 100 Companies Survey, which rank orders the top performing and worst performing companies on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange on an annual basis. Using rank order positions for a 4-year period, a total number of 221 eligible companies were identified and each was approached for participation in the study. Ultimately the participation of only 10 companies from seven industries was secured, which were rank ordered on the basis of their citation in top performing and worst performing categories for the 4-year period.

The study was consequently restricted to top management teams of the 10 companies and, where the organisation comprised several independent business units that were still managed as part of the "organisation" as opposed to a group or holding company, the chief executive officers or managing directors of these units were included in the definition of "top management". Four of the six companies that participated in the research fitted this parameter and the number of interviews typically ranged between 17 and 31.

Naturally this delimitation of participants meant that any account of an organisation's identity, if demonstrated, will only reflect the views of this constituency and not that of the entire organisation, but it should nonetheless provide a reasonable approximation of the organisation-level phenomenon. Engaging the entire organisation in a study of organisation identity would be a productive avenue for future research once the essential nature and/or general parameters of the phenomenon are clearer. In anticipation of possible difficulties with the availability of executives, the study attempted to include all managers at these levels for the companies participating in the study. In this manner 152 executives were engaged in the research (see Table 2 for characteristics of participating organisations and respondents).

#### Method of data collection

In order to generate identity-relevant data that will enable the identification of socially constructed meanings that have a bearing on the identity phenomenon, an in-depth interview (semi-structured), incorporating the Twenty Statements Test (Rees & Nicholson, 1994) was used. This method was considered useful because the empirical reality of organisation identity is an unknown parameter and, as Bridges (1992, p. viii) argues, organisational character (which is often equated to organisation identity or organisation personality) is enormously subtle and complex and techniques for identifying organizational character are still evolving. At the same time its use is consistent with previous organisation identity research among leaders (Wright, 1994), as well as Downey's (1986, p. 8) emphasis on open-ended investigative approaches for identity research.

The Twenty Statements Test (TST) is essentially an incomplete sentence instrument that requires the respondent to provide twenty different statements in response to the question "Who am I". The instrument yields statements or "answers" (self-

identifications) that are amenable to content analysis (can be coded and quantified). It was first used in 1950 with students at the University of Iowa as part of a study on the effects of unfavourable evaluations by others on the individual's self-concept, but has been used in different applications and contexts (Rees & Nicholson, 1994). These authors argue that it is favoured over other instruments because of its capacity to reflect the salience of identity facets. Its appeal is enhanced by the fact that it allows respondents to define the subject under review in a personal and unconstrained fashion i.e. he/she can freely select and nominate whatever information he/she regards as pertinent or salient in response to the "who am I?" question. Of course the particular frame of reference of the respondent may influence the nature and content nominated in response to the question and consequently the validity of the TST can be questioned. In this study, however, the organisation is the unit of analysis and individual managers' responses will be pooled to establish trends for the organisation on the basis of collective frequencies. This procedure should minimise this source of variance and improve validity. A primary benefit is that the instrument does not impose interpretation categories in an *a priori* fashion. Content analysis as a method for extracting meaning that relates to the phenomenon can therefore be utilised and the researcher is consequently not constrained in the use and application of alternative interpretation categories. The TST was consequently employed to elicit unaided, self-definitions from organisations as represented by their top executives. To convey this focus on the organisation the question "who am I?" was formulated as "who am I (company X)?" where "company X" was substituted with the name of the participating company.

#### Procedure

At the onset of the interviews, executives of the participating organisations were briefed on the purpose, nature and expected duration of the interviews. A blank copy of the interview schedule which incorporated the TST was provided to the executive at the onset of the interview after which he/she was provided with the single instruction to "Please describe your company's distinctive character by means of twenty different statements in response to the question "who am I (company X)?" Self-identifying statements nominated by individual executives were written down in a verbatim manner. Once the interviewee has nominated the first five or so statements the researcher read the provided statements back to the respondent

**TABLE 2**  
**SUMMARY FEATURES OF PARTICIPATING COMPANIES**

Company	Performance Ranking	Industry	Core business	Total assets <sup>1</sup>	Size of workforce	Number of executives interviewed
CO1	5	Financial: Banks & other financial services	Controlling company of a number of banks and diversified entities in the financial services field.	1545700	37000	31
CO2	7	Industrial: Stores (retail)	Holding company involved in retailing and distribution of building materials.	2592	1600	6
CO3	10	Mining: Gold producers	Operating gold mines.	8599	11000	25
CO4	1	Mining producers - Coal	Operating bituminous and anthracite collieries	30506	7500	6
CO5	2	Industrial: Stores (retail)	Retailing of clothing, footwear, accessories and home textiles, including the manufacturing of clothing	37455	17000	10
CO6	9	Industrial: Food	Processing of natural protein and related products (e.g. meat and leather)	7401	4000	17
CO8	8	Industrial: Pharmaceutical & Medical	Holding company which own and manage hospitals and medical clinics	26298	14000	10
CO9	3	Industrial: Stores (retail)	Investment holding company with supermarkets and hypermarkets as subsidiaries	25261	28300	29
CO10	4	Financial: Banks & other financial services	Banking, controlling/holding of interests in several related businesses in the financial services field	101145	1500	11
CO12	5	Industrial: Food	Trawling, processing and marketing of deep-sea fish (primarily hake)	4965	3600	7

**TABLE 3**  
**ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES OF RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION "WHO AM I (COMPANY X)?"**

Company	Line <sup>1</sup>	Statement <sup>2</sup>	Code(s) <sup>3</sup>	Category description
CO1	892	[CO1] is... A large and cumbersome organisation	15.16.2	Size: Large
CO2	3317	[CO2] is... Low profile	15.37	Low key/humble/low profile/understated
CO3	2721	[CO3] is... The work force generally is pretty multi-skilled	22.4.12	Human Resources: Multi-skilling
CO4	1584	[CO4] is... Has shown much growth over the past 26 years	8.8	History of growth
CO5	1567	[CO5] is... Best store for cosmetics in the country – offers the best range in terms of cosmetics	13.4.316.1	Differentiation: "Best..."Range of products/services (wide)
CO6	392	[CO6] is... Is in transition	30.5	Incomplete change/ongoing/in transition/constant change
CO8	3537	[CO8] is... Is a hospital company that manages private hospitals	4.1	Core business: description
CO9	26	[CO9] is... is noticeably different in terms of merchandising	15.3	Operational style: Differentiation
CO10	1024	[CO10] is... A niche player	15.2	Operational style: Niche player
CO12	421	[CO12] is... Internationally well known	7	Image (external/"corporate image") and reputation

<sup>1</sup> Corresponds with line/statement number in dataset

<sup>2</sup> A total of 7270 phrases were identified and coded

<sup>3</sup> Corresponds with category number in codebook

to confirm accuracy and to establish confidence and trust in the researcher's procedure. This procedure was repeated when the respondent appeared unable to contribute further statements and to facilitate the conclusion of the interview. In essence the TST allows the executives to provide a number of self-identifying statements which are then "pooled" for each participating organisation and subjected to analysis. A few randomly selected examples of self-identifying statements nominated by executives are provided in Table 3.

#### Data Analysis

Basic content analysis (Crabtree & Miller, 1992) was selected as vehicle for analysing the "who-am-I" statements generated by the executives and standard coding practices were followed. An evolving codebook approach was utilised to organise observations for subsequent interpretation. In order for descriptive categories to emerge, an open-ended approach to analysis was followed, which in this study utilised a single phrase ("short sentence") as unit of meaning and analysis. The code list was augmented with every new or unique descriptive organisational feature that emerged and the final consolidated codebook was used to revisit and code all phrases/statements. As the focus of the study was on organisations (as opposed to individuals), the quantification of responses per organisation and the calculation of frequencies of occurrence assumed a central role (cf. Miles & Huberman, 1994). This was accomplished by allocating a value of ("1") for each occurrence of a descriptive feature in a statement and the number of occurrences summated for each respondent in each category. To compile company specific frequencies, the frequencies per descriptive category for all respondents from a specific company were combined to arrive at "total company responses per category". However, as companies differed in terms of the number of respondents who represented them in the research, the pooled frequencies were converted and expressed as a proportion (percentage) of that company's total response set. This procedure was followed for all descriptive categories for each of the 10 participating companies. In this manner the responses of 152 executives were consolidated into 10 "new" organisational participants – each with a range of responses in various descriptive categories. This "new" dataset now enabled what Hofstede, Bond and Luk (1993, p. 487) refer to as an ecological analysis - as opposed to a pan cultural analysis where the data of all respondents are simply pooled with no regard for the respondent's organisational affiliation.

As a second stage, the company responses for the different descriptive categories were subjected to cluster analysis – a formal procedure for grouping variables or sampling units (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1991). Its main purpose is to define the structure of the data by sorting the most similar objects (observations, respondents or other entities) into categories or groups according to natural relationships (Hair, Anderson, Tatham & Black, 1998). Cluster analysis is similar to factor analysis in the sense that it identifies the underlying structure in the dataset and is effectively a data reduction procedure. The two techniques do however differ in meaningful ways. Unlike factor analysis which is primarily concerned with the grouping of variables, cluster analysis groups objects. The application parameters for the two procedures also differ. So, for example, clustering does not require a minimum of five observations or subjects per variable as factor analysis does (Bryman & Cramer, 1994). Most important is that cluster analysis is a descriptive, atheoretical and noninferential procedure that regularly reveals relationships that are not discernable through other multivariate techniques (Hair et al., 1998) – it is, as Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 245) indicate, a methodology that helps "...the analyst see 'what goes with what'". It is therefore ideally suited as an exploratory technique.

Using Ward's method (Hair et al., 1998), which employs Euclidian distance in a stepwise hierarchical procedure, cluster structures were extracted from the dataset which comprised 164 categories or "variables". Cluster scores were then calculated by summing proportional values (response frequencies which have been expressed as percentages) on all descriptive features that constituted a specific cluster. In this manner cluster scores were calculated for each participating company, on each and all clusters identified during the analysis. Descriptive features that did not form part of the structure revealed by cluster analysis were henceforth ignored.

## RESULTS

Of the 7270 statements obtained from the 10 organisational respondents in response to the "who am I" question, cluster analysis retained 164 descriptive categories and produced a dendrogram (note 2) consisting of six hierarchical layers (see Table 4).

**TABLE 4**  
**HIERARCHY OF CLUSTERS EXTRACTED FROM THE DATASET**

Level of clustering <sup>1</sup>	Designated Label	Number of clusters/ categories	Cluster meaning	Example	Differentiation & Integration
6th clustering: G level	CG clusters	4	Larger domains of economic activity	Financial Services	Convergence (greater similarity)
5th clustering: F level	CF clusters	7	Industry	Banking	↑
<b>4th clustering: E level</b>	<b>CE clusters</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>Organisation</b>	<b>A specific bank e.g. CO 10</b>	↑
3rd clustering: D level	CD clusters	15	Major divisions/SBU's	Vehicle financing	↓
2nd clustering: C level	CC clusters	22	Operational divisions	Retail banking	↓
1st clustering: B level	CB clusters	37	Departments	Capital management	↓
Data categories	Categories (coded)	164	Not applicable	-	↓ Divergence (greater dissimilarity)

<sup>1</sup> Levels of clustering represent a continuum with bipolar extremities being maximum divergence and maximum convergence or dissimilarity among clusters. At the lowest level of clustering i.e. at "B" level clustering, maximum divergence (or maximum dissimilarity) is observed between clusters. At levels C, D and higher, clusters increasingly converge i.e. reflect increasing similarity. Near maximum similarity is observed at the G level of clustering while maximum similarity is obtained when all clusters collapse into a single cluster (the next higher level above G level clusters – not indicated).

**TABLE 5**  
**CLUSTER SCORES (CE-CLUSTERS) PER ORGANISATION (EXPRESSED AS PERCENTAGES)**

Company	Cluster scores per company (proportions expressed as %)									
	CE1	CE2	CE3	CE4	CE5	CE6	CE7	CE8	CE9	CE10
CO1	10,83	33,16	1,64	3,28	2,46	5,74	3,28	13,95	8,37	<b>17,07</b>
CO2	<b>23,74</b>	21,58	5,03	2,15	2,15	2,87	4,31	7,91	3,59	10,79
CO3	8,58	10,01	1,78	6,08	<b>10,91</b>	2,32	4,47	11,27	4,29	11,80
CO4	4,43	13,92	<b>12,65</b>	3,16	2,53	1,89	3,16	10,12	5,06	6,96
CO5	3,53	26,10	1,76	1,76	5,75	7,07	<b>11,94</b>	17,25	2,21	5,30
CO6	6,44	21,56	2,52	3,64	5,88	3,36	5,60	<b>38,65</b>	3,36	13,72
CO8	9,30	29,76	1,39	<b>10,23</b>	8,37	4,18	2,79	13,02	2,79	8,83
CO9	15,35	<b>45,00</b>	2,98	4,32	3,42	2,68	2,23	7,30	1,93	10,73
CO10	11,15	23,04	1,48	4,08	7,06	7,43	2,23	7,43	<b>12,63</b>	10,40
CO12	15,38	28,44	4,14	0	3,55	<b>18,34</b>	1,18	15,97	0,59	8,28

Returning to the 10 CE clusters (level E) it is noticeable that each of the 10 companies dominated a specific cluster i.e. had the highest score, comparatively speaking, on one of the 10 CE clusters (see Table 5). Summary descriptions of these highest score clusters per company, are presented in Table 6. These cluster descriptions indicate the distinguishing features of each participating organisation relative to the group of participating organisations and reveal organisations as distinctive entities - even within the same industry. Examples that illustrate this principle are companies CO1 and CO10 (both in the banking sector) and CO3 and CO4 (both from the mining sector).

**TABLE 6**  
**DISTINCTIVE ORGANISATIONAL SELF-DESCRIPTIONS (CE-CLUSTERS)**

Company	Company description derived from CE-clusters (cluster with the highest score)
CO1	A company with a strong stakeholder focus and relations emphasis (particularly on public relations) that is characterised by consistency, democratic processes, a tendency towards informality, a cost focus and hard work (Cluster CE10)
CO2	A focused, community-oriented, competitive company (Cluster CE1)
CO3	A vision driven, unique, risk-orientated, dynamic and charismatic company with a strong results focus, but highly susceptible to variation in economic conditions (Cluster CE5)
CO4	A company with clear character and a sense of unity, aggressively on the acquisition trial, with a low key, understated profile (Cluster CE3)
CO5	A stable, progressive and non-conforming company with a strong market orientation and a solid history (currently in a rejuvenation phase and undergoing change) (Cluster CE7)

CO6	A very large, diversified business with world-class quality standards and products, struggling with past leadership issues and current performance, and currently in a survival stage (Cluster CE8)
CO8	A confident, powerful, and large company with a strong results focus and which is honest / transparent in its conduct (Cluster CE4)
CO9	A caring, people-oriented company, strongly focused on relationships with consumers and stakeholders, and generally regarded as a trendsetter (Cluster CE2)
CO10	A dominant Afrikaans, opportunistic, experienced and technology driven company, with political undertones and currently is undergoing restructuring. (Cluster CE9)
CO12	A sophisticated, continuously improving company with high quality service/products and standards (Cluster CE6)

During open coding it was observed that respondents occasionally used explicit "identity" terminology. These identity-responses were isolated within the overall dataset with the objective of surfacing sub-categories of meaning, and analysing relationships among these sub-categories of meaning. For this purpose a further or second cluster analysis was undertaken. Figure 1 displays the dendrogram generated by this analysis (following Ward's method and using Euclidian distances in a stepwise hierarchical procedure with the 20 descriptive sub-categories). As these clusters appeared to reflect the organisation's awareness of its identity, they were labelled sense-of-identity clusters – following Erikson's (1968, p. 324) use of the phrase not only with regard to individuals, but also in terms of groups and nations (e.g. a national sense of identity). The sense-of-identity categories are indicated on the horizontal axis with codes ranging from 6 to 6.2.4, while the

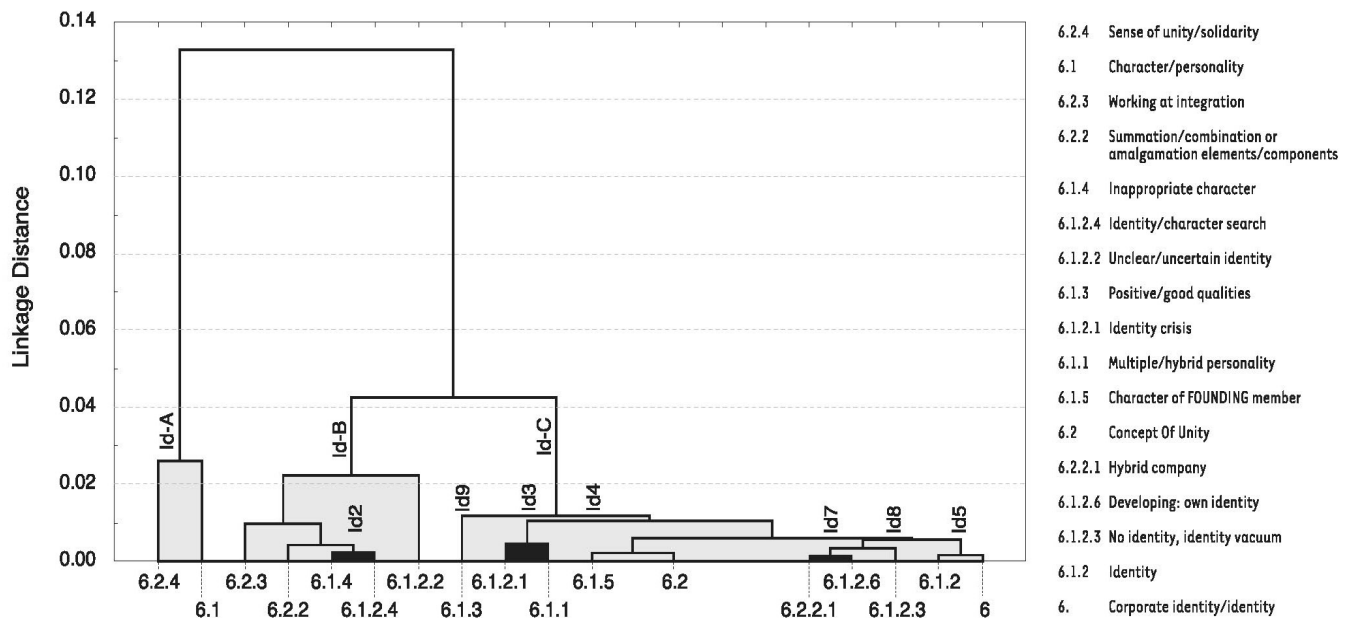


Figure 1: Cluster analysis of identity statements from the 20 statements test (Ward's method, Euclidean distances)

categories Id-A, Id-B and Id-C represent higher level clusters. The distance between the identity categories (including that between higher level clusters Id-A to Id-C) on the horizontal axis, serve as a measure of similarity between the items or categories (cf. Hair et al., 1998). The paired items "6" and "6.1.2" for example are very similar because of their close proximity, yet differ substantially from cluster Id-A (comprising items "6.2.4" and "6.1"). This specific example suggests that identity in its most common organisational usage ("6") and corporate identity ("6.1.2") is perceived by respondents as being effectively synonymous ... that identity is commonly associated with (or seldom differentiated from) "corporate identity".

Quite distinct from this, is the organisational sense of unity or solidarity ("6.2.4") and possession of a clear and integrated character or personality ("6.1"). These categories are more closely aligned with the notion of "organisation identity" as conventionally defined (cf. Albert & Whetten, 1985; Schley & Wagenfield, 1979; Van Tonder, 1999; Van Tonder & Lessing, 2003). Moreover, the three higher level clusters or categories suggest different identity statuses where the first, Id-A, appears to relate to a sense of adequate or healthy identity and therefore a "positive" identity status, while Id-C suggests an inadequate or deficient identity. The Id-B cluster appears to represent an intermediate state of diffused or unclear identity and is therefore suggested to be a less serious condition as that indicated by the Id-C cluster. Both the Id-B and Id-C clusters therefore appear to represent "negative" identity statuses, which are differentiated only by the extent or severity of the identity problem. This perspective is bolstered by the data presented in Table 7, which conveys the frequency of explicit identity-statements expressed as percentages (proportions) of overall company responses to the "who am I?" question. Generally these proportions were very small, and in the case of company 12 (CO12) nonexistent.

Several prominent observations emerge from an inspection of the sense-of-identity cluster scores for each organisation (Table 7):

- The greater salience of *problematic identity issues* ("negative" identity statuses) suggested in Figure 1, emerges more clearly in Table 7 with the total proportion of identity responses that indicate a healthy or "positive" identity status merely representing 3,48% (Id-A and Id4) of identity statements. This is outweighed by the 7,44% of identity

statements that indicate deficient or "negative" identity statuses (Id-B and Id-C).

- If the performance rankings of the participating organisations are considered (Table 2), *broad alignment between a high performance ranking and a positive or healthy sense of identity* (Id-A) is noted. The same is true for a lower performance ranking and its alignment with a troublesome or deficient identity (Id-BC). The suggested inverse relationship between a healthy identity (Id-A) and an inadequate identity (Id-C) is evidenced in companies CO4, CO8, CO9 and CO10 which display a positive identity status (varying proportions of Id-A), and the absence of negative identity statuses (Id-C). The same can be said for companies CO6, CO1, CO5, CO2 and CO3 which are characterised by the absence of, or a very low incidence of a positive identity status (Id-A) yet present with material evidence of a negative identity status (Id-C).
- The distribution of identity responses across the sense of identity categories (Table 7) suggests that *finer nuances in identity issues or problems* can be distinguished with greater precision, which may prove useful for remedial intervention. While Table 7 reveals the major foci of identity self-reports (sense-of-identity clusters) for each company, Table 8 sheds more light on the nature and direction of sense-of-identity issues for the respective companies.

Viewed in conjunction with Tables 5 and 6, the data in Table 8 highlights the relationship between the companies' more embracing yet distinctive self-descriptions as derived from the CE-clusters (Table 5), and the sense-of-identity statuses (see identity categories, Table 7). The prominent identity issues that confront each company (their experienced sense-of-identity) and their interrelatedness are revealed by the intercorrelations between distinctive company self-descriptions and the identity issues they reported. These identity dynamics align well with the background information on the companies, which were conveyed by respondents during the interviews. To illustrate, consider the following examples:

- **Company CO1**, the product of four banking mergers, at the time of the research had barely put the last of the four mergers behind it (it did not exist independently prior to these mergers) and was attempting to rise above the four inherited organisational cultures through a pronounced branding initiative. The organisation was indeed searching for and *working* at establishing an identity as a result of experienced *identity loss/diffusion* (a less intense form of *identity crisis*).



**TABLE 7**  
**SENSE OF IDENTITY CLUSTER SCORES PER ORGANISATION**

Company	Sense of identity cluster scores per company (proportions expressed as %)										
	Id-A	Id2	Id3	Id4	Id5	Id-B	Id7	Id8	Id9	Id-C	Id-BC
	Sense of unity & character (Id-A)	Identity search (Id2)	Identity crisis/diffusion (Id3)	Enduring character (anchored in founding member attributes (Id4)	Corporate/general identity (Id5)	Unclear & inappropriate identity (Id-B)	Working at/developing an identity (Id7)	Identity loss/vacuum (Id8)	Identity-relevant qualities (Id9)	Overall inadequate identity (Id-C)	Deficient Identity (Id-B + Id-C)
CO1	0,16	0,98	0,49	-	-	2,79	0,32	0,49	-	1,31	4,10
CO2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0,71	0,71	0,71
CO3	0,17	-	-	-	0,17	-	0,17	-	-	0,35	0,35
CO4	1,89	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0,00
CO5	-	-	0,88	-	-	-	-	-	-	0,88	0,88
CO6	-	0,28	0,28	-	0,56	0,56	-	-	-	0,84	1,40
CO8	0,46	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0,00
CO9	0,29	-	-	0,14	-	-	-	-	-	-	0,00
CO10	0,37	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0,00
CO12	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	3,34			0,14		3,35				4,09	7,44

**TABLE 8**  
**CORRELATION OF DISTINCTIVE ORGANISATIONAL SELF-DESCRIPTIONS (CE-CLUSTER SCORES) WITH SENSE OF IDENTITY STATUSES (IDENTITY CLUSTER SCORES)**

Company (CO)	Descriptive clusters <sup>1</sup>	Sense of identity clusters									
		Sense of unity & character (Id-A)	Enduring character (anchored in founding member attributes (Id4)	Identity-relevant qualities (Id9)	Corporate/general identity (Id5)	Working at/developing an identity (Id7)	Identity search (Id2)	Unclear & inappropriate identity (Id-B)	Identity loss/vacuum (Id8)	Identity crisis/diffusion (Id3)	Deficient identity (Id-BC)
CO1: Banking	CE10	-0,331	0,035	0,041	0,387	0,715	0,787	0,767	0,695	-0,029	0,528
CO2: Building (retail)	CE1	-0,382	0,260	0,747	-0,295	-0,069	-0,074	-0,054	-0,002	-0,469	-0,068
CO3: Gold Mining	CE5	-0,191	-0,214	-0,367	0,295	0,039	-0,305	-0,315	-0,330	-0,086	-0,211
CO4: Coal Mining	CE3	0,833	-0,057	0,153	-0,159	-0,269	-0,222	-0,216	-0,194	-0,297	-0,295
CO5: Clothing (retail)	CE7	-0,241	-0,218	0,022	0,181	-0,069	-0,048	-0,062	-0,097	0,835	0,547
CO6: Food & Leather	CE8	-0,287	-0,265	-0,242	0,875	-0,069	0,248	0,173	-0,012	0,367	0,415
CO8: Hospital Group	CE4	0,148	0,056	-0,218	0,059	0,071	-0,082	-0,081	-0,075	-0,293	-0,268
CO9: Supermarkets	CE2	-0,309	0,703	-0,130	-0,300	-0,012	0,242	0,255	0,281	0,133	-0,001
CO10: Banking	CE9	0,173	-0,251	-0,087	-0,115	0,344	0,349	0,362	0,384	-0,042	0,091
CO12: Fishing	CE6	-0,332	-0,201	-0,195	-0,231	-0,107	-0,034	-0,021	0,011	0,057	-0,161

See also Tables 5 and 6

- **Company CO5's identity crisis** emerged when declining sales and loss of market share revealed that the profile of the company's consumer base had changed. On analysis it emerged that the company's established practice of the past three decades of bringing the best international fashion and design trends to the local market, were being shunned by consumers in favour of competitors' local flavour and design content. The crisis that it found itself grappling with was one of how it should view and position itself – given its past profile (prevailing identity) and changing market sentiment (suggesting a new or substantially altered identity). The indicated identity status as one of crisis, without a search for an identity, fitted prevailing realities in the organisation

quite well as it was not without identity but rather faced a choice between identities at the time of the research.

- A further illustration is offered by **company CO6**, a large agricultural, food (meat supply) and luxury leather-goods company and one of the poorest performers in the sample. It received extensive negative coverage in the media and enjoyed poor public relations for some time. This was largely a consequence of poor leadership practices (the previous chief executive) which resulted in consistently poor returns to shareholders. In addition, the company was struggling with its (outdated) image as an agricultural cooperative on the one hand and an acclaimed world class manufacturer of luxury leather products on the other (e.g. a sought after

**TABLE 9**  
**CONSOLIDATED IDENTITY PERSPECTIVE ON TOP PERFORMING AND WORST PERFORMING COMPANIES IN THIS POPULATION**

Company	Performance Rank order	Industry	Core business	Distinctive description (CE Clusters)	Dominant Sense-of-identity status (Id-clusters)
CO4	1	Mining: Coal producers	Operating bituminous and anthracite collieries	A company with clear character and a sense of unity, aggressively on the acquisition trail, with a low key, understated profile (Cluster CE3)	Strong sense of unity and character
CO5	2	Industrial: Stores (retail)	Retailing of clothing, footwear, accessories and home textiles, including the manufacturing of clothing	A stable, progressive and non-conforming company with a strong market orientation and a solid history (currently in a rejuvenation phase and undergoing change) (Cluster CE7)	Experiencing an identity crisis/ Identity diffusion
CO6	9	Industrial: Food	Processing of natural protein and related products (e.g. meat and leather)	A very large, diversified business with world-class quality standards and products, struggling with past leadership issues and current performance, and currently in a survival stage (Cluster CE8)	Pronounced preoccupation with corporate identity, some sense of identity diffusion/identity crisis and in search of identity
CO3	10	Mining: Gold producers	Operating gold mines	A vision driven, unique, risk-orientated, dynamic and charismatic company with a strong results focus, but highly susceptible to variation in economic conditions (Cluster CE5)	Some preoccupation with corporate identity; some overarching sense of identity (some identity-relevant attributes, identity not unclear or at a loss, or consciously searching for identity)

manufacturer of automobile leather upholstery). From this context it seems appropriate that the company's corporate identity and the lack of a clear identity will surface as substantial concerns and hence it is logical that an *identity crisis* and a search for an appropriate identity emerged from the data.

Once again, if the company performance rankings in Table 2 are borne in mind, the data in Table 8 alludes to a relationship between sense-of-identity and organisational performance. To an extent this is also suggested by the summary perspective provided in Table 9.

In this table the distinctive self-descriptions (CE-clusters, Table 6) as well as the sense-of-identity descriptions (Id clusters; Table 7) of the two top performing and two worst performing companies are juxtaposed. Struggling companies appear to present more complicated and confusing perspectives on their identity while the top performing companies have less complicated and very clear identity positions. Granted, company CO5 experiences an identity crisis but no other evidence of identity difficulties are recorded. The suggestion that a "positive" or healthy sense of identity goes hand-in-hand with good to excellent organisational performance and vice versa, is one of several hypotheses generated by this study and the subject of further research.

## DISCUSSION

In view of the paucity of empirical research on organisation identity, the modest purpose of this study was to engage in an *initial empirical exploration of the organisation identity phenomenon*. It sought to obtain an empirical response to the question of whether or not an organisation possesses an identity. A commonly accepted yet largely nondescript concept of organisation identity was used to guide the choice of the initial sample and data-gathering method. This entailed presenting executives with a single question that implored them to describe their organisation's distinctive character by providing as many relevant descriptive statements about it in response to the question: "Who am I?" – where the "I" was defined as their organisation. A mass of individual statements that described the organisations were obtained. These were subsequently combined

and reconstituted to reflect organisational responses i.e. organisational self-descriptions. The results surfaced two distinct organisation identity constructs namely the somewhat more descriptive account of identity (the CE-clusters) and the organisation's experience and awareness of its identity status (the sense-of-identity clusters).

At first glance these results are unsurprising and intuitively logical, yet from a more considered viewpoint they are somewhat more striking. Several considerations inform this position. The different literature streams to date have consistently portrayed identity and organisation identity constructs as tacit, ambiguous and abstract phenomena. It is this nature of the organisation identity phenomenon that suggests that it is improbable that organisation identity will be the subject of everyday discourse among employees in the workplace. The concept is simply too intangible and conceptually too far removed from daily workplace realities. Secondly, the emergence of distinctive patterned self-descriptions for the respective organisations is to be expected when "who-am-I" responses of managers are pooled. However, patterns and their relative salience and hence significance can only emerge when the collective is constituted and the data is processed as such. It is a statement of the obvious to argue that these "emergent" properties cannot be reduced to, and hence be discerned from any individual protocol.

The extraction of patterned self-descriptions is contingent on the existence of a *commonly held understanding* of who and what the organisation is – certainly among those representatives of the organisation that were sampled. *Distinctive* self-descriptions in turn is contingent on the existence of a *common* belief among these same respondents that who and what the organisation is, is indeed *distinctive* and as such it implies some form of inter-organisational comparison. These arguments assert that notions of organisation identity and organisational distinctiveness are unlikely to emerge spontaneously in any workplace discussion because of its intangible character and the fact that it requires effort investment at a cognitive level (mostly tacit). In this study the surfacing of distinctive organisation identity concepts was further constrained through the use of cluster analysis, a form of re-descriptor (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1991) that seeks out underlying *communality* (patterns or structure) in the data set. In

the process a significant proportion of unique or organisation-specific variance that is pertinent to the notion of organisation identity, is consciously discarded. Paradoxically, cluster analysis in its search for common underlying structure across the different participating organisations, sacrifices unique variance, yet through cluster scores reveal organisations to be distinctive. The latter in a sense reifies Argyris' (1956) statement that an organisation is like all other organisations yet like no other organisation. When these arguments are collectively considered, the probability of unique organisational "who-am-I" responses emerging from the dataset is reduced substantially. In view of these constraints we argue that the response to the question "who am I?" represents a lean and filtered account of perceived organisational distinctiveness. Against this setting the notions of identity and sense-of-identity as they were obtained in this study are considered particularly meaningful.

The findings of the study are of course a function of how organisation identity was defined and operationalised. For this study it was defined as *the organisation's distinctive character as conveyed by its (the organisation's) response to the question "who am I?"*. To the extent that this is a valid articulation of the phenomenon, the current study suggests it to be an empirically relevant organisational construct. The *distinctive, patterned self-descriptions* obtained for each of the participating organisations, suggest some support for those conceptual accounts of the organisation identity phenomenon that tend to view it in more general and broad terms. These include those perspectives that view organisation identity as the organisation's response to the question "who am I/we?" (Albert et al., 2000; Badaracco, 1998; Pratt & Foreman, 2000b), emphasise the organisation's *distinctive character* (cf. Ackerman, 1984; Balmer, 1995; Wright, 1994), its distinctive or distinguishing attributes (Balmer & Stotvig, 1997; Elsbach & Kramer, 1996), and/or its *perceived uniqueness* (Ackerman, 1984; 1988; Downey, 1986). The findings however also comment on the more focused definitions of organisation identity and for example suggest that the *distinctiveness* dimension of Albert and Whetten's (1985) definition, which equated organisation identity to that which is *central, enduring, and distinctive about an organisation's character*, may be borne out by more focused empirical studies of organisation identity.

Overall the self-descriptions obtained for each of the participating organisations reveal unique variance, such that organisations within the same sector are clearly differentiated from one another. While this is to be expected it is also remarkable in view of the arguments presented earlier and provides an encouraging platform from which to pursue the identity phenomenon in a more focused empirical manner.

Perhaps more important is that the TST technique also surfaced a small number of self-descriptive statements that incorporated explicit identity-terminology. The inclusion of identity-specific terminology (e.g. company X is experiencing an *identity crisis*) set these self-descriptive statements apart from the majority of the statements generated by the respondents. Their unique contribution appears to be that they reveal that organisations (as collectives and as perceived by management teams), to some extent are aware of their identity status. These statements, we suggest, convey the organisation's sense of its identity (refer Figure 1, Tables 7 and 8) and are important because they suggest parameters of an organisation identity phenomenon, which to date, have not yet been the subject of the mainstream organisation identity discourse. This awareness of the organisation's identity reveals parallels with earlier research by psychologists (cf. Van Tonder, 1987) that argued that a notion of individual or ego-identity cannot be adequately construed without the incorporation of the person's subjective experience and interpretation of his/her identity.

It is particularly meaningful that a cluster analysis performed on these explicit identity statements produced categories that

appear to articulate various identity statuses. These statuses again are broadly consistent with those empirically demonstrated in Marcia's (1966; 1967; 1976) early work on the operationalisation of ego-identity status (based on an Eriksonian concept of ego-identity). Marcia's work revealed identity to reflect a continuum with various identity statuses conveyed by different positions on this continuum. These typically ranged between an identity crisis and a clear identity. Although the extension of the individual identity metaphor to organisations can not be done in an unrestrained and uncritical manner, the organisation is viewed in this study as a social collective, which legitimises this practice somewhat. Moreover in this early stage of exploring the empirical expression of organisation identity, metaphorical extension may open up further avenues for conceptualising the phenomenon.

The sense-of-identity results provide a tentative platform for hypothesising that the organisation's sense of identity is a continuous yet variable phenomenon that assume different statuses at different times and which may vary between a more positive and healthy and a generally deficient or "negative" sense of identity. At this preliminary stage the findings on sense-of-identity suggest that common sense notions of *identity crises* among organisations, may have some theoretical and empirical validity... that concepts of *individual identity* and *identity crisis* (cf. Abend, 1974, Van Tonder, 1987) align with theoretical positions on organisational identity crises (Van Tonder, 1999, 2004bc). It further alludes to the possibility that the hypothesised construct of an identity crisis, viewed from within the framework of organisation identity theory (Van Tonder, 2004b, 2004c) has a strong probability of being revealed by future empirical research. Such a construct could have important implications for how organisations and management view and approach large scale change such as mergers. At the same time it will imply that the theoretically postulated relationship between an *organisation's identity* and its performance will become a more urgent research priority. In a similar vein, the sense-of-identity categories such as enduring character, identity-relevant attributes, a sense of unity, and identity search offer substantial scope for a different view of organisational dynamics. Consider for example that over the past three decades management has systematically embraced and internalised an intangible, tacit and collectively held (organisational) schema, popularly operationalised as "the way we do things around here" (organisational culture). The current study suggests that "who I am" or "who we are", in an organisational sense, could fit with this notion of an intangible, tacit and collective organisational schema, but substantial further research is required to arrive at firm conclusions in this regard.

In conclusion: the definition of organisation identity utilised in this study and premised on Schley and Wagenfield's (1979) notion of identity being the *total* response to the "who am I?" question and Van Tonder's (1999) notion of organisation identity being the distinctive character of the organisation, proved useful in revealing a broad yet unsophisticated concept of organisation identity. From the perspective that top executive teams are representative of their organisations (cf. Kets de Vries, 1991), and viewed from a social constructivist position, organisations in this study appear to have developed a collective, yet largely tacit sense of who and what they are and how they differ from similar organisations. Given this very broad open-ended operational definition of organisation identity, we conclude that organisations as social collectives do indeed possess and display distinctive identities. Moreover, the finding that organisations as collectives display some awareness of their identity condition, significantly raises the ante for an encompassing, systemic and coherent theory of organisation identity in organisational settings. The results generated by this study nonetheless remain tentative. At best it creates a powerful platform for cautiously extending the anthropomorphic vehicle (individual identity) in a more focused empirical pursuit of organisation identity phenomena in organisations.

The study attempted to empirically explore an uncharted terrain characterised by several methodological challenges. Quite often all of these cannot be suitably resolved. For this reason the results have to be interpreted with some caution. In this regard note that the population from which organisations were drawn facilitated a heterogeneous sample and consequently variance in responses is to be expected. A counter argument however is precisely that the cluster analysis methodology established common structure before unique variance was identified. Moreover, although care was exercised to minimise possible researcher "bias" and interviewer effects, and to maintain consistency in presenting the research question during the interviews with executives, the possibility of such effects cannot be ruled out.

These caveats underscore the need for continued research on the phenomenon. In this regard the present study generated broad and tentative parameters of what can be termed organisation identity. This in itself suggests a substantial need for further empirical research, which should preferably proceed in two directions. The first, in particular, will have to focus on alternative conceptualisations of organisation identity. The purpose would be to reduce the ambiguity that was created by a proliferation of conceptual contributions. This purpose will be served when the range of available definitions can be narrowed down and content parameters of the phenomenon are validated and / or rejected on the basis of empirical observation.

The second avenue of research should direct attention at the sense-of-identity concept and attempt to elaborate on the initial observations generated by the current study. If future empirical research supports the hypothesis that the sense-of-identity is indeed a continuous phenomenon, then it may well serve a useful and important diagnostic and monitoring purpose in organisations. The suggestion that organisations may alternate between stages of clear and strong identity on the one hand and identity diffusion and crisis on the other, open up many avenues for future research. It certainly offers the opportunity of establishing the relevance of organisation identity, and its derivative the sense-of-identity, in organisational settings. Such relevance was argued by most theoretical perspectives but was not yet subjected to empirical testing. Research directed at the relationship between organisation identity and organisational wellness and in particular its relationship to short and medium term performance indicators, may prove substantially beneficial from a relevance perspective. For example, if the relationship between sense-of-identity status and organisational performance suggested by the results of this study but also hypothesised in Organisation Identity Theory (Van Tonder, 2004b, 2004c) is borne out, the organisational sense-of-identity, among other, may serve as an early notice of impending performance decline and provide an opportunity for proactive and preventative remedial action. While these types of considerations suggest that organisation identity may have an important utility value, this ultimately depends on further research.

In closing, although the research reported here suggests a specific notion of organisation identity, it marks a very tentative first step and scholars are still unavoidably confronted with the question: does an organisation possess an identity? Theorists suggest organisations do possess identities, but empiricists have not yet spoken. The paucity of empirical evidence regrettably has been a hallmark of the predominantly conceptual discourse on identity in organisational settings. This tradition of engaging the identity phenomenon at a conceptual level has progressed substantially, however ... "In the end, any conceptualization is only as adequate as its empirical support" (Maddi, 1980, p. 443).

#### Notes

1. It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a comprehensive overview of the relevant theory, current status and contemporary focal issues in the domains of identity, corporate identity and organisation identity. In this regard

Balmer (2001) provides a comprehensive perspective on developments in the corporate identity field while Whetten and Godfrey (1998), Van Tonder (1987; 1999) and Van Tonder and Lessing (2003) respectively deal with the phenomenon of organisation identity at some length. Balmer and Greyser (2003) in turn provide an anthology that incorporates several classical and contemporary works spanning both the corporate and organisation identity literature streams.

2. Compiled with the aid of the SAS statistical software (SAS Institute, 2000). The scope and magnitude of this dendrogram precludes meaningful reproduction of the diagram in the format of this study.

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