

**ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTIFICATION AND COMMUNICATION:  
EMPLOYEES' EVALUATIONS OF INTERNAL COMMUNICATION  
AND ITS EFFECT ON IDENTIFICATION AT DIFFERENT  
ORGANIZATIONAL LEVELS**

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PROEFSCHRIFT

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volgens besluit van het College voor Promoties  
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op woensdag 4 oktober 2006 om 15.00 uur

door

**Jos Bartels**

geboren op 29 september 1972  
te Venlo

Dit proefschrift is goedgekeurd door de promotor, Prof. dr. A. Th. H. Pruyn en de  
assistent promotor, dr. M.D.T. de Jong.

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## Voorwoord

Promoveren, het is net als voetbal: als je de wedstrijd eenmaal gespeeld hebt, maken de slidings, de blauwe plekken en de overtredingen tijdens het spel niet meer uit. Het is dan ook met trots en enige blauwe plekken dat ik u dit proefschrift presenteer.

Na wat omwegen behaalde ik zes jaar geleden mijn drs.-titel bij de opleiding Toegepaste Communicatiewetenschap (TCW). Ik bleef daarna werken aan de UT, deels als medewerker bij Bureau Communicatie en deels als medewerker onderwijs & onderzoek bij TCW. In 2001 kwam bij TCW een hoogleraar Consumentenpsychologie, wiens onderzoek mij zeer aansprak. In een eerste kennismakingsgesprek beging ik mijn eerste 'overtreding' in de wedstrijd die promoveren heet: ik maakte mijn ambitie om hoogleraar te worden openbaar. Ad Pruyn, de hoogleraar in kwestie, zag dit 'gevaarlijk spel' door de vingers en gunde mij het voordeel van de twijfel. Hij stelde mij op in zijn team.

De eerste jaren heb ik mij laten meeslepen in het spel en veel tijd besteed aan onderwistaken. Het maakte mijn werk interessant en afwisselend, maar bracht niet altijd de focus die ik nodig had voor het winnen van de wedstrijd die promoveren heet. In de tweede helft van de wedstrijd heb ik mijn aandacht verlegd en laten zien dat ik ook doelpunten kan scoren: Er ligt een boekje met mijn naam erop, gevuld met artikelen die gepubliceerd zijn (of worden) in internationale wetenschappelijke tijdschriften. De wedstrijd is gespeeld en gewonnen: in de derde helft mag ik de titel 'doctor' dragen.

Net als bij het voetbal, is promoveren leuker (en wellicht ook ietsje makkelijker) met een groep medespelers en enthousiaste toeschouwers. En zonder het voorwoord langer te maken dan de kern van mijn proefschrift, wil ik toch een aantal van deze mensen bedanken. Op de eerste plaats wil ik Huub en Jeanne (mijn 'jeugdtrainers') bedanken voor de manier waarop ze me hebben opgevoed. Ik hoop dat ze net zo trots zijn op mij, als ik op hen. Ze hebben me altijd de mogelijkheid geboden om door te studeren en mijn eigen keuzes laten maken. Pap, mam, ich wil ôg doa gaer be deze veur bedanke.

Verder is er een aantal mensen direct betrokken geweest bij de totstandkoming van dit proefschrift. Allereerst de respondenten uit de verschillende organisaties: bedankt voor jullie tijd en moeite om mijn vragenlijsten in te vullen. Daarnaast Rynke Douwes, Inge Joustra en Marjolein van der Molen: het was leuk en leerzaam jullie als afstudeerders te begeleiden en ik ben dan ook blij jullie te kunnen vermelden als medeauteur van de artikelen in dit proefschrift. En ten slotte Hanneke van Brummelen, Claartje Grooten en Brahma Ramsodit: zonder jullie inspanningen lagen de vragenlijsten voor de eerste en tweede meting van de longitudinale studie waarschijnlijk nog steeds bij de respondenten.

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Jos Bartels,  
Enschede, oktober 2006

# 1

## General Introduction

### 1.1 Introduction

People often define themselves in terms of certain group memberships. These social identities are common in current life. People see themselves as being part of a country, gender, race, political movement, sports team or organization. In turn, these groups depend on their members to survive (Fisher and Wakefield, 1998). Tajfel (1972) defined social identity as 'the individual's knowledge that he (or she) belongs to certain groups together with some emotional and value significance to him (or her) of the group membership' (Tajfel, 1972: 31). An important outcome of identification with a group is in-group favouritism: claiming men are better than women; buying T-shirts of your favourite football team; shouting at fans of opposing teams. Or more specifically: defending your company when someone criticizes it. These are only a few day-to-day examples of behavioural outcomes of strong identification with a gender group, a sports team or an organization to which people may belong. In short, the stronger the relationship between a group and its individual members, the more these members are willing to show cooperative behaviour towards this group and malign other groups (Kelman, 1961; Tajfel, 1972, Haslam, 2001).

A specific form of group identification is called organizational identification (OI). Organizational identification is a way to explain the relationship between individuals and the organization they work for. Organizational identification can be defined as 'the perception of oneness with or belongingness to an organization, where the individual defines him or herself in terms of the organization(s) of which he or she is a member' (Mael and Ashforth, 1992, p. 104). Organizational identification has

proven to be an important factor in organizational life. Research in the past thirty years has shown that employees who identify strongly with their organization demonstrate positive attitudes and behaviours towards the organization for which they work (Hall 1972; Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Mael and Ashforth, 1992; Dutton, Dukerich and, Harquail, 1994; Bhattacharya, Rao and Glynn, 1995; Elsbach and Glynn, 1996; Scott et al., 1999; Van Knippenberg and Van Schie, 2000; Bergami and Bagozzi, 2000; Smidts, Pruyn and Van Riel, 2001; Bartel, 2001; Christ, Wagner, Stellmacher and Van Dick, 2003; Van Dick et al., 2004; Feather and Rauter, 2004). For a recent extensive overview see Riketta (2005) and Riketta and Van Dick (2005). Stronger identification leads to higher levels of job satisfaction, more extra-role behaviours, lower feelings of intent to leave, and less employee absenteeism. In other words, if employees identify strongly with their organization, they are willing to go the extra mile. This is not only relevant for the internal organization; employees' positive organizational behaviour may also have its effects on the organization's environment. For example, research has shown that job satisfaction among employees may lead to positive behaviours towards customers, which in turn will enhance customer satisfaction (e.g. Bernhardt, Donthu and Kennett, 2000; Schlesinger and Zornitsky, 1991; Tornow and Wiley, 1991; Donovan and Hocutt, 2001). Thus, if employees identify strongly with their organization, this could eventually lead to positive evaluations of the organization by the external environment.

Employees' attitudes and behaviours have become highly important for organizations. Many profit organizations are increasingly concerned with providing services. At the same time, non-profit organizations (e.g. universities, hospitals and police departments) are likewise becoming more service-oriented. Non-profit organizations are increasingly accountable for their results. Instead of just offering courses, performing surgery, or preserving the public order, these non-profit organizations must consider students, patients or civilians as customers who are not only affected by the organization's actions but also judge them. In these circumstances, managing employees' organizational identification appears to be a crucial success factor.

An umbrella concept, in which employees are considered to be important stakeholders of the (service) organization, is called internal marketing (IM). In this approach, employees are part of the marketing concept of an organization which is assumed to enhance an organization's response to (external) markets as it embodies the idea of linking internal means with external organizational goals (Gounaris, 2006). Several authors have emphasized the importance of internal marketing (Thomas, 1978; Grönroos, 1990; Varey, 1995; Kotler, 2000) as being part of the conceptual framework of service marketing. Although the general idea of internal marketing was

already introduced in the 1970s, only recently has insight into its conceptualization grown (Gounaris, 2006). During the last decades, several approaches to IM have been developed. Previous researchers considered IM to reflect the organization's attempts to satisfy the needs of its employees (e.g. Berry, Hensel and Burke, 1976; Berry, 1981) and to effectively manage internal relationships among employees (Gummesson, 1987). This approach is especially concerned with improving service quality delivered by employees who are in direct contact with customers. IM was thus first introduced as an internal marketing strategy focusing on jobs (internal products) that satisfy the needs of employees (internal customers). Satisfying employees' needs would in turn increase employees' job satisfaction. Eventually, because of employees' increased job satisfaction, the company's service objectives would be met (Gounaris, 1996). These early approaches of IM deal with employees in a similar way as they deal with customers. An employee has certain needs which have to be fulfilled; if these needs are fulfilled, then organizational success is eminent. In this way, internal marketing resembles external marketing.

As a response to this straightforward approach of internal marketing, scholars (e.g. Ahmed and Rafiq, 1993; Piercy, 1995) developed more sophisticated concepts of IM. They concentrated on the development of managing employees to integrate organizational goals. Rafiq and Ahmed (1993) argue that focusing on the employee as a customer is a rather narrow view of IM, since employees, in contrast to customers, have contractual obligations towards the organization. In Rafiq and Ahmed's view, external market conditions cannot be fully translated into employees' needs. They therefore suggest a broader approach of internal marketing. They propose IM to be an outcome of both marketing and human resource strategies in which all employees in the organization are encouraged to become customer conscious to improve the organization's effectiveness. Thus, this concept of IM incorporates the idea that employees are essentially different stakeholders than customers. Furthermore, IM focuses not only on sales personnel but also on all employees in the organization.

A third major approach concerns the idea that internal marketing is part of an organization's philosophy. External marketing success depends on whether employees are satisfied and motivated. The role of IM in this approach is to create satisfied and motivated employees (e.g. Lings, 2004). In this view, internal marketing is used to describe all efforts made to improve the internal climate (Lings and Greenly, 2005). It encompasses the notions of internal communication and participative decision-making as important means for understanding an organization's internal marketing orientation. The central theme in this approach is the relationship between employees and their organization and how it can facilitate the relationship

between employees and customers. The relationship between employee and organization is based on the organization's ability to attach value to its 'internal market' by understanding employees' needs, comparable with the necessity to attach value to the organization's customers (Slater and Narver, 1999; Gounaris, 2006).

In this thesis, the relationship between employees and their organization will be explored further by examining the link between employees' evaluations of organizational communication and their identification with the organization. It is assumed that effective organizational communication, in which the needs of individual employees are considered, may be an important instrument to manage their organizational identification. This corresponds to the latter approach of IM. Thus the idea of organizational identification as part of an organization's internal marketing orientation (IMO) is a central theme in this thesis.

This introduction first affords an overview of the conceptualization of organizational identification and subsequently describes its most important correlates. It will emphasize communication variables as important and underexposed determinants of organizational identification. Next, organizational identification will be introduced as a multidimensional construct in which employees are willing and able to identify with multiple organizational levels. This chapter concludes with gaps in current OI research so far and explains the studies conducted in this thesis.

## **1.2 Organizational identification: conceptualizations of the construct**

Many studies have focused on the conceptualization of organizational identification (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Brown, 1969; Dutton et al., 1994; Foote, 1951; Hall, Schneider and Nygren, 1970; Lee, 1971; Patchen, 1970; Pratt, 1998; Riketta, 2005; Riketta and Van Dick, 2005; Rotondi, 1975a, 1975b; Rousseau, 1998; Schneider, Hall and Nygren, 1971; Van Dick, 2001; Van Dick, 2004). This section gives a brief overview of the conceptualizations of identification. Although there are several differences in these conceptualizations, they also appear to show a strong overlap. However, a distinction is made below between the earlier conceptualizations of OI and those based on Social Identity Theory (SIT). The definition of organizational identification used in the studies of this thesis is based on these SIT conceptualizations.

### **1.2.1 Earlier conceptualizations of organizational identification**

One of the first to use the term identification in an organizational context was Foote (1951). In a conceptual paper, he considered identification to be a basis for motivation. Foote describes OI as ‘appropriation of and commitment to a particular identity or series of identities’ (p. 17). In his view, OI is the conception of the individual as a member of the organization. This self-conception will then motivate individuals to act on behalf of the organization. Remarkably, even in this early stage, Foote used self-conception as part of the definition of OI. This term was actually elaborated as self-categorization in Social Identity Theory and Theory of Self-Categorization by Tajfel and Turner (1979). These are influential theories used in current research on organizational identification, as will be discussed later in this section.

Several authors have independently tried to capture the construct of organizational identification (Brown, 1969; Lee, 1969, 1971; Patchen, 1970; Hall et al., 1970; Schneider et al., 1971). Brown (1969) formulated identification as a self-defining response, set in a specific relationship between the individual and his or her organization. Brown’s approach on identification focuses on four aspects of involvement: attraction to the organization, consistency of organizational and individual goals, loyalty toward the organization and reference of self to organizational membership. Although, like in Foote’s (1951) description, there is some emphasis on ‘self’ versus ‘organization’, Brown’s approach is a rather broad conceptualization of organizational identification. For example, in operationalizing one of the four aspects, respondents have to prioritize which identity (e.g. home state, job, organization, church membership) is most important to them. This aspect of his definition appears to refer to the salience of certain identities (compared to others) rather than to the process of identification itself.

During this same period, a second development of the construct of identification was described by Lee (1969, 1971). Lee (1971) defined organizational identification as ‘the degree of the individual’s broad personal identification with the organization’ (p. 215). His approach on OI emphasized three main aspects. First it described a sense of belongingness resulting from common goals shared with others or employees’ feelings that their function fulfils their personal needs. A second feature in this definition is loyalty, which addressed attitudes and behaviours like support for organizational goals or defending the organization to outsiders. Finally, shared characteristics implies a certain similarity between the individual and others within the organization. Lee’s definition seems to be more distinguishable from other related constructs than Browns’. However, like Brown (1969), Lee uses the term loyalty as

part of the definition of OI which relates to attitudes or behaviours that support or defend the organization. Thus, using terms as sense of belongingness, loyalty and shared characteristics still seems to be a somewhat broad conceptualization of OI.

A third approach of identification is offered by Patchen (1970) in his book 'Participation, Achievement and Involvement in the Job'. Although he does not actually define identification, Patchen referred to employees' perceptions of shared characteristics between them and their organization, and employees' perception of shared interests and goals with other organizational members. Furthermore, he emphasized feelings of solidarity with the organization, a sense of belongingness to that organization, and support of the organization where the individual supports and defends the organizational goals and policies.

Finally, Hall, Schneider and Nygren (1970) defined organizational identification as 'the process by which the goals of the organization and those of the individual become increasingly integrated or congruent' (Hall et al., 1970, p. 176–177). Their approach emphasized two elements, namely goal and value acceptance and emotional commitment to the organization. Hall et al. use the notion of self as becoming integrated with the organization by integrating organizational goals and values into one's own identity.

In short, based on earlier work on identity (e.g. Tolman, 1943; March and Simon, 1958; Kelman, 1958), several conceptualizations of organizational identification emerged. Whereas these approaches all had their own emphasis, in general they have a strong overlap in the comparison of the 'self' with the organization. However, it seems that the approaches described above include a wide range of psychological states of individuals. In turn, this makes it difficult to accurately define organizational identification as a unique construct.

A different conceptualization of organizational identification based on Burke (1937) was introduced from a communication or discourse scope by Cheney (1983) and developed further by Cheney and Tompkins (1987). Cheney's (1983) rhetorical approach defines organizational identification as 'an active process by which individuals link themselves to elements in the social scene' (Cheney, 1983, p. 342). The difference with earlier definitions was that Cheney and Tompkins (1987) saw organizational identification both as a process of identification and as a result of that process. Identity (the end-product) is shaped through the use of language (process). In other words: 'People bond themselves with a particular value-based identity and subsequently make sense of the world through discourse' (Larson and Pepper, 2003,

p. 532). This approach, in contrast to most earlier definitions, draws on discourse perspectives where identity is fluid and subject to change (Edwards, 2005).

### **1.2.2 Conceptualizations of organizational identification based on Social Identity Theory**

As mentioned earlier, the scope of the definition in this thesis is best represented by the definitions of organizational identification drawn from Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel and Turner, 1979), which is still a dominant approach in current organizational identification literature. In short, Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Self-Categorization Theory (SCT) (Tajfel, 1972; Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel and Turner 1979) suggest that individuals categorize themselves into a perceived group (or more specifically an organization). SIT assumes that people have both a personal identity and a number of social identities to construe their place in the world. Individuals need to simplify the social world by categorizing people into groups, and consequently assign themselves to being a member of a particular group or category. In constructing their self-concept, they may consider themselves to be members of several different groups or categories. According to SIT, people furthermore are inclined towards social comparison. They compare themselves with others on the basis of their membership of particular groups. As people always strive for a positive self-esteem, SIT states that they will assign themselves (either consciously or subconsciously) to those social groups or categories that are evaluated more positively than others. (For an extensive review of Social Identity Theory see also Robinson (1996), Ellemers, Spears and Doosje (1999), Haslam, Van Knippenberg, Platow and Ellemers (2003), Haslam (2004), and Haslam and Ellemers (2005).)

The first researchers to draw from Social Identity Theory were Ashforth and Mael (1989). They saw organizational identification as a specific form of social identification. The most important social identification component they refer to, is the idea of self-categorization, in which individuals perceive that they are psychologically intertwined with the fate of their organization. Somewhat later, Dutton et al. (1994) focused on identification as the idea of a person's self-concept containing the same attributes as those in the perceived organizational identity. In their view, OI is the extent to which employees define themselves by the same attributes as those which define the organization. They emphasized the idea that an employee's identity as an organizational member can be more salient than alternative identities. Furthermore, if someone's self-concept has many similar characteristics as the organization, it is more likely that he or she will define the organization as a social group. This approach has some overlap with earlier conceptualizations of the OI in which terms like e.g. shared characteristics are used. However, Dutton et al.'s view is more strongly embedded in

SIT. Furthermore, and in contrast with the earlier conceptualizations described, they introduce the term perceived organizational identity in their review. Rousseau (1998) used a slightly different approach and divided identification into two processes: situated identification and deeper structured identification. Situated identification refers to 'a perception of a discrete work setting, created by situational cues signalling shared interests'. (Rousseau, 1998 p. 218) This situated identification remains salient as long as the cues persist. A deeper structured identification consists of cognitive schemas in which individuals' relationships have in some respects altered the mental model that they have of themselves. This later form of identification occurs across situations and over time and leads to a congruence between people's self at work and their broader self-concept (Turner, 1978). Thus, Rousseau (1998) defines identification as a psychological state in which individuals perceive themselves to be part of a larger whole, specifically the organization. According to Rousseau, identification is a cognition of the self in relation to the organization.

The main overlap in the three approaches mentioned (apart from being derived from SIT), seems to be the fact that, to a large extent, identification is perceived as a cognitive process. More recently, Van Dick (2001) elaborates on Ashforth and Mael's definition of OI. He argues that their definition, focusing on a cognitive approach of identification, lacks some of the core elements of Social Identity Theory. Based on the assumptions of SIT, several authors (e.g. Bergami and Bagozzi, 1996; Van Dick, 2001) state that employees' identification consists of both cognitive (knowing someone is part of an organization) and emotional aspects (feeling sense of belongingness to this organization). Van Dick (2001) states that identification emphasizes four different aspects which are all part of the organizational identification process. First, he describes an affective component in which an employee has an emotional attachment to the group. Second, someone should have the knowledge of being a group member, which Van Dick refers to as the cognitive component. The evaluative component of identification is the third part of his approach, in which employees appraise the organization (e.g. pride in the organization). A fourth component is a behavioural (conative) component which includes actual behaviour. Van Dick (2001) recognizes cognitive as well as emotional aspects of OI based on Social Identity Theory. However, the evaluative and behavioural components seem to be more an outcome of the identification process than the process itself.

### **1.2.3 Concluding remarks on conceptualizations of organizational identification**

Although differences are eminent, all definitions described above show some kind of overlap. The main idea is the linkage between the self and the organization and the

definition of oneself in terms of the characteristics of the organization. Furthermore, for the individual, identification means that elements of the organizational characteristics in some way and to some extent become part of their own self-concept.

Despite the strong overlap between several conceptualizations of OI, some appear to be more suitable than others. On the one hand, several approaches describe more than just identification (e.g. involvement, loyalty, behavioural outcomes of identification). This causes problems for the differentiation of determinants of identification, organizational identification itself, and its consequences. On the other hand, some scholars choose a rather narrow definition of OI, by focusing, for instance, only on the cognitive aspects (knowing) of identification, without fully using the potential of the aspects of Social Identity Theory.

The aim of this thesis is not to question the concept of organizational identification itself or come up with a new definition. In the current literature on organizational behaviour, Mael and Ashforth's approach on identification is used the most often (Riketta, 2005). However, their operationalization of organizational identification does not appear to fully match their own definition. Mael and Ashforth state that identification is a cognitive process (Mael and Ashforth, 1992, p. 105), whereas their measurement instrument for OI also contains emotional aspects. For example, respondents have to answer whether they have feelings of embarrassment or feel insulted when their organization is criticized. This seems to primarily refer to their emotional states. In this thesis, the definition of organizational identification formulated by Mael and Ashforth (1992) is used. Furthermore in this thesis, and in line with other scholars who argue that OI is more than a cognitive process (e.g. Bergami and Bagozzi, 1996; Van Dick, 2001), emotional aspects of the construct are also used to operationalize OI.

### **1.3 Organizational identification and relationship with other variables**

From the beginning of the 1990s, and starting with the influential study by Mael and Ashforth (1992), a large body of research has been developed on organizational identification and its correlates. In this section, the most important correlates will be discussed. A brief overview of organizational identification and its relationship with work-related attitudes, work-related intentions and organizational characteristics will be given. Due to the cross-sectional nature of the majority of studies conducted on

organizational identification, it is not always obvious whether a variable must be considered to be a cause or a consequence of organizational identification (e.g. Riketta, 2005). Despite these reservations, the variables will be presented in three clusters: (1) consequences of identification, (2) strongly related constructs to identification, and (3) antecedents of identification.

### **1.3.1 Consequences of organizational identification**

Several positive attitudinal (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Mael and Ashforth, 1992) and behavioural outcomes are linked to organizational identification. The most often researched correlates are: intention to leave the organization, extra-role behaviour, in-role and extra-role performance, and absenteeism (for an overview see Riketta, 2005; Riketta and Van Dick 2005).

First, identification is linked to positive group membership and support of organizational goals. Stronger organizational identification leads to more cooperation with other organizational members (Dutton et al., 1994) and influences employees' willingness to strive for organizational goals (Elsbach and Glynn, 1996). Furthermore, several authors found that employees who have a strong identification show more organizational citizenship behaviour (e.g. Bergami and Bagozzi, 2000; Christ et al., 2003; Feather and Rauter, 2004). A second consequence of strong organizational identification is that employees are more inclined to stay with the organization (e.g. Scott, et al., 1999). In other words, they have a lower intention to leave the organization (Van Dick et al., 2004; Van Dick, Wagner and Lemmer, 2004). Organizational identification also seems to have positive effects on a person's well-being. A large body of research, for instance, has shown that job satisfaction is strongly and positively correlated with organizational identification (or commitment) (e.g. Hall, 1972; Begley and Czajka, 1993; Van Knippenberg and Van Schie, 2000; Van Dick et al., 2004; Feather and Rauter, 2004; Van Dick, Ullrich and Tissington, 2006). While some authors use job satisfaction as a consequence of identification, others have used it as an antecedent of organizational identification. Finally, some studies found that if employees identify strongly with their organization, they are willing to spread a positive image of the organization (e.g. Bhattacharya et al., 1995).

From an internal marketing perspective, these are important outcomes for organizations that would like to become more service-oriented and therefore aim at higher degrees of customer satisfaction. In short, organizational identification has proven to be an important predictor in explaining several positive employee behaviours that may be a basis for connecting internal and external environments of the organization.

### 1.3.2 Organizational identification and organizational commitment

A construct which is the most strongly related to organizational identification is organizational commitment. Organizational commitment has been one of the most studied concepts in organizational behaviour (Reichers, 1985; Schneider, 1985; Mathieu and Zajac, 1990; Riketta, 2005) and can be defined as ‘the relative strength of an individual’s identification with and involvement in a particular organization’ (Mowday, Steers and Porter, 1979, p. 226) or ‘the employee’s emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organization’ (Meyer and Allen, 1991, p. 67). Although these definitions suggest that identification and commitment are quite similar, they are not (see e.g. Mael, 1988). Some argue that commitment and identification are the same, both empirically and theoretically (Stengel, 1987; Sass and Canary, 1991; Ouwerkerk, Ellemers and De Gilder, 1999; Van Vuuren, 2006). However, most researchers state that (affective) commitment differs from identification (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Pratt, 1998; Van Knippenberg and Van Schie, 2000; Mael and Tetrick, 1992; Van Knippenberg and Sleebos, 2005; Van Dick, Wagner, Stellmacher and Christ, 2004; Van Dick et al., 2004; Meyer, Becker and Vandenberghe, 2004).

In all, results have often illustrated strong correlations between commitment and identification (Witt, 1993; Ashforth and Saks, 1996; Siegel and Sisaye, 1997; Gautam, Van Dick and Wagner, 2004; Van Dick, 2004; Harris and Cameron, 2005; Riketta, 2005). Although Riketta (2005) in a recent meta-analytical study found a shared explained variance of 62%, several correlates showed different strengths in relation to identification and commitment. Edwards (2005) concludes that organizational commitment antecedents focus more on what an organization *does*, whereas identification antecedents are more related to what the organization *is*. Furthermore, several researchers use identification as part of the broader concept commitment.

If conceptualizations of organizational identification are more broad, they seem to have a stronger overlap with commitment than if OI were defined more narrowly. For example, when examining a frequently used measurement of organizational identification, the organizational identification questionnaire (OIQ) by Cheney (1982), this construct is hardly distinguishable from commitment (Sass and Canary, 1991; Miller, Allen, Casey and Johnson, 2000). However, a more narrow operationalization of OI (e.g. Mael and Ashforth’s, 1992) measures something different and does actually have different correlates than (affective) commitment (see Riketta, 2005, for a detailed overview).

As mentioned earlier, the fact remains that the ‘intertwine’ of identification and commitment is still one of the most important issues in organizational identification research. In this thesis, organizational identification is used as a distinguishable concept from organizational (affective) commitment. However, insight into commitment literature could be helpful in explaining antecedents of identification. Therefore, commitment literature is also considered to posit hypotheses on organizational identification.

### **1.3.3 Antecedents of organizational identification**

A wide range of antecedents have been related to organizational identification (cf. Riketta, 2005; Riketta and Van Dick, 2005). Various types of determinants may be distinguished: demographic variables including nature and duration of contact between employee and organization (e.g. tenure, age, job level, gender, educational level), and characteristics of the organizational context (e.g. organizational prestige, job satisfaction). In this section, a brief overview of the most important determinants will be given.

The effects of several demographic variables on organizational identification appear to be ambiguous. For example, in a recent meta-analysis, Riketta (2005) reported only small correlations between organizational identification and employees’ age, tenure or gender. On the other hand, more evidence was found that organizational tenure has a positive effect on organizational identification (e.g. Hall, et al., 1970; Mael and Ashforth, 1992).

Furthermore, the perception of someone’s overlap between one’s personal identity and the organizational identity has been studied in several situations (e.g. Bergami and Bagozzi, 2000; Elsbach and Bhattacharya, 2001). These studies show that if employees perceive more overlap between both identities, they will identify stronger with the overall organization. This is in line with research into person-organization fit (P-O fit), which may be defined as ‘the compatibility between individual and organizations’ (Kristof, 1996, p. 3). This fit can be based on several aspects, for example, the congruence between personal and organizational beliefs (e.g. O’Reilly, Chatman and Caldwell, 1991) or between individual and company goals (Kristof, 1996). Not surprisingly, since P-O fit shows some overlap with identification, several studies show that if the P-O fit was stronger, employees showed stronger commitment to and identification with the organization (Valentine, Godkin and Lucero, 2002; Verquer, Beehr and Wagner, 2003).

Since identification, based on Social Identity Theory, consists of comparing one's own group (organization) with others, a third distinguishable set of antecedents emphasizes the external environment of a group or organization. First, there is some evidence that the perceived distinctiveness of the organization shows positive correlations with organizational identification (Mael and Ashforth, 1992). Thus, the more employees see their organization as different from others, the stronger they will identify with this organization. An important antecedent of OI which relates to the external environment is called organizational prestige (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991; Dutton et al. 1994; Bhattacharya et al., 1995; Pratt, 1998; Riketta, 2005), also called perceived external prestige (Smidts et al., 2001). Perceived external prestige (PEP) relates to how employees perceive the way the outside world thinks about their organization. In other words, perceived external prestige represents how employees think outsiders view their organization. If employees think that important external stakeholders think positively about the organization, they are likely to feel proud to work for this organization (Smidts et al., 2001). Research has confirmed the idea that positive evaluations of the organizational prestige lead to a stronger organizational identification among employees (Mael and Ashforth, 1992; Bhattacharya, et al., 1995; Iyver, Bamber and Barefield, 1997; Fisher and Wakefield, 1998; Bergami and Bagozzi, 2000; Smidts et al., 2001; Carmeli and Freund, 2002; Carmeli, 2005). In this thesis, PEP will be used as a basis for explaining the relationship between employee and external environment, which was mentioned earlier in the section on internal marketing.

Although the importance of communication in organizations has been evident for quite some time (Redding, 1972), empirical research into employees' perceptions of organizational communication in relation to their organizational identification is only scarce. This so-called communication climate, can be described as 'a subjectively experienced quality of the internal environment of an organization; the concept embraces a general cluster of inferred predispositions, identifiable through reports of members' perceptions of messages and message-related events occurring in the organization' (Dennis, 1974, p. 29). Dennis divided communication climate into the dimensions: supportiveness, openness and candour, participative decision making, trust, confidence and credibility, high performance goals, information adequacy, semantic information difference, and communication satisfaction. Several researchers have found positive correlations between communication climate or its dimensions and organizational commitment (Welsch and LaVan, 1981; Trombetta and Rogers, 1988; Guzley, 1992). However, in contrast to the correlates mentioned above, communication climate has only recently been linked to organizational identification. Smidts et al. (2001) were the first to report that communication climate, sub-divided

into three dimensions (i.e. openness, participation and supportiveness), is an important predictor of organizational identification. If the relationship between PEP and OI helps to explain the relationship between the employee and the outside world, the relationship between communication climate and identification is used as a basis for the relationship between member and organization in the internal marketing approach. This thesis elaborates on both PEP and communication climate as antecedents of organizational identification to explore these relationships.

#### **1.3.4 Antecedents of organizational identification in a merger context**

Not only in status quo settings has research into organizational identification developed. Identity issues become even more salient in settings in which organizational structure could rapidly and even dramatically change, like in merger situations (Van Knippenberg et al., 2002). In these situations, additional determinants of organizational identification could become more important. In merger contexts, an important determinant seems to be pre-merger identification. Research in merger contexts has found pre-merger identification to correlate with post-merger identification (e.g. Van Leeuwen, Van Knippenberg and Ellemers, 2003; Van Dick et al., 2004; Van Dick et al., 2006). A second important correlate of identification in merger situations is a sense of continuity. This could be described as the employees' concern about personal consequences due to the merger (Rousseau, 1998). Research has emphasized the importance of a sense of continuity in merger processes and its impact on identification (e.g. Bachman, 1993; Mottola, Gaertner, Bachman, Dovidio, 1997; Terry and O'Brien, 2001; Jetten, O'Brien and Trindall, 2002). These studies show that the more insecure employees are or the more threatened they feel about a merger, the less they will identify with the newly merged organization. Van Knippenberg and Van Leeuwen (2001) conclude that a sense of continuity is crucial in the relationship between pre- and post-merger identification.

In contrast to the correlates of identification mentioned above, like in status-quo settings, much less is known about communication climate and organizational identification in merger contexts (e.g. Gardner, Paulsen, Gallois, Callan and Monaghan, 2001). Therefore, two studies in this thesis will focus on the role of (communication) determinants of identification in a merger context.

### **1.4 Multiple organizational identification environments**

Most research on organizational identification seems to suggest that employees only identify strongly with their overall organization (cf. Mael and Ashforth, 1992;

Ashforth and Saks, 1996; Foreman and Whetten, 2002). However, organizations are more than just holistic identities. Organizations often consist of multiple organizational layers (Ashforth and Johnson, 2001). Workgroups, departments, divisions or business units are examples of sub-units in organizations with which employees can identify.

Multiple organizational identities may occur in different forms. Ashforth and Johnson (2001) proposed a model in which identities could be cross-cutting and/or nested (embedded) (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Brewer, 1995; Dukerich, Golden and Jacobson, 1996). The former (cross-cutting) means that an identity cuts vertically through organizational levels. The latter (nested) emphasizes the idea that identities manifest themselves in the form of the various organizational levels. Figure 1.1 shows a summary of their model.

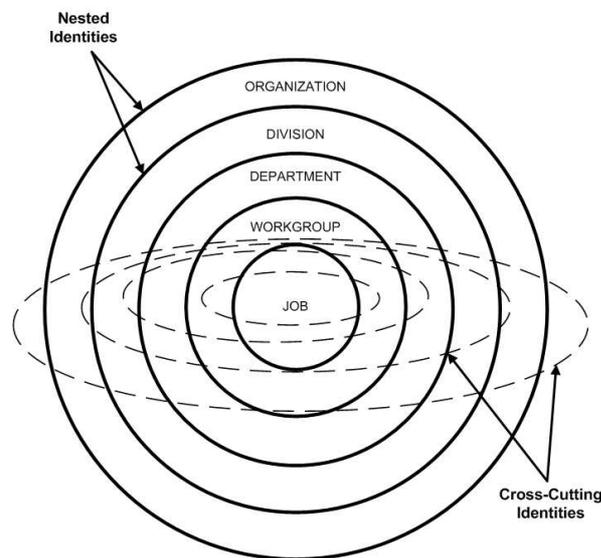


Figure 1.1: Nested and cross-cutting identities in organizations (Ashforth and Johnson, 2001, p. 33)

Ashforth and Johnson (2001) refer to subordinate levels of the organization as so-called lower order identities. The organizational levels are more closely linked(?) to employees' day-to-day work life (e.g. profession, job and workgroup). More superordinate organizational levels, like divisions, business units and organization, are called higher order identities. Higher order identities are more inclusive because

they encompass lower order identities. An organization therefore embodies an arsenal of characteristics of jobs, workgroups, divisions and business units of this organization (Kramer, 1993). Furthermore, according to Ashforth and Johnson higher order identities are relatively distal. The impact on an individual employee tends to be sooner indirect than direct. Overall organizational goals are formulated which in turn could lead to a certain organizational climate shaping individuals' thoughts and feelings (Lewin, 1943; Mueller and Lawler, 1999).

In contrast to so-called higher order identities, lower order identities are more concrete and proximate because employees carry out their daily activities in their jobs or workgroup environments (Riordan and Weatherly, 1999; Van Knippenberg and Van Schie, 2000). Some studies have shown that employees' identification with their job (i.e. professional identification) (Apker and Fox, 2002) or workgroup (Riketta, 2006) is stronger than with the organization as a whole. Furthermore, some studies seem to underpin the idea that different organizational levels correlate with each other (e.g. Van Knippenberg and Van Schie, 2000). However, while researchers have suggested the possibility of the existence of multiple organizational identities, there is little empirical evidence on how differentiation occurs or what its implications for the organization are (Foreman and Whetten, 2002; Corley, 2004). In particular, research on the correlates of employees' identification with different organizational levels is scarce. Therefore, this thesis will elaborate on employees identifying with multiple organizational levels, specifically on the idea of nested identities as explained by Ashforth and Johnson (2001). Furthermore, it will focus on the impact of (communication) determinants at various organizational levels of identification.

## **1.5 Gaps in organizational identification research and present studies**

In this section, the gaps in current organizational identification research which led to the studies reported in this thesis are summarized. First, the relationship between communication climate and organizational identification is as yet underexposed, although there are some studies emphasizing the relationship between communication and commitment (e.g. Welsch and LaVan, 1981; Trombetta and Rogers, 1988; Guzley, 1992). However, only one study is available to date in which the concepts of communication climate and perceived external prestige are linked to organizational identification (Smidts et al., 2001).

Second, organizational identification is predominantly treated as a holistic construct in which employees are assumed to identify with an overall organization. Only recently has some insight been gained into the multidimensional nature of identification (Foreman and Whetten, 2002). This thesis will further explore the multidimensionality of identification in organizational contexts. So far, no research has been conducted on the relationship between communication climate and multiple identities in an organization. Neither has a design been used in which both communication climate and organizational identification are treated as multidimensional constructs. Hence the investigation of this multidimensional relationship in this thesis.

Third, organizational identification is often only measured at one moment in time. Longitudinal studies into the development of organizational identification are scarce. The relationship between communication climate and identification over time is yet to be explored. One of the studies in this thesis thus focuses on the longitudinal aspects of this relationship.

The following chapters describe four empirical studies designed to overcome the gaps mentioned in the literature review. Two studies were conducted in a status quo setting (chapters three and five) and two studies in merger settings (chapters two and four). All studies emphasize the relationship between organizational identification and communication climate variables at various organizational levels. **Chapter 2** describes a quasi-experimental case study among directly and indirectly involved employees in a pending merger of police organizations. Organizational identification and its determinants were examined from a pre-merger perspective. Pre-merger identification, sense of continuity, expected utility of the merger, communication climate before the merger, and communication about the merger were used as determinants of the expected identification of employees with their new organization. **Chapter 3** contains a case study in a regional police organization. The study emphasizes on employees' identification with various organizational levels. Furthermore, it explains to what degree the identification on these various levels is influenced by the communication climate of each level and/or the perceived external prestige. **Chapter 4** describes a longitudinal study into the determinants of pre- and post-merger organizational identification on two organizational levels. A merger between four faculties of a Dutch university was monitored. Determinants used to explain identification are communication climate, perceived external prestige and job satisfaction. This study emphasizes the relationship between communication climate and organizational identification over time. **Chapter 5** describes a study in a regional hospital organization. For this final study a somewhat different approach was used

than in the first three. The multidimensional approach of identification in the first three studies mainly emphasized employees' identification with different organizational levels. In the two mergers studies (expected) future identification and past identification was used to explain the multidimensional nature of identification. Employees' evaluations of communication was also measured at different organizational levels in the first three studies. In contrast, in the last study the direction of communication (horizontal versus vertical) was used to explain the multidimensional nature of communication climate. Furthermore, a different angle was used to elaborate on the multidimensional nature of identification. This last study covers the impact of horizontal and vertical communication climate on two forms of identification, namely professional and organizational identification. The nature of this study is exploratory. Finally, **chapter 6** incorporates all the research findings in an internal marketing perspective. It summarizes the most important findings, discusses the theoretical and practical implications, and formulates suggestions for future research.

# 2

## Organizational identification during a merger<sup>1</sup>

### 2.1 Abstract

In order to investigate the development of organizational identification during a merger, a quasi-experimental case study was conducted on a pending merger of police organizations. The research was conducted among employees who would be directly involved in the merger and among indirectly involved employees. In contrast to earlier studies, organizational identification was measured as the expected identification *prior* to the merger. Five determinants were used to explain the employees' expected identification: (a) identification with the pre-merger organization, (b) sense of continuity, (c) expected utility of the merger, (d) communication climate before the merger, and (e) communication about the merger. The five determinants appeared to explain a considerable proportion of the variance of expected organizational identification. Results suggest that in order to obtain a strong identification with the soon to be merged organization, managers should pay extra attention to current departments with weaker social bonds as these are expected to identify the least with the new organization. The role of the communication variables differed between the two employee groups: communication about the merger only contributed to the organizational identification of directly involved employees; and communication climate only affected the identification of indirectly involved employees.

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter was published as Bartels, J., R.M. Douwes, M.D.T. de Jong and A.T.H. Pruyn (2006). Organizational identification during a merger: Determinants of employees' expected identification with the new organization. *British Journal of Management*, 17(s1), 49-67.

## 2.2 Introduction

Both in profit and non-profit organizations, mergers seem to be the order of the day. Merging is one of the prominent strategies organizations use to increase market shares, reduce costs or create synergy. At the same time, it is generally acknowledged that mergers may involve a difficult process with uncertain outcomes. More than half of the mergers eventually fail to some extent (Cartwright and Cooper, 1992). Problems can often be ascribed to human aspects involved in mergers (Blake and Mouton, 1985; Haunschild, Moreland and Murrell, 1994). They may occur due to members' perceptions of inter-group differences in the new organization (Jetten, Duck, Terry and O'Brien, 2002), incompatible organizational cultures (Cartwright and Cooper, 1993), and conflicting corporate identities (Melewar and Harrold, 2000). All these problems seem to refer to one underlying phenomenon: that in merger processes members (or employees) of the new organization (the 'mergees') may feel threatened when their group is endangered by the 'infusion' of new identities and that they are inclined to cling to the group they are already part of. As a consequence, employees may lose their psychological commitment to or identification with an organization (e.g. Cartwright and Cooper, 1993; Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail, 1994). In addition, mergers may lead to a variety of reactions, such as intention to leave (Mottola, Gaertner, Bachman and Dovidio, 1997; Van Knippenberg, Van Knippenberg, Monden and De Lima, 2002), lower self-esteem (Terry, Carey and Callan, 2001), stress (Terry, Callan and Sartori, 1996), lower productivity and even illness (Cartwright and Cooper, 1993).

Social identity theory (e.g. Tajfel and Turner, 1986) offers an interesting explanation of why employees often react so negatively to organizational changes or mergers (Hogg and Terry, 2000). Mergers may be perceived as a threat to the stability and continuation of employees' current identities. People may thus resist merger processes, especially when these imply a serious threat to existing group values, structures or other manifestations of intra-group culture. This will be even more so when the work (group) serves as an important cornerstone of the employee's personal (self-)identity. Under such conditions, one would expect a negative relationship to exist between pre-merger identification with the 'threatened' organization and post-merger identification with the new organization. Moreover, the stronger the social bonding with the existing organization (the company, the department, or even the workgroup), the more problematic the imminent (re-) identification with the soon-to-be merged organization. Research has indicated, however, that the assumption about a negative relationship between pre-merger and post-merger identification may not be as clear-cut as it seems. Bachman (1993) found a positive relationship between pre-

merger and post-merger identification in her study on an intergroup model for organizational mergers. In a survey study within merged organizations, Van Knippenberg, Van Knippenberg, Monden and De Lima (2002) found positive correlations between pre-merger and post-merger identification. These correlations were particularly strong for members of the dominant (sub-)organizations in the merger. Pre-merger identification appeared to be a strong predictor of post-merger identification. Van Dick, Wagner and Lemmer (2004) also found a positive relationship between pre-merger and post-merger identification. They explain this finding by referring to the relatively limited consequences of the merger as perceived from the post-merger situation: the employees were able to transfer parts of their old identity into the new organization.

In a longitudinal study by Jetten, O'Brien and Trindall (2002), mixed results were found regarding the influence of pre-merger identification. Evidence was found that high initial organizational identification had a positive effect on long-term organizational commitment. It appeared, however, to be relevant whether employees identified themselves primarily with the workgroup or with the organization as a whole. As the merger implied a major threat to existing workgroup structures ('the composition of the work-teams changed dramatically for most employees', Jetten et al., 2002, p. 293), a strong workgroup identification in the pre-merger phase led to negative feelings about the merger. Under such conditions one would not expect a strong post-merger identification. A strong superordinate organizational identification (with the 'corporate' organization instead of with the workgroup or department) led to more positive feelings about the merger, however. Important underlying variables in these studies appeared to be the salience and perceived threats of pre-merger subgroup identities. Thus, a positive relationship between pre-merger and post-merger identification might exist when employees do not experience the (forthcoming) changes as a threat to their current (pre-merger) situation. This may be the case, for example, when they are only indirectly involved in the merger because their workgroup is hardly affected by it or when employees consider the corporate identity to be of more importance to them than the workgroup identity.

Another possible explanation for the reported positive relationships between pre- and post-merger identification is that in these studies, as in the majority of the studies on organizational identification, pre-merger identification was measured from the perspective of a post-merger situation. Employees are asked in retrospect to what extent they identify with the new organization. This may have methodological and managerial drawbacks. One methodological drawback is that employees' perceptions of the identification process (pre-merger identification, but also other relevant factors

such as expected utility of the merger, sense of continuity and communication about the merger) may be biased by memory distortions and history (employees' experiences in the new, post-merger situation). Such 'hindsight biases' may cause far-reaching distortions in perception and behaviour (Guilbault, Bryant, Howard-Brockway and Posovac, 2004), and may well explain the positive correlation between pre- and post-merger assessments. From a management perspective, measurements in the post-merger situation have the disadvantage that the results are of little practical value to the merger process at hand: they may be used to repair negative effects of the merger but cannot be used to anticipate problems that occur during the process.

### **2.3 The present study**

The extent to which employees are willing and able to identify themselves with the post-merger organization can be considered a key factor in the (social-psychological) success of mergers (Van Knippenberg et al., 2002). Several researchers have therefore focused on factors of expected influence of post-merger identification such as pre-merger identification, sense of continuity and expected utility of the merger (Bachman, 1993; Rousseau, 1998; Terry and Callan, 1998; Jetten, O'Brien and Trindall, 2002; Van Leeuwen, Van Knippenberg and Ellemers, 2003). These three factors all appeared to have significant effects on employees' post-merger identification.

Although many researchers recognize the importance of communication variables in the context of organizational change and mergers, the role of communication in (re-)identification processes during a merger has so far been underexposed (Gardner, Paulsen, Gallois, Callan and Monaghan, 2001; Paulsen, Jones, Graham, Callan and Gallois, 2004). The available literature and most relevant communication studies seem to focus on variables other than post merger identification, such as, for instance, employee well-being (Terry, Callan, Sartori, 1996; Jimmieson, Terry and Callan, 2004), or (job) uncertainty (Bastien, 1987; Bordia, Hobman, Jones, Gallois and Callan, 2004; Tourish, Paulsen, Hobman and Bordia, 2004). Other, more general studies of employee reactions to mergers do not appear to recognize the multidimensional nature of organizational communication, and only include a limited number of items in their questionnaires (e.g. Bachman, 1993; Terry, Carey and Callan, 2001). As Postmes (2003) demonstrates, the treatment of communication as unitary phenomenon might be a oversimplification of organizational reality. Only few studies (such as Schweiger and DeNisi, 1991 and Bachman, 1993) investigated the impact of communication on employees' attitudes towards the merged organization

and found ambiguous results. Furthermore, one recent study (Smidts, Pruyn and Van Riel, 2001) has empirically shown that communication is important in successful identification and that it is useful to differentiate between the (content of) communication itself and the communication climate within the organization. To summarize, communication is generally seen as an important factor in merger processes, but relatively little is known about the way communication affects post-merger identification. This may have to do with the nature of the available research on organizational identification. In the majority of these studies, post-merger identification is measured in retrospect, which makes it hard for respondents to reliably judge the quality of the communication in the pre-merger situation and during the merger process.

In this study we will therefore investigate organizational identification and its determinants from a pre-merger perspective. This implies measuring employees' expected post-merger identification in a pre-merger situation. It is assumed that once employees are aware of a forthcoming merger, they will start to consider the post-merger situation and the possible consequences for their own situation. In this early phase of (pre-) identification the stage is set for longer term commitment (Jetten et al., 2002). Hence, the strength of pre-merger identification should be measured at this point in order to be able to interpret its relationship with (expected) post-merger identification unambiguously. As yet, an unanswered question is whether the determinants of post-merger identification also apply during the early phases of identification. Dackert, Jackson, Brenner and Johansson (2003) are among the few researchers who focused specifically on the pre-merger situation, but unfortunately they did not include identification variables in their study.

The present study extends previous research on organizational identification and mergers by: (1) examining the relationship between organizational identification and its determinants from a pre-merger perspective, and (2) examining communication about and before the merger process as one of the possible determinants of expected post-merger identification. Moreover, we will explore the issue of organizational identification for employees who are only indirectly involved in the merger process. Research data were collected about a pending merger within a regional police organization. Specific research questions and hypotheses pertain to the impact of (a) pre-merger identification, (b) sense of continuity, (c) expected utility of the merger, (d) communication climate before the merger, and (e) communication about the merger on the expected identification of employees with their new organization.

## 2.4 Organizational identification in mergers: antecedents and consequences

Organizational identification is rooted in social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1986), which starts from the presumption that (social) group membership is important in the creation and enhancement of the self-concept of people. Since people's work and occupational status often play a prominent part of their lives, it is plausible to assume that the company, the department, and even the daily workgroup is an important object for employees to identify with (cf. Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Ashforth and Johnson, 2001; Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004). Organizational identification can be described as 'the perception of oneness with or belongingness to an organization, where the individual defines him- or herself in terms of the organization(s) in which he or she is a member' (Mael and Ashforth, 1992, p.104). Organizational members (or employees) will identify more strongly with an organization when they experience similarities between the organizational identity and their own personal identity and when they feel acknowledged as a valued member. According to Albert and Whetten (1985), organizational identity is often latent. Only in times of considerable change — such as organizational restructuring, fast growth, mergers, or downsizing — will elements of organizational identity become salient. Organizational identification is considered important because it influences employees' willingness to strive for organizational goals (Elsbach and Glynn, 1996) to stay with the organization (Scott, Connaughton, Diaz-Saenz, Maguire, Ramirez, Richardson, Shaw and Morgan, 1999), to spread a positive image of the organization (Bhattacharya, Rao and Glynn, 1995), and to cooperate with other organizational members (Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail, 1994).

In merging organizations, when employees are urged to reconsider their (professional) identity vis-à-vis the new to-be-established 'in-group' (the new company or the new department within a company), group identification can be considered to be one of the key variables of success. It is therefore important to heed and influence the identification process. So what are the intervention instruments for the management of organizational identification in mergers? In the introduction, a brief summary was given of the antecedents of organizational identification that have already been reported in literature. These variables will be subsequently explained in more detail and relevant research findings will be discussed. The overview of previous research will not be restricted to empirical findings concerning organizational identification but also include the related concept of organizational commitment. Theoretically, the constructs of identification and commitment are not necessarily the same (cf. Mael

and Tetrick, 1992; Van Knippenberg and Sleebos, 2003; Van Dick, Wagner, Stellmacher and Christ, 2004): identification reflects the extent to which the organization membership is incorporated in the self-concept, whereas commitment focuses on the attitudes that employees hold towards their organization by considering costs and benefits (cf. Van Dick, Wagner, Stellmacher and Christ, 2004). Nevertheless, the findings of the organizational commitment studies are of interest here because the two constructs may - to a certain extent - overlap: there appears to be a strong relationship between employees' identification and their commitment (Witt, 1993; Siegel and Sisaye, 1997).

Based on research findings on identification and commitment, hypotheses were formulated for the present study with regard to five possible determinants of expected post-merger identification. The first determinant included in this study is pre-merger identification. Two other determinants focus on the expected outcome of the merger, both personal (sense of continuity) and organizational (expected utility of the merger). And two determinants involve the role of communication to facilitate the acceptance of the merger: the communication climate before the merger and communication about the merger.

#### **2.4.1 Pre-merger organizational identification**

As was already discussed, several studies have provided evidence that current identification may affect the eventual outcomes of the (post-merger) identification of employees (e.g. Bachman, 1993; Van Knippenberg et al., 2002; Van Dick, Wagner and Lemmer 2004). Remarkably, these studies appear to report a positive relationship between pre- and post-merger identification, whereas – based on social identity theory – one would expect a negative one, at least in situations in which existing group structures are threatened. After all, a merger can be seen as a threat to one's own group identity, involving uncertainties about the extent to which this current group identity will survive. Closer inspection of studies on post-merger organizational identification reveals that pre-merger identification is invariably measured in hindsight, and that it often pertains to the early identification with the new organization, instead of measuring the strength of current social bonds with the old organization. Even in the longitudinal identification study by Jetten, O'Brien and Trindall (2002), pre-merger identification was restricted to the early processes of identification with the new organization and no conclusions can be drawn as to the facilitation or inhibition of these processes by means of current group membership.

The only study that explicitly examines the relationship between in-group bias, pre-merger identification with the current organization and post-merger identification is an experimental study by Van Leeuwen, Van Knippenberg and Ellemers (2003). This

study demonstrates that the perceived identity change caused by the merger appears to play an important role in the relationship between pre-merger and post-merger identification. Findings indicate a clear relationship between the two types of identification but the direction of this relationship is dependent on the perceived identity fit between 'old' and 'new': when participants perceived only minor changes, the relationship was positive; when they experienced more drastic changes, pre-merger identification had a negative impact on post-merger identification. These results are perfectly in line with social identity theory: group members resist the infusion of new identities that are further distanced from them more strongly than they would those from closer by. On the basis of these findings, it seems plausible to assume that there indeed exists a relationship between pre-merger and post-merger identification and that this relationship is qualified by the perceived consequences of the merger in terms of the identity change.

In many realistic merger situations, employees may identify with the pre-merger organization on various levels (e.g. Jetten et al., 2002). They may, for instance, identify with their direct workgroup, or with the pre-merger organization at a more abstract, corporate level. We assume that social bonding and identification with the closest organizational circle (a relatively 'homogeneous' group) of co-workers will sooner lead to perceived distance when the group is 'threatened' of being infused by out-group members than when the identification target concerns a superordinate functional level in the organization (a more 'heterogeneous' group of colleagues). Hence, we predict that for identification with the superordinate level in the organization:

*The stronger the employees' identification with the present, pre-merger organization, the stronger they will expect to identify with the post-merger organization (Hypothesis 1).*

For the identification with relatively close and homogeneous workgroups we predict a difference in the results of the directly and the indirectly involved employees. For directly involved employees, the merger might imply major changes in their daily work, which may be perceived as a threat on the workgroup level. In that case the relationship between pre-merger and post-merger identification would be a negative one. For indirectly involved employees, the merger cannot possibly imply threats on their workgroup level, because they are not part of the actual merger. Therefore, a positive relationship between pre-merger and post-merger identification may be expected for them. Hence, we predict for identification with the workgroup level of the organization:

*The stronger the directly involved employees' identification with the present, pre-merger workgroup, the weaker they will expect to identify with the post-merger organization (Hypothesis 2).*

*The stronger the indirectly involved employees' identification with the present, pre-merger workgroup, the stronger they will expect to identify with the post-merger organization (Hypothesis 3).*

#### **2.4.2 Sense of continuity**

Sense of continuity, as defined by Rousseau (1998), concerns the personal consequences of the merger for the employees — e.g. will I have to move, will the nature of my job change, or will I even lose my job due to the merger? In the academic literature, many different terms have been used to refer to (aspects of) sense of continuity, such as 'feelings of uncertainty' (Jetten, O'Brien and Trindall, 2002), trust in merger (Haley, 2001), and various types of 'threat' (e.g. Bachman, 1993; Mottola, Gaertner, Bachman and Dovidio, 1997; Terry and Callan, 1998; Terry and O'Brien, 2001). Terry and Callan (1998) distinguished several sub-factors of perceived threat (stress, uncertainty about the consequences of the merger, and concerns about the impact of the merger), thus recognizing the multidimensional nature of sense of continuity.

In the research literature, empirical evidence was found stressing the importance of sense of continuity in merger processes. Bachman (1993) found a negative relationship between pragmatic threat and post-merger commitment and identification. Jetten, O'Brien and Trindall (2002) found in their research that sense of continuity (uncertainty) played an important role in the employees' feelings about the merger. The more uncertain employees were about the merger in the pre-merger phase, the more negative their feelings were about the forthcoming merger. In an experimental study, Mottola, Gaertner, Bachman and Dovidio (1997) investigated the influence of various determinants on organizational commitment. One of the determinants included in their study was 'employee threat', which was based on Bachman's (1993) 'pragmatic threat'. They found a negative relationship between the extent to which employees experienced personal threat caused by the merger and their post-merger organizational commitment. Terry and O'Brien (2001), too, found a negative correlation between perceived threat and organizational identification. The more respondents considered the merger to cause serious threats, the less they tended to identify with the new organization. Van Knippenberg, Van Knippenberg, Monden and De Lima (2002) did not investigate sense of continuity as such, but found that post-merger identification is stronger when consistency between past and future

identity is more salient. Based on their results, they expect that sense of continuity is an important factor for post-merger identification. Van Knippenberg and Van Leeuwen (2001) go even as far as to state that sense of continuity is a most crucial factor affecting the relationship between pre-merger and post-merger identification.

Based on all these earlier findings, it may be assumed that the employees' sense of continuity will have a positive effect on their expected post-merger identification. This results in the following hypothesis:

*The stronger employees' sense of continuity, the stronger they will expect to identify with the post-merger organization (Hypothesis 4).*

### **2.4.3 Expected utility of the merger**

The expected utility of the merger focuses on organizational change — e.g. will the organization indeed be more efficient, productive, viable due to the merger? In contrast to the attention for sense of continuity in the research literature, surprisingly little empirical evidence was found about the importance of expected utility in merger processes. Jetten, O'Brien and Trindall (2002), for instance, found that in the post-merger situation, employees' judgements about their team performance correlated positively with both their work-team and organizational identification. Bachman (1993) used the variable 'better opportunities', which comprised both utility of the merger and sense of continuity, since it referred to both personal and organizational advantages of the merger – e.g. 'Overall, the salary and benefits are better in the merged organization' and 'There is an improvement in policies and procedures in organization M'. She found a positive relationship between the ambiguous 'better opportunities' variable and organizational commitment and identification. Based on these preliminary findings, we predict that:

*The more positive the employees' expected utility of the merger, the stronger they will expect to identify with the post-merger organization (Hypothesis 5).*

### **2.4.4 Communication climate before the merger**

Organizational communication is generally considered to be crucial for organizational success (Hargie and Tourish, 2000). Kitchen and Daly (2002) even claim that supportive communication is the most important factor for the existence of an organization. The quality of organizational communication is often referred to in terms of communication climate, which can be described as 'a subjectively experienced quality of the internal environment of an organization; the concept embraces a general cluster of inferred predispositions, identifiable through reports of

members' perceptions of messages and message-related events occurring in the organization' (Dennis, 1974, p. 29). Communication climate thus largely consists of the perceptions employees have of the quality of relationships and communication within the organization (Goldhaber, 1993). Dennis divided communication climate into nine dimensions: supportiveness, openness and candour, participative decision making, trust, confidence and credibility, high performance goals, information adequacy, semantic information difference, and communication satisfaction.

Several researchers have empirically demonstrated the importance of communication climate or its underlying dimensions for employees' commitment (Welsch and LaVan, 1981; Trombetta and Rogers, 1988; Guzley, 1992), organizational identification (Scott, 1997; Smidts, Pruyn and Van Riel, 2001), and job satisfaction (Trombetta and Rogers, 1988). Welsch and LaVan (1981), for instance, found evidence for the relationship between communication variables and organizational commitment: participative decision making, motivation (i.e. supportiveness in Dennis' terminology) and goal setting all had a positive relationship with organizational commitment. Trombetta and Rogers (1988) established the importance of openness and information adequacy for employees' organizational commitment. Guzley (1992), too, found a positive correlation between communication climate (in particular participative decision making and clarity of the communication) and organizational commitment.

More recently, in a study by Smidts, Pruyn and Van Riel (2001), a clear relationship was found between communication climate and organizational identification. The perceived communication climate, sub-divided into three dimensions (i.e. openness, participation, and supportiveness), appeared to directly affect employees' organizational identification. The adequacy of the information supply within the organization, in turn, affected the perceived communication climate.

Perceptions of the quality of communication appear to be relevant for employees' commitment (Welsch and LaVan, 1981; Trombetta and Rogers 1988; Huff, Sproull and Kiesler, 1989; Putti, Aryee and Phua, 1990; Allen, 1992; Guzley, 1992; Treadwell and Harrison, 1994; Varona, 1996; Allen and Brady, 1997; Postmes, Tanis and De Wit, 2001), and their organizational identification (Scott, 1997; Scott, Connaughton, Diaz-Saenz, Maguire, Ramirez, Richardson, Shaw and Morgan, 1999; Wiesenfeld, Ragharum and Garud, 1999; Smidts, Pruyn and Van Riel, 2001). Most of the evidence, however, does not specifically concern merger situations. Furthermore, the multidimensional nature of communication climate in the context of mergers is

not fully acknowledged in the available research. Based on these earlier results, the following hypothesis was proposed in this study:

*The more positive employees' perceptions of the communication climate before the merger, the stronger they will expect to identify with the post-merger organization (Hypothesis 6).*

#### **2.4.5 Communication about the merger**

According to Jimmieson, Terry and Callan (2004), the information supply about (forthcoming) organizational changes may help to reduce the employees' feelings of uncertainty and threats caused by these changes. In turn, the reduction of these uncertainties among employees must be considered to be a crucial success factor for organizational changes. Other studies, by Bastien (1987) and Schweiger and Weger (1989) underline the importance of communication during merger processes.

Few studies have focused on the specific role of communication during merger processes. The results of these studies were mixed. In a longitudinal field experiment, Schweiger and DeNisi (1991) found that the quality and amount of communication about a merger reduced employees' perceptions of dysfunctional outcomes of the merger and contributed to the employees' commitment. Cornett-DeVito and Friedman (1995) investigated the relationship between communication and merger success in four organizations but did not find a clear relationship between the two. Bachman (1993) investigated the impact of management communication on identification with the merged organization, again without significant results. In a recent longitudinal study, Jimmieson, Terry and Callan (2004) found that change-related information plays a significant role during organizational changes. They did not measure organizational identification, but found that this information was a significant predictor of employees' well-being, customer-orientedness and job satisfaction during the first three months after implementation.

To sum up, there have been few research initiatives focusing on the role of communication during merger processes. Unfortunately they did not specifically address the relationship between communication and post-merger organizational identification. Moreover, the results of the available research are not unequivocal about the significance of the contribution of communication. Based on these results and on the general acknowledgement of the importance of communication during merger processes, we predict that:

*The more positive employees' perceptions of the communication about the merger, the stronger they will expect to identify with the post-merger organization (Hypothesis 7).*

## **2.5 Method**

### **2.5.1 Research setting**

The research was conducted in the context of a Dutch police organization. To enhance the effectiveness of crime prevention, police organizations are currently undergoing major organizational changes. Small and independent regional divisions are to be merged into larger supra-regional organizations.

The present study covers a forthcoming merger of three regional criminal investigation organizations (CIOs) into one new organization at the beginning of 2005. Data were collected six months prior to the merger. A total of 715 employees would be directly or indirectly involved in the merger at hand. 420 Employees would be directly involved: employed as they were in the three CIOs to be merged. The other 295 employees would only be indirectly involved: they worked in more local criminal investigation workgroups (CIWs). They would not merge into the new organization but would have to cooperate very closely with the new, post-merger organization. At the time of the data collection, the CIWs worked with one of the independent CIOs; after the merger, they would have to work with one and the same merged CIO. In the analyses, the two respondent groups were treated separately, because some of the variables could be measured on more levels for the directly involved employees than for those who were indirectly involved (cf. Measures).

### **2.5.2 Procedure for data collection**

For both respondent groups, data were collected using self-administered questionnaires. The questionnaires were sent to the entire population of employees that were directly or indirectly involved in the forthcoming merger.

To investigate the views of the directly involved employees, 420 questionnaires were sent to the employees of the three CIOs. The questionnaires were distributed via the CIO secretariats. They were accompanied by a letter of introduction describing the purpose of the study and asking the employees to participate. The total response time for the respondents was three weeks. Also, 295 questionnaires were sent to the (indirectly involved) employees of twelve CIWs. The questionnaires, accompanied by

a similar letter of introduction, were distributed via the CIW heads. Again, the response time was three weeks.

### 2.5.3 Measures

Apart from questions about the respondents' background, the questionnaire covered six topics: expected post-merger identification, pre-merger identification, sense of continuity, expected utility of the merger, communication climate before the merger, and communication about the merger.

Expected post-merger identification was measured using a 3-item scale based on Van Knippenberg, Van Knippenberg, Monden and De Lima (2002). A sample item was: 'I expect to feel strong ties with the new criminal investigation unit'. Scale reliability was high for both respondent groups (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .86$  and  $.78$ ).

Pre-merger workgroup identification was measured using an 11-item scale based on Mael and Ashforth (1992) and Smidts, Pruyn and Van Riel (2001). Sample items were: 'I feel strong ties with my workgroup', 'I am glad to be a member of my workgroup', and 'When I talk about my workgroup, I usually say *we*, rather than *they*'. Scale reliability was high for both respondent groups (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .91$  and  $.88$ ). In the case of the CIOs (directly involved employees), there was also a superordinate level (organization) with which employees could identify. Identification at the organizational level was measured using the 3-item scale adapted from Van Knippenberg, Van Knippenberg, Monden and De Lima (2002). Again, scale reliability was high (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .87$ ).

Sense of continuity was, in accordance with Bachman (1993), Terry and Callan (1998), Haley (2001) and Jetten, O' Brien and Trindall (2002), measured as a multidimensional construct. It was measured with a 17-item scale based on Bachman (1993). Sample items were: 'I expect my work to be more pleasant after the merger', 'I feel threatened by the merger', 'I feel a sense of insecurity because of the merger', and 'I expect the merger to have very few consequences for me'. Although the reliability of the scale was adequate for both respondent groups (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .77$  and  $.65$ ), exploratory factor analysis revealed three underlying factors, with a total explained variance of 70 percent. Four items had to be removed because they loaded  $.40$  or higher on more than one factor. The remaining 13 items could be categorized into the following factors: (1) expectations about the work content, (2) feelings of security about the merger, and (3) trust in the merger. The resulting scales were adequately reliable for both respondent groups (Cronbach's  $\alpha$  varying between  $.66$  and  $.84$ ).

Expected utility of the merger was measured using a 4-item scale that was specifically designed for this study. Sample items were: 'I expect an improvement in quality of services of the criminal investigation unit after the merger', and 'I expect an improvement in the cooperation between the CIOs and the CIWs after the merger'. For both respondent groups, the scales were reliable (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .86$  and  $.89$ ).

Communication climate was also measured as a multidimensional construct (cf. Dennis, 1974; Smidts, Pruyn and Van Riel, 2001). Communication climate before the merger was measured using a 9-item scale based on Dennis (1974) and Smidts, Pruyn and Van Riel (2001). Sample items were: 'Colleagues within the workgroup are honest with each other', 'Colleagues within the workgroup listen seriously to me when I talk to them', and 'My suggestions are taken seriously by my colleagues within the workgroup'. The reliability of this scale was high for both respondent groups (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .90$  and  $.88$ ). Again, within the CIOs, two organizational levels were distinguished. Besides the communication climate at the workgroup level, communication climate was also measured at the organizational level (CIO), using the same set of questions (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .91$ ). A separate set of 11 questions, based on Smidts, Pruyn, Van Riel (2001), focused on the communication climate between CIOs and CIWs. Sample items were: 'Communication between employees of CIOs and CIWs is open', 'Employees of CIOs and CIWs listen to one another sincerely', and 'I experience communication between CIOs and CIWs as motivating'. The reliability of this scale was high for both respondent groups (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .90$  and  $.88$ ).

Finally, communication about the merger was measured using a 19-item scale based on Dennis (1974). Sample items were: 'I think the information I receive about the merger is reliable', 'I am satisfied with the way I am informed about the merger', and 'I have the opportunity to put forward my own ideas about the merger'. Although the reliability of the scale was high for both respondent groups (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .96$  and  $.95$ ), exploratory factor analysis revealed three underlying factors, with a total explained variance of 69 percent. Two items had to be removed because they loaded  $.40$  or higher on more than one factor. The remaining 17 items could be categorized into the following factors: (1) satisfaction about information received concerning the merger, (2) participative decision making, and (3) reliability of information. This division of communication climate into three factors confirms the multidimensional nature of communication climate (Dennis, 1974). The resulting scales were reliable for both respondent groups (Cronbach's  $\alpha$  varying between  $.87$  and  $.94$ ).

#### **2.5.4 Sample and response rate**

Of the 420 questionnaires sent to the (directly involved) CIO employees, 121 questionnaires were returned. This was a response rate of 29%. The sample displays the following demographic characteristics: 76% of the respondents' age was over 40; males outnumbered females by 4:1; 85% had a non-management position; 41% had been employed in the CIO for more than 6 years; 25% had a college degree.

Of the 295 questionnaires sent to the (indirectly involved) CIW employees, 129 questionnaires were returned, which amounts to a 44% response rate. The sample displays similar demographic characteristics: 82% of the respondents' age was over 40; males outnumbered females by 4:1; 80% had a non-management position; 49% had been employed in the CIW for more than 6 years; 12% had a college degree.

We did not explicitly perform a non-response analysis, but the differences in response between the two employee groups might be explained by the length of the questionnaires. The directly involved employees were given a more extensive questionnaire.

## **2.6 Results**

### **2.6.1 Descriptive results and correlations**

Table 2.1 presents the means, standard deviations and scale inter-correlations of the dependent and independent variables for the (directly involved) CIO employees. The employees' expected post-merger identification was slightly above the midpoint of a five-point scale ( $m=3.36$ ). Their pre-merger identification with their workgroup was considerably higher ( $m=4.03$ ), but their pre-merger identification on the organizational level was more or less the same as their expected post-merger identification ( $m=3.32$ ). Furthermore, table 2.1 shows that all independent variables had a (moderately) positive score, with means varying from 3.18 to 3.84.

All but one independent variables correlated significantly with expected post-merger identification. The only variable without such a correlation was the employees' expectations about the work content. Current identification on the organizational level appeared to have the strongest correlation ( $r=.67$ ;  $p<.001$ ). Sub-factors of sense of continuity, communicate climate before the merger and communication about the merger showed significant inter-correlations as well.

Table 2.1 Mean, standard deviation, reliability and correlations among all variables for directly involved employees

Variable	Mean	(sd)	Alpha Reliability (# items)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Expected organizational identification	3.36	(.71)	.85 (3)	-												
2. Pre-merger organizational identification	3.32	(.74)	.87 (3)	.67**	-											
3. Pre-merger workgroup identification	4.03	(.56)	.91(11)	.44**	.47**	-										
4. Expected utility of the merger	3.34	(.69)	.86 (4)	.46**	.22*	.18	-									
<i>Sense of continuity</i>																
5. Expectations about the work content	3.34	(.56)	.66 (5)	.07	.17	.06	.07	-								
6. Feelings of security about merger	3.54	(.81)	.81 (4)	.20*	.13	.00	.32**	.43**	-							
7. Trust in merger	3.25	(.62)	.68 (4)	.48**	.25**	.24**	.62**	.29**	.69**	-						
<i>Communication before merger</i>																
8. Workgroup communication	3.84	(.51)	.90 (9)	.23*	.53**	.33**	.03	.14	.00	.00	-					
9. Organizational communication	3.38	(.51)	.90 (9)	.31**	.38**	.50**	.16	.23*	.06	.17	.53**	-				
10. Communication between CIOs and CIWs	3.23	(.50)	.90 (11)	.36**	.30*	.36**	.33**	.20*	.00	.16	.41**	.48**	-			
<i>Communication about merger</i>																
11. Information satisfaction	3.35	(.69)	.93 (8)	.25**	.25*	.30**	.25**	.18	.15	.20*	.15	.37**	.15	-		
12. Participative decision making	3.18	(.93)	.90 (3)	.38**	.26*	.30**	.23*	-.07	.16	.17	.11	.30**	.09	.73**	-	
13. Reliability information	3.46	(.59)	.90 (6)	.30**	.20*	.29**	.21*	.20*	.20*	.20*	.17	.40**	.16	.86**	.62**	-

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed), \* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). 5-point Likert scales were used for all measures

Table 2.2 presents the means, standard deviations and scale inter-correlations of the measures for the (indirectly involved) CIW employees. Their expected post-merger identification was slightly below the midpoint of the five-point scale ( $m=2.80$ ). Their pre-merger identification with their workgroup was high ( $m=3.98$ ). Table 2 shows that the independent variables varied between 2.47 (participative decision making) and 3.84 (workgroup communication).

Not all independent variables correlated with the employees' expected post-merger identification. Compared with the directly involved employees, the correlation between pre-merger and expected post-merger identification was low ( $r=.19$ ;  $p<.05$ ). Instead, especially expected utility of the merger ( $r=.63$ ;  $p<.001$ ) and the employees' trust in the merger ( $r=.59$ ;  $p<.001$ ) showed the strongest correlations.

Table 2.2 Mean, standard deviation, reliability and correlations among all variables for indirectly involved employees

Variable	Mean	(sd)	Alpha Reliability (# items)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Expected organizational identification	2.80	(.78)	.92 (3)	-										
2. Pre-merger workgroup identification	3.98	(.49)	.88 (11)	.19*	-									
3. Expected utility of the merger	2.98	(.74)	.89 (4)	.63**	.01	-								
<i>Sense of continuity</i>														
4. Expectations about the work content	3.50	(.69)	.84 (5)	-.11	.20*	.03	-							
5. Feelings of security about merger	3.63	(.69)	.80 (4)	.04	.07	.15	.30**	-						
6. Trust in merger	2.96	(.63)	.72 (4)	.59**	.03	.71**	.12	.40**	-					
<i>Communication before merger</i>														
7. Workgroup communication	3.84	(.45)	.88 (9)	-.15	.50**	-.23*	.27**	.04	-.28**	-				
8. Communication between CIOs and CIWs	3.04	(.52)	.88 (11)	.29**	.06	.03	.00	.07	.15	-.03	-			
<i>Communication about merger</i>														
9. Information satisfaction	2.78	(.67)	.94 (8)	.27**	.08	.15	.10	.22*	.29**	-.02	.38**	-		
10. Participative decision making	2.47	(.80)	.87 (3)	.16	.15	.08	.14	.18*	.21*	.04	.36**	.67**	-	
11. Reliability information	3.14	(.51)	.87 (6)	.28**	.12	.22*	.22*	.20*	.36**	.01	.41**	.73**	.57**	-

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed), \* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). 5-point Likert scales were used for all measures.

### **2.6.2 Differences between directly involved and indirectly involved employees**

The descriptive statistics, as presented in tables 2.1 and 2.2, showed that there may be differences between the two respondent groups. Using independent-sample t-tests, these differences were explored further. With regard to the employees' expected post-merger identification, a significant difference was found between the two groups ( $t=5.93$ ,  $df=246$ ,  $p<.001$ ). As could be expected, the employees directly involved had a stronger degree of post-merger identification than those indirectly involved.

There were no significant differences between the two groups for the following variables: (1) current workgroup identification, (2) feelings of security about the merger, and (3) workgroup communication before the merger. The indirectly involved employees judged more positively about work content ( $t=.99$ ,  $df=234$ ,  $p<.05$ ). Not surprisingly, they expected fewer changes in their own work content due to the merger.

The directly involved employees were more positive about the majority of the independent variables: (1) expected utility of the merger ( $t=4.11$ ,  $df=244$ ,  $p<.001$ ); (2) trust in the merger ( $t=3.62$ ,  $df=240$ ,  $p<.001$ ); (3) communication between CIOs and CIWs ( $t=2.91$ ,  $df=241$ ,  $p<.005$ ); (4) information satisfaction ( $t=6.53$ ,  $df=238$ ,  $p<.001$ ); (5) participative decision making ( $t=6.36$ ,  $df=228$ ,  $p<.001$ ); and (6) reliability of the information ( $t=4.49$ ,  $df=228$ ,  $p<.001$ ).

### **2.6.3 Determinants of expected post-merger identification**

The hypotheses regarding the relationship between expected post-merger identification and the determinants used in this study were tested using regression analysis. Table 2.3 shows the results of the regression analysis for the (directly involved) CIO employees. The determinants explained a considerable proportion of the variance of expected post-merger identification ( $R^2=.68$ ;  $p<.001$ ). Of the two levels of pre-merger identification, only organizational identification contributed significantly. This was the strongest predictor in the model. The model furthermore confirms the influence of the expected utility of the merger, sense of continuity, and communication about the merger. Of the sense of continuity sub-factors, only trust in the merger was a significant predictor. Of the sub-factors of communication about the merger, participative decision making had a positive influence on expected post-merger identification whereas information satisfaction contributed negatively: the more employees were inclined to identify themselves with the new organization, the less positively they judged the information about the merger. The communication climate before the merger was not a significant predictor of expected post-merger identification.

Table 2.3 Regression for impact (dependent variable – expected organizational identification); directly involved employees

Predictors	R (R <sup>2</sup> )	F (Sig)	B	β	T	Sig
	.83 (.68)	14.90 (.000)				
Pre-merger organizational identification			.54	.55	6.27	.000
Pre-merger workgroup identification			.02	.01	.16	.876
Expected utility of the merger			.23	.23	2.56	.012
Expectations about the work content			.06	.05	.64	.522
Feelings of security about merger			-.12	-.14	-1.38	.172
Trust in merger			.30	.28	2.56	.012
Workgroup communication			.06	.04	.54	.593
Organizational communication			-.08	-.06	-.65	.515
Communication between CIOs and CIWs			.09	.07	.86	.391
Information satisfaction			-.33	-.35	-2.34	.022
Participative decision making			.18	.24	2.30	.024
Reliability information			.18	.15	1.19	.239

Table 2.4 shows the regression results of the (indirectly involved) CIW employees. Again, the determinants explained a considerable proportion of the variance ( $R^2=.58$ ;  $p<.001$ ). Pre-merger identification, expected utility of the merger and sense of continuity again appeared to be significant predictors, although with different weights. The strongest predictor appeared to be the expected utility of the merger. Communication appeared to play a different role for the indirectly involved employees than for those directly involved. Communication about the merger had no significant effect on expected post-merger identification. Instead, one of the sub-factors of communication climate before the merger proved to be a significant predictor for this group.

Table 2.4 Regression for impact (dependent variable – expected organizational identification); indirectly involved employees

Predictors	R (R <sup>2</sup> )	F (Sig)	B	β	T	Sig
	.76 (.58)	13.51 (.000)				
Pre-merger workgroup identification			.27	.17	2.19	.031
Expected utility of the merger			.44	.43	4.40	.000
Expectations about the work content			-.13	-.12	-1.16	.111
Feelings of security about merger			-.17	-.15	-1.92	.057
Trust in merger			.43	.35	3.21	.002
Workgroup communication			.01	.00	.09	.930
Communication between CIOs and CIWs			.36	.20	2.62	.010
Information satisfaction			.12	.10	.88	.382
Participative decision making			-.07	-.07	-.74	.462
Reliability information			-.04	-.03	-.26	.799

## 2.7 Discussion

### 2.7.1 Conclusions about hypotheses

The hypotheses formulated were partly confirmed by the results of this study. For both (directly and indirectly involved) respondent groups, pre-merger identification appeared to be a significant predictor of expected post-merger identification. The first hypothesis (H1), regarding a positive relationship between pre-merger identification at the organization level (the police investigation force) and expected post-merger identification, was confirmed. This was measured for the directly involved CIO employees only, as the distinction between organizational and workgroup level could not be made in the considerably smaller CIWs. Results of this study corroborate earlier findings by Bachman (1993), and Van Knippenberg, Van Knippenberg, Monden and De Lima (2002), who studied the relationship between these constructs from a post-merger perspective.

The second hypothesis (H2) was not confirmed for directly involved employees. Pre-merger workgroup identification did not significantly affect the expected post-merger identification. Moreover, the correlation between the two appeared to be positive rather than negative. Thus, there is no evidence for a *negative* relationship between pre-merger workgroup identification and expected post-merger identification. This finding contrasts with earlier research by Jetten, O'Brien and Trindall (2002), as well as with the expectations based on social identity theory (cf. Tajfel and Turner, 1986). As was mentioned in the introduction, a negative relationship between pre-merger

workgroup identification and post-merger identification may be explained by the feelings of threat among employees caused by the merger. This seems to be a plausible explanation for our findings regarding the second hypothesis. After all, the directly involved employees appeared to have clearly positive feelings about the personal and organizational consequences of the merger (i.e. the sense of continuity and expected utility variables) and about the communication before and about the merger. Under such circumstances, it is imaginable that the forthcoming merger is not perceived as a threat to the pre-merger workgroup identity. This is in line with an earlier study by Van Dick, Wagner and Lemmer (2004), who explained similar results in a post-merger situation by referring to the employees' ability to at least partly continue their old identity in the new organization.

Another explanation may be found in the apparent compatibility of various identification levels in organizations. The extent to which employees identify with sub-group and superordinate levels of their organization appears to be strongly related to each other (Allen, 1996; Van Knippenberg and Van Schie, 2000). This presumed compatibility is in this study confirmed by the positive correlation between pre-merger workgroup and pre-merger organizational identification for the directly involved employees. The new, to-be-merged organization may be viewed as the addition of another level to the old, pre-merger organizations. Given the compatibility of identification levels, it may then be assumed that the employees' identification with this new level will, in principle, be a positive one, unless the new situation involves dramatic changes.

The third hypothesis (H3), regarding a positive relationship between pre-merger identification at the workgroup level and expected post-merger identification among indirectly involved employees, was confirmed. Identification processes during mergers have not been investigated before for indirectly involved employees. But this finding is in line with the general assumption discussed earlier that a positive relationship between pre-merger and post-merger identification may be expected when the merger does not involve severe feelings of threat among employees. In the case of indirectly involved employees, the forthcoming merger could not be expected to imply any threats at their workgroup level.

The fourth hypothesis (H4), regarding the employees' sense of continuity after the merger, was partly confirmed in this study. For both respondent groups, a positive relationship was found, but this only applied to one specific aspect of sense of continuity: a variable that was labelled as 'trust in the merger'. Again, this is consistent with earlier studies (e.g. Bachman, 1993; Mottola, Gaertner, Bachman and

Dovidio, 1997; Jetten, O' Brien and Trindall, 2002), but the results of this study suggest that it may be worthwhile to explore and subdivide the sense of continuity concept. What was remarkable, for instance, was that among the indirectly involved employees there was no relationship between 'trust' and the present identification with the organization but that trust is indeed strongly connected to the perceived advantages of the reorganization. The latter finding also applies to directly involved employees. However, for highly involved subjects trust is also related to the current strength of identification with both workgroup and corporate organization.

The fifth hypothesis (H5), on the positive impact of expected utility of the merger on future organizational identification, was confirmed for both employee groups. This is in accordance with earlier results by Bachman (1993) and Jetten, O' Brien and Trindall (2002). It warrants the conclusion that managers should emphasize the advantages of a merger in terms of efficiency and effectiveness in their communication with those involved. Present findings add to our understanding that the impact of perceived utility of a merger on identification is considerably stronger for indirectly involved employees than for directly involved employees. For the less involved subjects (indirectly involved employees) the expected utility even appears to be the strongest predictor of expected identification. It seems plausible that the expectations these employees had of the improvements in the organization they had to collaborate with was the most important factor in their feelings of involvement with the new organization, since the forthcoming merger had no other direct consequences for them. Thus far these data suggest that a segmented approach in the internal communication about a forthcoming merger may be feasible and rewarding by overemphasising the utility aspects in the communication with the less involved corporate members and focusing on the enhancement of the present corporate identification with directly involved employees.

The sixth hypothesis (H6), about the influence of the communication climate before the merger, could only be confirmed for the indirectly involved employees, and was restricted to the communication between members of their own CIW and the other workgroups before the merger. This finding is plausible. Since the CIW employees were not personally involved in the merger, they were obviously mainly interested in and focused on the effects that the merger would have on their own relationships with the affected members of the other workgroups. The lack of significant results for the directly involved employees may seem at odds with earlier research on the relationship between communication climate and organizational identification (Smidts, Pruyn and Van Riel, 2001). This might be explained by the specific merger context of this study: Smidts, Pruyn and Van Riel investigated the relationship

between communication climate and organizational identification in a less dynamic situation than a merger process. Still there appeared to be strong and meaningful, positive correlations between communication climate and current (pre-) and post-merger identification, both at workgroup as well as at corporate level, indicating that much of the shared explained variance in the regression model is probably used up by other predictors.

In the seventh hypothesis (H7), it was predicted that the perceived quality of the communication about the merger contributes to the employees' expected post-merger identification. This hypothesis was confirmed for the directly involved participants only. The more they were satisfied with the information and the more they felt participative in the decision making, the higher their expected identification. This confirms earlier findings of Schweiger and DeNisi (1991). Surprisingly, although there are positive correlations between perceived reliability and pre- and post-merger identification, the perceived reliability of the information does not seem to contribute much to the identification. Apparently, communication about the merger did not affect the expected post-merger identification of the indirectly involved employees. Although these employees indeed received information about the forthcoming merger, the quality of this information was probably less important to them as they knew they would not be part of the actual merger.

### **2.7.2 Conclusions about the moment of measurement**

An important overall conclusion that may be drawn from this study is that measuring *expected* post-merger identification can be a useful approach in academic and practical research into merger processes. Apparently, employees who are informed about a forthcoming merger do indeed develop a view about the extent to which they expect to identify with a new organization, even though the actual merger has not yet taken place. This is not only confirmed by the respondents' ability to answer the post-merger identification questions, but even more by the meaningful relationships that were found between expected post-merger identification and its determinants. After all, the results of this study show considerable similarities with earlier retrospective studies into the determinants of post-merger identification (e.g. Jetten, O'Brien and Trindall, 2002; Van Knippenberg, Van Knippenberg, Monden and De Lima, 2002; Van Dick, Wagner and Lemmer, 2004). This means that the 'hindsight bias' explanation for a positive relationship between pre-merger and post-merger identification does not hold. The fact that employees appear to be able to transfer their pre-merger identification to a post-merger situation can thus not be attributed to memory distortions and assimilation and coping strategies in the post-merger situation.

### **2.7.3 Involvement and post-merger identification**

Apart from testing the six hypotheses, the present study was also intended to explore differences between directly and indirectly involved employees in a merger. Obviously, the main focus in merger situations is on the employees who will be part of the new organization (or: unit). In many merger situations, however, there will also be stakeholders who will not become part of the new organization although they may be affected by it because they will be closely cooperating with it. This may for instance apply to independent organization units in a supplier or client role.

The results of this study show that the process of post-merger identification may differ for directly and indirectly involved employees. Not only do the directly involved employees expect to identify more strongly with the new organization, but, more importantly, also the impact of the various determinants appears to be different for both groups. The relationship between expected post-merger identification and its determinants can be characterized as pragmatic for both groups. However, whereas for the directly involved employees, this mainly concerned the way they perceived the changes in their work environment and the communication about the merger, the indirectly involved employees focused mainly on the relationship between their own organizational unit and the new, soon-to-be merged organization.

### **2.7.4 Management implications**

The positive relationship between pre-merger and (expected) post-merger identification suggests that the extent to which employees are able to identify with the current organization can be a crucial factor in merger processes. For directly involved employees, pre-merger identification is even the strongest predictor of expected post-merger identification. This implies, also from a merger perspective, that management should continuously focus on employees' identification with the current organization. A strong identification with a pre-merger organization, in particular at the level of the organization as a whole, may be expected to serve as a buffer in forthcoming merger situations. Identity management in merger situations should be a major management issue long before a forthcoming merger is manifest.

Of the factors that can be influenced during the merger process, especially the expected utility of the merger and the employees' trust in the merger appear to be highly relevant for both directly and indirectly involved employees. Thus it seems to be important for managers of organizations in a merger situation to monitor and influence the expectations employees have of the merger, both on a personal and on the organizational level. Communication is the most important tool that can be implemented to manage the employees' anticipations.

Besides the role communication may play in creating expectations among employees, there is also a direct relationship between organizational communication and expected post-merger identification. For directly involved employees, the quality of the communication about the merger appears to be an important factor. In particular, it appears to be important that employees are satisfied with the amount and quality of information received, as well as with the extent to which management listens to their needs and ideas during the merger process. The present study highlights the importance of distinguishing directly involved and indirectly involved stakeholders in merger processes. An important finding is that the two groups may have different communication needs in a merger process and that management should consequently adapt their communication strategies to accommodate this diversity.

### **2.7.5 Limitations of the study**

An important limitation of this study is its cross-sectional nature. Both expected post-merger identification and its determinants were measured only once, thus reflecting the situation at one particular point in time during a longer lasting merger process. It is therefore recommendable to be cautious with causal interpretations of the results. The determinants appear to explain a considerable proportion of the expected post-merger identification, but it may not be concluded, for instance, that increasing the employees' trust in the merger will automatically lead to a stronger post-merger identification.

A second limitation concerns the nature of the data collected. All measures included in this study were based on employees' self-reports. Since our variables of interest all referred to subjective evaluations or attitudes of employees, the collection of self-report data is inevitable. Yet it is debatable whether employees can really make a valid estimation of their future (post-merger) identification. The relationships found between the dependent and independent variables suggest that employees may indeed be capable of anticipating their own post-merger identification. However, this does not imply that the expected post-merger identification may be treated as an equivalent to actual post-merger identification.

A third limitation is that the study was restricted to one particular merger process. The data were collected in a Dutch police organization and it is open to debate whether the findings can be generalized to other organizational contexts. In our view, the study can best be characterized as a quasi-experimental case study. The quasi-experimental design deals with the comparison of directly and indirectly involved employees, and it deals with the comparison of different levels of abstraction in the identification (with the closest circle of the workgroup or with the organization as a whole). Thus for

present purposes, external validity and generalizability were considered to be of less importance.

### **2.7.6 Future research**

The relationship between (expected) post-merger identification and its determinants could be more extensively investigated by using a longitudinal research design with times series. An advantage of such an approach would be that the development of post-merger identification and its determinants can be studied which will give more insight into processes of severing the employees' pre-merger identification and their construction of a new, post-merger identification.

In the design of the present study, the role of communication was restricted to its direct relationship with expected post-merger identification. In a longitudinal study, the role of communication could be more fully investigated, connecting both its direct and indirect effects on post-merger identification (e.g. exploring the way communication affects employees' trust in the merger) with actual communication events in the organization.

Finally, it would be interesting to explore the differences further between directly and indirectly involved stakeholders in a merger. The present study shows that the two groups may have different demands regarding the communication about the merger, and differ in the way they identify with the new, soon-to-be merged organization. Since the majority of the research on merger processes only focuses on the directly involved stakeholders, the differences found in this study call for more research attention for the identification process of stakeholders with weaker social bonds.

# 3

## Multiple organizational identification levels and the impact of perceived external prestige and communication climate<sup>2</sup>

### 3.1 Abstract

Earlier studies have shown that perceived external prestige and communication climate influence organizational identification. In this paper we present the results of a study of the influence of communication climate and perceived external prestige on organizational identification at various organizational levels of a regional police organization. In total, 314 respondents filled out a questionnaire on communication climate, perceived external prestige and organizational identification. The results of this study show that communication climate has the strongest link with employee identification when it concerns the identification with the daily workgroup and a weaker one with the organization as a whole. It also appears that perceived external prestige has a stronger influence on the identification with the organization as a whole than on the identification at the more concrete organizational levels (such as department or workgroup). This research offers reasons to presuppose that organizational identification and communication climate are multiple constructs. If management wishes to influence organizational identification through a bottom-up process, it is wise to pay particular attention to the communication climate in the workgroups. Influencing organizational identification with the organization as a whole is better conducted through perceived external prestige.

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## 3.2 Introduction

Someone's identity is not solely defined by personal characteristics, but also determined by one's membership of groups or organizations (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Tajfel (1972, 31) defined this as social identity, or 'the individual's knowledge that he (or she) belongs to certain groups together with some emotional and value significance to him (or her) of the group membership'. Social identity theory is based on the idea that individuals prefer membership of groups that are evaluated more positively in comparison with other potential social categories (cf. Haslam, 2004). This would enhance their personal identity and contribute positively to their self-esteem. The process through which the identity is formed as a function of group membership is termed *group identification*. With organizational identification this implies a specific form of identification with a (formal) group, often the organization or company where one is employed. A common definition of organizational identification is that of Mael and Ashforth (1992, p. 104), 'The perception of oneness with or belongingness to an organization, where the individual defines him or herself in terms of the organization(s) in which he or she is a member'. The gist of this definition is that employees who feel one with the organization for which they work will also describe themselves in terms of the characteristics of the organization.

The degree to which employees truly feel part of the organization for which they work is a crucial factor in the successful running thereof. Time and again research has shown the importance of the degree to which employees identify themselves with their organization (Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004). Strong organizational identification leads, for example, to a more positive attitude towards the organization (Ashforth and Mael, 1989), a higher work satisfaction (Hall, 1972; Van Dick et al., 2004), a lower intention to leave the organization (Scott, 1999; Van Dick et al., 2004; Van Dick, Wagner and Lemmer, 2004), and even the willingness to make financial sacrifices (Mael and Ashforth, 1992). Also Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail (1994) argue that when employees identify themselves with the organization, they will show behaviour that is conducive to the organization.

Besides the importance of organizational identification to organizations, much research attention has thus far been paid to the factors that influence the degree to which employees identify with an organization. Antecedents of organizational identification include perceived external prestige (Bhattacharya, Rao and Glynn, 1995; Dutton et al., 1994; Smidts, Pruyn and Van Riel, 2001), perceived distinguishing ability of the organization (Mael and Ashforth, 1992), the degree of contact between employee and organization (Hall, Schneider and Nygren, 1970; Mael

and Ashforth, 1992), and the degree of overlap between organizational identity and personal identity in the employees' perception (Bergami and Bagozzi, 2000; Elsbach and Bhattacharya, 2001).

In various studies, the importance of communication is emphasized as an antecedent of organizational identification (DiSanza and Bullis, 1999; Riordan and Weatherly, 1999; Scott, 1997) or commitment (e.g. Allen, 1992). Insight into *how* communication influences identification processes is still limited, however (Smidts et al., 2001; Wiesenfeld, Raghuram and Garud, 1999). The impact of communication was initially and particularly studied in commitment research. These studies all appear to indicate a positive relationship between various dimensions of communication (climate) and organizational commitment (e.g. Guzley, 1992; Postmes, Tanis and De Wit, 2001; Trombetta and Rogers, 1988). Although, theoretically speaking, identification and commitment are not per definition one and the same (Mael and Tetrick, 1992; Meyer, Becker and Vandenberghe, 2004; Van Dick, Wagner, Stellmacher and Christ, 2004; Van Knippenberg and Sleebos, 2005), they are strongly related constructs (e.g. Gautam, Van Dick and Wagner, 2004; Siegel and Sisaye, 1997; Witt, 1993; Harris and Cameron, 2005). In a recently conducted meta-analysis (Riketta, 2005) over 96 studies, a large amount of shared variance between both constructs was reported. We therefore decided to include empirical evidence on organizational commitment in our study.

To date, the majority of research on organizational identification has focused on the organization as a holistic construct. Smidts et al. (2001), for example, address the influence of communication climate in the degree to which employees identify with the organization as a whole. Only a few recent studies on organizational identification view organizations as multiple entities (Foreman and Whetten, 2002; Johnson, 2002; Johnson, Morgeson, Ilgen, Meyer and Lloyd, 2006; Larson and Pepper, 2003). In these studies the emphasis is on the importance of distinguishing between several organizational levels with which employees might identify themselves. Little is known about the relationship between internal communication and (perceived) external prestige on the one hand, and multiple identities in an organization on the other.

This present study thus addresses the questions: (1) to what degree, and how differently, employees identify themselves with various organizational levels, and (2) to what degree the identification on these various levels is influenced by the communication climate of each level and/or the perceived external prestige. Whereas studies of the 'umbrella' organization have shown that communication climate and

perceived external prestige are defining factors for the degree to which employees identify with the organization as a whole (Smidts et al., 2001), this study addresses the influence of communication climate and perceived external prestige on identification with various organizational levels.

### **3.3 Multiple organizational identities**

Although little is still known about multiple organizational identities, the assumption that employees can identify with departments within their organization has been the focus of attention for quite some time (Albert and Whetten, 1985; Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Brickson, 2000; Pratt and Foreman, 2000; Rousseau, 1998). An organization can be seen as a melting pot of all kinds of sub-cultures and sub-identities. Ashforth and Johnson (2001) argue that it is partly due to modern working relations often being temporary (hence: job insecurity), that people are inclined to adopt all kinds of sub-identities. Although the concept that multiple identities in organizations actually exist is not new, empirical evidence for the relationships between these identities is limited (Foreman and Whetten, 2002) and not always unequivocal (Allen, 1996; Barker and Tompkins, 1994; Scott, 1997, Scott et al., 1999).

Multiple identities can manifest themselves in various ways in organizations. Identities can for example cut vertically through organizational levels, but might also manifest themselves in the form of the various organizational levels (Ashforth and Johnson, 2001). One example of a study based on the assumption of identities cutting right through the organization is that of Foreman and Whetten (2002). Respondents recognized two identities in their own organization and the overall branch organization to which they belonged, namely a family identity (with organizational characteristics such as traditions, symbols, ideology and altruism) and a business identity (with characteristics such as economic rationality, maximization of profit and self-interest). When identifying with the organization, it appeared that employees felt the urge to strengthen both the family and the business identity, whereas when identifying with the branch it was only the family identity that was emphasized. Foreman and Whetten (2002) concluded that there are sound reasons to assume that in organizations various identities are distinguished by employees.

A study of the division of identities in organizational levels is by Reade (2001), who found that in a multinational organization local identification was influenced more by local determinants (e.g. support of the immediate superior, local prestige and local distinguishing factors) than by multinational (global) determinants. It also appeared

that multinational identification was influenced more by multinational determinants than by local ones. At a global level, Reade found that in an international context local and 'umbrella' determinants influence local and 'umbrella' identification respectively. Whether such 'split organizational identities' can also manifest themselves on a smaller scale, in a national context, does not become clear from her study. Also Scott (1997) conducted research on the division of identities in various organizational levels. Scott studies how strongly employees, divided into three different organizational levels, identified themselves with these levels. One expectation was that personnel would identify more strongly with the level in which they themselves worked than with the other organizational levels. This expectation proved to be only partly correct. Scott did actually establish several differences in the strength of employee identification with the three organizational levels. It also appeared, however, that all the respondents identified themselves equally strongly with the umbrella organizational level, and that there are strong positive correlations in employee identification across the different organizational levels. In several other studies (Baruch and Winkelman-Gleed, 2002; Bartels, Douwes, De Jong and Pruyn, 2006; Scott et al., 1999; Van Knippenberg and Van Schie, 2000) it has since been shown that the stronger an employee identifies with a level in the organization, the stronger he or she also identifies with another organizational level.

There are, moreover, initial indications that the identification of employees with their closest organizational department (there where the daily duties are carried out) is experienced as being the most important (Moreland and Levine, 200; Riordan and Weatherly, 1999; Van Knippenberg and Van Schie, 2000). Ashforth and Johnson (2001) call this 'identity salience' and posit that an identity is more visible when it is 'closer' to the employee. In Van Knippenberg and Van Schie's study (2000) it not only appeared that identification was stronger with one's own workgroup than with the organization as a whole but also that workgroup identification was a better predictor of attitudes and behaviour (e.g. with regard to the organization. Also Bartels et al. (2006) and Riketta and Van Dick (2005) found that employees identified themselves more strongly with their own workgroup than with the organization as a whole. Riketta and Van Dick (2005) conducted a meta-analytical study on the impact of determinants of workgroup and organizational identification, in which they used data of 40 independent samples. They found that team-related variables, such as team climate perceptions, satisfaction with co-workers or supervisors, and altruistic behaviours were closely related to workgroup identification, whereas satisfaction with the organization, organization-related extra-role behaviour, or intentions to leave the organization, were more strongly related to organizational identification. Riketta and Van Dick (2005, 505) therefore concluded that 'the focus of attachment merits a

central role in attempts to explain differences in work-related attitudes and behaviours. In general, associations are stronger when the foci of attachment and potential outcome match than when they do not'.

### **3.4 Perceived external prestige and organizational identification**

Perceived external prestige concerns employees' perception of how the outside world views their organization. Various authors have emphasized the importance of perceived external prestige (PEP) to the organization (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991; Dutton et al., 1994). A number of studies have shown a correlation between PEP and organizational identification (Bergami and Bagozzi, 2000; Carmeli, 2005; Carmeli and Freund, 2002; Iyver, Bamber and Barefield, 1997; Mael and Ashforth, 1992; Smidts et al., 2001). These studies demonstrate that the more positively employees think that the status and prestige of their organization is viewed by the outside world, the more positive they are towards their organization and the stronger they identify with it. Furthermore, and in line with social identity theory, if organizational members see their organization as more respected or prestigious by important outsiders, organizational identification is more likely to take place, because it could increase someone's self-esteem (Dutton et al., 1994). Several researchers indeed found that the more prestigious employees perceive their organization, the greater the potential increase in self-esteem through identification (e.g. Bhattacharya et al., 1995; Fisher and Wakefield, 1998). One restriction of these studies, however, is that until now perceived external prestige has only been linked with the degree to which employees identify with the organization as a whole. On this subject, Carmeli (2005, p. 448) speaks of perceived external prestige as being 'a function of several criteria that represent the overall behaviour of the organization'. Carmeli thus approaches PEP as a global organizational construct. An area as yet uninvestigated is the influence of PEP on identification with underlying, more concrete organizational levels. Fisher and Wakefield (1998) propose that in order to influence employees' identification, organizations with a good reputation should emphasize on this, whereas organizations with less visibility should rather employ strategies to improve internal relationships between members. This enhances the idea that PEP could be more closely related to overall organizational levels or the organization as a whole than to smaller workgroups and departments that are less visible within the organization. Current study thus explores the multidimensional relationship between PEP and organizational identification at various organizational levels.

### 3.5 Communication climate and organizational identification

According to Redding (1972), the communication climate is crucial when creating an effective organization. A frequently used definition of communication climate is that of Dennis (1974, p. 29): 'A subjective experienced quality of the internal environment of an organization: the concept embraces a general cluster of inferred predispositions, identifiable through reports of members perceptions' of messages and message-related events occurring in the organization.' Communication climate can thus be defined as the perception of employees with regard to the quality of the mutual relations and the communication in an organization (Goldhaber, 1993). As a starting point for his research and to define the concept of communication climate and the related dimensions, Dennis (1974) posits that an ideal communication climate consists of eight dimensions: supportiveness, openness and candour, participative decision making, trust, confidence and credibility, high performance goals, information adequacy, semantic information difference, and communication satisfaction. His division is particularly and often used as a basis for further studies broaching the relationship between communication climate and *organizational commitment* (Allen, 1992; Allen and Brady, 1997; Guzley, 1992; Huff, Sproull and Kiesler, 1989; Postmes et al., 2001; Putti, Aryee and Phua, 1990; Treadwell and Harrison, 1994; Trombetta and Rogers, 1988; Varona, 1996; Welsch and LaVan, 1981). Studies in which the concept of communication climate is explicitly linked to *organizational identification* are rare (Bartels et al., 2006; Scott et al., 1999; Smidts et al., 2001). However, the findings of all of these studies do show that there is a positive relationship between communication climate and organizational identification (or commitment).

Some studies of the relationship between communication climate and *organizational commitment* or *organizational identification* have explored communication climate as a multidimensional construct, usually solely from the perspective of organizational commitment or identification with the organization as a whole. Seldom has research been conducted on the relationship between communication climate and commitment and identification at lower organizational levels (such as workgroups, departments, business units or divisions). Falcione and Kaplan (1984) have already claimed that organizations have more sub-systems of, for example, communication climate. They posit that the relationships between various constructs within an organization (such as communication climate, job satisfaction and productivity) should preferably be measured at the same level of analysis. If communication climate is measured at

workgroup level, so should the identification of employees also be measured at that level. Furthermore, a large body of research into the relationships among co-workers (e.g. in workgroups) – conducted in the area of team-member exchanges (TMX) (e.g. Seers, 1989; Seers, Petty and Cashman, 1995) - supports the idea that teams in organizations are crucial for organizational success. Specifically, the fact that TMX is positively linked to social cohesion in groups (Jordan, Field and Armenakis, 2002), job performance and organizational commitment (e.g. Liden, Wayne and Sparrowe, 2000), challenges the exploration of relationships between communication climate and employees' identification in such sub-units in the organization.

### 3.6 Hypotheses and expected model

This study presupposes that an identity in a specific organizational level is embedded in other more abstract levels of the organization (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Dukerich, Golden and Jacobson, 1996). Following Ashforth and Johnson (2001), the expectation is that there are both lower order identities (in this study *workgroup* and *department*) and higher order identities (in this context *business units* and *organizations as a whole*). These so-called 'nested identities' form 'a means-end chain (March and Simon, 1958) in that a given identity is both the means to a higher order identity and the end of a lower order identity' (Ashforth and Johnson, 2001, p. 32). In other words, the workgroup is part of the department, the department part of the business unit, and the business unit part of the organization. Lower order identities such as workgroup and department will generally be more visible and important than the more abstract identities such as business unit and organization (e.g. Kramer, 1991; Lawler, 1992; Scott, 1997). It is moreover expected that workgroup identification is experienced as the most visible (Van Knippenberg and Van Schie, 2000), thus forming the basis for identification with other organizational levels. Hence the following hypotheses were formulated on the basis of the aforementioned suppositions:

- 1a) Employee identification at workgroup level influences identification at department level, business unit level and organizational level.*
- 1b) Employee identification at department level influences identification at business unit level and organizational level.*
- 1c) Employee identification at business unit level influences identification at organizational level.*

Furthermore, and following the suppositions above, it is expected that sub-identities (as manifested in organizational levels) perceived by employees to be closely related,

will also be seen by them as similar. A possible consequence of this is that there will be a stronger correlation between more closely related sub-identities than when employees perceive sub-identities as being more separate. On the basis of these suppositions, the following hypothesis was formulated:

2) *The relationship between identifications with more closely related organizational levels is stronger than the relationship between identifications with organizational levels that are further apart from each other.*

On the basis of findings of Carmeli (2005) and Smidts et al. (2001), it can be concluded that perceived external prestige is connected with overall organizational identification. For this study, however, we expect that the more visible an identity with which the organization is compared to the outside world, the stronger the relationship is between PEP and identification. Hence the formulation of the following hypothesis:

3) *Perceived external prestige has a greater influence on identification with the organization as a whole than on identification at lower organizational levels.*

On the basis of differences in visibility between lower and higher order identities in an organization (Ashforth and Johnson, 2001), relationships found earlier between communication climate and organizational identification (Bartels et al., 2006; Scott et al., 1999; Smidts et al., 2001), and Reade's (2001) findings that identification can be predicted best when matched with antecedents on the same level of abstraction within the organization, we expect that identification with part of an organization can be explained better by the communication climate within that organizational unit than by the communication climate of another unit. For this study the following hypotheses were thus formulated:

4a) *Communication climate at workgroup level has a greater influence on identification with the workgroup than on identification with the department, the business unit or the organization as a whole.*

4b) *Communication climate at department level has a greater influence on identification with the department than on identification with the workgroup, the business unit or the organization as a whole.*

## 3.7 Method

### 3.7.1 Organizational context

In order to test the hypotheses a questionnaire study was carried out. The relationship between communication climate and several levels of organizational identification was investigated in various organizational units of a regional police organization. This organization comprises three business units. Employees have dealings with four organizational levels: their workgroup, their department, their business unit and the organization as a whole. The organization itself comprises three geographical business units, each sub-divided into six departments. Finally, each department consists of several workgroups which form the immediate vicinity for the employees' daily tasks. In total, 1100 questionnaires were sent out.

### 3.7.2 Procedure of data collection

This study made use of an electronic questionnaire and was conducted in December 2003. Employees received an e-mail from their immediate superior in which he/she gave a short description of the study and requested them to cooperate. Absolute anonymity was stressed and guaranteed in the introduction. Via a link at the bottom of the e-mail, employees accessed the questionnaire on intranet. Respondents had one week in which to reply. To increase the response, a reminder was sent out a week later, after which the respondents were given an extra week to complete the questionnaire.

### 3.7.3 Measurement instrument

Besides respondents' demographical background data, the questionnaire comprised three parts: (1) organizational identification, (2) communication climate, and (3) perceived external prestige. All the items of the questionnaire could be answered on the basis of 5-point Likert scales.

As in the study by Bartels et al. (2006), two related scales were used for organizational identification. Organizational identification at workgroup level and department level was measured with 3-item scales based on Van Knippenberg, Van Knippenberg, Monden and De Lima (2002). An example item was: 'I feel closely connected to my workgroup/department'. Both scales were sufficiently reliable (Cronbach's  $\alpha_{\text{workgroup}} = .75$  and Cronbach's  $\alpha_{\text{department}} = .82$ ). Identification at both business unit and organizational level was measured with 11 items based on Mael and Ashforth and (1992) Smidts et al. (2001). Example items were: 'If someone criticizes [name organization], I take it personally', 'I am very interested in what others think about [name organization]', and 'When I talk about [name organization], I usually

speak of *we* and not *they*'. The reliability of the scales was high (Cronbach's  $\alpha_{\text{business unit}} = .93$  and Cronbach's  $\alpha_{\text{organization}} = .90$ ). The 3-item scale by Van Knippenberg et al. (2002) which was used to measure identification at workgroup and department level is a shorter version of the 11-item scale used to measure identification at business unit and overall organizational level. This was done to avoid a lengthy questionnaire with highly similar items. Bartels et al. (2006) proved both scales to be reliable.

Communication climate was measured with two 9-item scales based on Dennis (1974) and Smidts et al. (2001). Communication climate was sub-divided into: (1) climate workgroup level, and (2) climate department level. Example items were: 'Generally speaking, everyone at [name organization] is honest with one another', 'If I talk with colleagues at [name organization], I feel I am being taken seriously', and 'Colleagues at [name organization] genuinely listen to me when I say something'. The reliability of the communication climate scales was high (Cronbach's  $\alpha_{\text{workgroup}} = .87$ , Cronbach's  $\alpha_{\text{department}} = .90$ ).

Perceived external prestige was measured with a 3-item scale based on Smidts et al. (2001). Scale items were: '[Name organization] has a good reputation', '[Name organization] is regarded as pleasant to work for', and 'When talking with family and friends about [Name organization] they often display a positive attitude towards [Name organization]'. The reliability of the scale was sufficient (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .78$ ).

#### **3.7.4 Sample and response**

Of the total 1100 e-mails sent, 314 useful questionnaires were eventually returned. This was a response percentage of 29%. Although several authors (Badger and Werret, 2005; Krosnick, 1999; Keeter and Miller, 2000) have claimed evidence that a response rate of 20-40% should be accurate to be representative for the target group, we were disappointed with the high non-response rate. Post-hoc inspection and interviews revealed that: (1) the email-database was poorly up-dated and (hence) there was a considerable number of 'blind targets' in the sample, and (2) two weeks' time for response might have been too short for a population of policemen that is frequently involved in long-term fieldwork projects or external training, during which they hardly appear to use internet.

Respondents had the following demographical characteristics: 60% was older than 40 years, the ratio male/female was 4:1, 80% of the respondents had been employed there for more than 5 years, 20% had a college degree. These demographics are representative of the composition of this regional police organization (as was checked

by means of the Annual Report and the Annual Central Data (2004) of the police organization.

## 3.8 Results

### 3.8.1 Descriptives

Table 3.1 shows the means, standard deviations and correlations of all variables. What is striking is that the means are reasonably high and also that all variables correlate with one another. For example, if employees identify themselves with their workgroup, they also identify with the department to which the workgroup belongs. The relationship between workgroup identification and department identification and the relationship between business unit identification and organizational identification appear to be the strongest. Perceived external prestige appears to correlate the strongest with organizational identification and lesser so with identification at other organizational levels. Communication climate correlates with identification at the various organizational levels. What catches the eye, here, is that communication climate at workgroup level correlates the strongest with identification at workgroup level. Communication climate at department level correlates strongly with both identification at department level and identification at workgroup level.

Due to the high mutual correlations between the communication climate at workgroup and department level, it was decided to inspect the risk of common method bias before testing the ultimate model. A number of techniques were used to find out if the measured constructs consisted of one joint factor or, as was expected, of more factors. First, a Harman's single-factor test was carried out by conducting an exploratory factor analysis for all used items in the study. This is the most commonly used test to discover common method bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee and Podsakoff, 2003). The exploratory factor analysis showed that there were clearly more factors responsible for the explained 69% variance. Subsequently, in the Amos program (Arbuckle, 2003), and by means of a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), it was investigated whether all measured constructs yielded a one-dimensionally fitting model. CFA showed that this was by no means the case ( $\chi^2 = 287.11$ ,  $p = .00$ ;  $GFI = .78$ ;  $CFI = .70$ ;  $TLI = .55$ ;  $RMSEA = .25$ ). Since the correlation between communication climate at workgroup and department level turned out to be the strongest, a model was tested in which communication climate was seen as one-dimensional. If both communication climate scales (at workgroup and department level) were combined as predictor in the model to form one construct, the model did not fit ( $\chi^2=22.59$ ,  $p=.00$ ;  $GFI=.98$ ;  $CFI=.96$ ;  $TLI= .89$ ;  $RMSEA=.11$ ). So, despite the

strong correlation between both scales for communication climate, the two dimensions for communication climate (at workgroup and department level) were used for subsequent analyses.

*Table 3.1 Means, standard deviations and correlations between various levels of identification and communication climate (N=314)*

Variables	Mean	(SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Perceived external prestige	3.79	(.44)	-						
Organizational identification	3.65	(.51)	.51**	-					
Business unit identification	3.37	(.64)	.22**	.53**	-				
Department identification	3.77	(.70)	.13*	.34**	.38**	-			
Workgroup identification	3.46	(.69)	.15**	.36**	.37**	.55**	-		
Communication climate at department level	3.78	(.52)	.19**	.25**	.17**	.51**	.53**	-	
Communication climate at workgroup level	3.84	(.53)	.17**	.22**	.11*	.44**	.55**	.83**	-

\*\* Correlations are significant at  $p < .01$  (2-sided), \* Correlations are significant at  $p < .05$  (2-sided), 5-point Likert scales were used for all scales.

### 3.8.2 Testing the expected model

Structural equation modeling was then used to test Hypotheses 1-4. In Amos, a path analysis was carried out to chart the expected indirect and direct effects. Figure 3.1 shows an overview of the latent variables that influence the dependent variable, overall organizational identification. All shown relationships between the variables are significant at  $p < .05$  with the exception of the relationship between department identification and organizational identification ( $p = .10$ ). First a comparison was made between the model with and without PEP. Both models show a reasonable fit. Although the model without PEP fitted slightly better ( $\chi^2 = 12.85$ ,  $p = .025$ ;  $GFI = .98$ ;  $CFI = .99$ ;  $TLI = .97$ ;  $RMSEA = .071$ ) than the model with PEP ( $\chi^2 = 26.21$ ,  $p < .05$ ;  $GFI = .98$ ;  $CFI = .98$ ;  $TLI = .96$ ;  $RMSEA = .078$ ), the sufficiently fitting model with PEP was used to test the hypotheses.

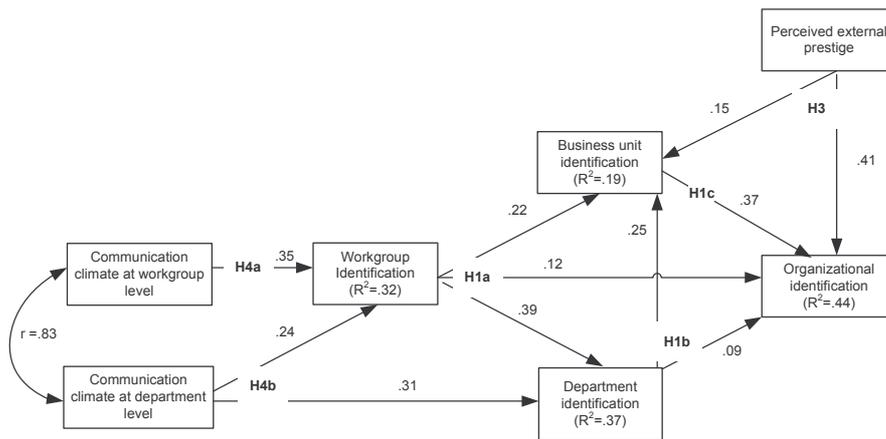
As can be seen in the Figure, Hypothesis 1a was confirmed. Workgroup identification is the strongest direct predictor of department identification, a less strong predictor of business unit identification, and an even less strong predictor of overall organizational identification. Hypothesis 1b was partly confirmed. Department identification was the strongest predictor of business unit identification and only a marginally significant predictor of overall organizational identification. Business unit identification appeared a strong predictor of overall organizational identification. Hypothesis 1c was thus confirmed. There is therefore a positive relationship between employee identification at workgroup, department, business unit and organizational level, whereby the

relationships are stronger between the more closely related organizational levels than between those levels that are further apart. Fisher's Z-tests were conducted to compare regression weights for Hypothesis 2. Three of the four comparisons were significant at  $p < .05$ . The only relationship that did not differ significantly was between workgroup identification and the two highest organizational levels of identification. The Fischer's Z test did not confirm that the relationship between workgroup and business unit identification ( $\beta = .22$ ) was stronger than the relationship between workgroup and organizational identification ( $\beta = .12$ ), despite the higher  $\beta$  coefficient in the model. Hypothesis 2 could thus be confirmed for the majority of the comparisons, and we may indeed conclude that there exists a stronger correlation between identifications with more closely related organizational levels than between identifications with levels that are further apart from each other.

Perceived external prestige has a greater influence on overall organizational identification than on business unit identification. PEP causes an increase of the explained variance of overall organizational identification from 32% to 44%, whereas the explained variance of business unit identification increases by only 1%. PEP has no significant influence on department and workgroup identification. Hypothesis 3, in which it was posited that PEP has more influence on identification with the organization as a whole than on identification with lower organizational levels is hereby confirmed. Fisher's Z-test showed a significant difference between the two regression weights ( $\beta = .14$ ;  $\beta = .41$ ) at  $p < .01$ .

Hypothesis 4a, in which it was posited that communication climate at workgroup level is a stronger predictor of identification at workgroup level than of identification at other organizational levels was also confirmed by the findings. Figure 3.1 shows that communication climate at workgroup level is a significant direct predictor of workgroup identification. Communication climate at workgroup level had no direct or only an indirect influence on identification with the other organizational levels (department, business unit and the organization as a whole).

Finally, Hypothesis 4b was partly confirmed. Communication climate at department level has indeed a greater influence on department identification than on business unit identification and identification with the organization as a whole (the latter two relationships are non-existent, as can be seen in Figure 1). Comparing the influence of communication climate in the department on department identification to its influence on workgroup identification, the difference between the two regression weights ( $\beta = .31$ ;  $\beta = .24$ ) was in the expected direction. The Fisher's Z-test failed to reach significance, however.



Note: Parameters above the arrows represent standardized coefficients (Betas).

Figure 3.1 Relationship between communication climate, perceived external prestige and identification

### 3.9 Discussion

#### 3.9.1 Major conclusions

With regard to communication climate it can be said that at a certain organizational level it need not per definition have the same impact on identification at other organizational levels. In other words, the appraisal of a pleasant working atmosphere in one's workgroup or within one's department does not necessarily imply that one identifies oneself strongly with the organization as a whole. Indeed, communication climate appears mainly to have a strong influence on identification with the specific sub-identity of the organization in which the communication takes place. A clearly positive relationship between communication climate and organizational identification thus appears to exist. This confirms the study of Smidts et al. (2001). This relationship could however be refined more than has been empirically investigated to date. Apparently, with employees' identification with the organization as a whole, other factors play a role than with workgroup or department identification (e.g., Reade, 2001). As expected, external factors such as PEP appear to have a greater influence on overall organizational identification whereas internal factors, such as perception of the internal communication, appear to have a greater influence on identification with close-related organizational levels such as the workgroup and

the department. In short, this study has increased the insight into the relationship between sub-identities in organizations, refined the notion of the influence of communication climate on identification, and confirmed the influence of PEP on identification at higher levels of the organization.

### **3.9.2 Management implications**

As employees' organizational identification influences behaviour that is conducive to the organization, it is vital that managers gain insight into the antecedents of identification. Managers should take into account the fact that an organization can be composed of a variety of identities. Identifying oneself with a specific workgroup, such as the one in which one works daily, is clearly different from identification with the possibly further removed organization as a whole. It appears that when a person identifies him-/herself strongly with the workgroup, this has positive consequences on identification with other, more remote organizational levels. Management should thus be aware of the presence of identities at and employees' identification with different organizational levels.

Perceived external prestige is important for creating a kind of overall feeling of oneness or team spirit. If employees have the idea that their organization is seen by the outside world in a positive light, this will yield a certain degree of pride. Employees are then all too willing to pursue the mission and goals of the organization. Communicating both the organization's outside achievements and the appreciation of the outside world on its importance as an organization might well augment the overall organizational identification.

In order to achieve stronger identification, internal communication management should concentrate more on the quality of the workgroups and departments within the organization. After all, perception of the communication climate at these levels of the organization appears to be a strong predictor of a sense of involvement. Indirectly this will eventually yield a relevant contribution to the involvement of the employees with the entire organization.

If management wishes to influence organizational identification through a bottom-up process, it is thus wise to consider monitoring the communication climate in the workgroups. When influencing organizational identification with the organization as a whole, it is better to emphasize in communications the degree to which the organization – in the employees' eyes – is positively regarded by the outside world (PEP).

### **3.9.3 Restrictions of the study**

A serious restriction is the cross-sectional nature of this study. The variables in this research were measured at one given moment. This implies that the present results represent a specific situation in time. Although the results would seem to confirm most of the hypotheses, one must be careful when interpreting the results with regard to the causality of correlations found.

As is often the case with such questionnaire research, the nature of the collected data is restrictive. All constructs were measured on the basis of the respondents' self-reporting. All the questions referred to the employees' personal perception. The results of this study are thus dependent on the degree to which employees can assess how for example the outside world views their organization.

A third restriction is the fact that only one organization was involved in this study. In order to get a better idea of the multidimensional relationships between communication climate, PEP and organizational identification, it is necessary to conduct research in more organizations. It must be said, however, that in earlier studies, in which other organizations were involved, roughly the same relationships were observed (Iyver et al., 1997; Carmeli and Freund, 2002; Smidts et al., 2001).

Finally, in research on identification there appears to be a growing interest in the visibility of a certain identity: identity salience (Callero, 1985; DeGarmo and Forgatch, 2002; Haslam, Oakes, Reynolds and Turner, 1999; Randel, 2002; Shapiro, Furst, Spreitzer and Von Glinow, 2002; Van Dick, Wagner, Stellmacher and Christ, 2005). In the present study, we measured identification at different organizational levels. We assumed that if employees identified stronger with a certain organizational level, this level was more salient to them. We did, however, not explicitly measure identity salience.

### **3.9.4 Future research**

This study approaches communication climate as a multidimensional construct. This is in line with Postmes (2003), who sees communication as a mix of complex multidimensional constructs. In two organizational levels, communication climate was measured according to Dennis' dimensions of communication climate (1974). The emphasis in this research was more on the sub-division of communication climate in various organizational levels than on the intrinsic multidimensionality of Dennis' dimensions (1974). It is possible that if the intrinsic dimensions of communication climate were taken more into account, a greater distinction of the

influence of communication climate at various organizational levels would become apparent.

For PEP, too, a more refined image would arise if in future research it was approached as a multidimensional construct. In large, complex organizations it is feasible for differences to exist between departments or divisions on the way one sees one another. It is quite possible that at another organizational level than the overall one, PEP has an influence on different sub-identities in the organization. In other words, employees might well find it not only important how the outside world sees them (the organization), but also how the outside world sees their role in that organization: their workgroup or department. One could therefore consider extending the measurement of reputation by introducing PIP, the perceived *internal* prestige.

If the presence of various kinds of PIP in organizations were to be taken as a starting point, it is quite feasible that insight into the visibility of internal 'we-they'-relations will become more important. Van Dick et al. (2005) argue that salience of a certain organizational identity or level could lead to acting according the norms of this specific organizational level. These norms could differ from norms of the umbrella organization. So, in order to answer the question how employees are able to compare a closely related identity of their own workgroup with an identity further removed in the organization, it will be interesting in future research to specifically ask after the visibility of a certain identity for employees.

To conclude, it would also appear of interest in future organizational research to consider organizations more as a melting pot of multiple identities. In this day and age, with its short-term relationships between employees and organizations, the notion that organizations are holistic entities appears to fall short of the reality in organizations.

# 4

## Pre-merger and post-merger identification<sup>3</sup>

### 4.1 Abstract

Earlier studies have shown that perceived external prestige, communication climate, and job satisfaction influence overall organizational identification. This paper presents the results of a longitudinal study into the determinants of organizational identification at two organizational levels during a merger. Respondents filled out a questionnaire on communication climate, perceived external prestige, job satisfaction and organizational identification four months before the merger (T1) and two years after the merger (T2). Results indicate that pre-merger identification primarily influences post-merger identification at the same organizational level. Furthermore, determinants of overall organizational identification differ from the determinants of employees' identification with a lower organizational level. Internal communication climate was especially important for the identification with the lower organizational level. Perceived external prestige only played a role in employees' identification with the overall organization. This study offers management implications for monitoring employee identification both in times of mergers and in general.

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## 4.2 Introduction

The idea of employees identifying with their organization has been of academic interest for many years (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). People who strongly identify with their organization tend to have positive attitudes towards the organization (Mael and Ashforth, 1992), have less intention to leave the organization (Van Dick et al., 2004a), are more satisfied with their job (Van Knippenberg and Van Schie, 2000), show more organizational citizenship behaviour (Bergami and Bagozzi, 2000; Christ et al., 2003; Feather and Rauter, 2004) and cooperate more intensively with other organizational members (Dutton et al., 1994).

Especially in current and hectic organizational life of change (e.g. mergers and acquisitions), identity issues become salient (Cartwright and Cooper, 1993; Haunschild et al., 1994; Terry and Callan, 1998; Van Knippenberg et al., 2002). Several studies have shown that mergers may fail because of employees' feelings of threat to individual self-esteem and well-being (Cartwright and Cooper, 1993; Callan et al., 1994), uncertainty about how the changes will affect their work (Ashford, 1988), and employees holding on to old pre-merger identities (Blake and Mouton, 1985; Buono and Bowditch, 1989). In contrast, positive identification with the newly merged organization has proven to be a crucial factor in explaining successful merger processes (Bachman, 1993; Van Knippenberg et al., 2002).

Several studies have focused on the relevance of identification in merger contexts. According to these studies, a strong pre-merger identification contributes to post-merger identification (Van Knippenberg et al., 2002; Jetten et al., 2002; Van Leeuwen et al., 2003; Van Dick et al., 2004c; Van Dick et al., 2005; Van Dick et al., 2006; Bartels et al., 2006). Most of these studies only focused, however, on one organizational level of identification in both the pre-merger and the post-merger situation. They typically highlight the degree to which employees identify themselves with the original organization as a whole, in relation to their identification with the newly merged organization as a whole.

So far, only two studies have differentiated between organizational levels of identification in the pre- and/or post-merger situation. Bartels et al. (2006) investigated the merger of a police organization, and included in their pre-merger measurements not only the employees' identification with the merging units but also their identification on a *subordinate* (workgroup) level. They found that only the pre-merger identification with the original units had a positive relationship with post-merger identification. Jetten et al. (2002) measured two levels of identification in the

pre- and post-merger situation. In investigating a work-team restructure within an organization, they not only measured pre- and post-merger work-team identification, but also included a *superordinate* level of organizational identification. In their analysis, they focused on the prediction of organizational identification only, and found that pre-merger organizational identification was the strongest predictor of post-merger organizational identification and pre-merger work-team identification made a negative contribution. A nearly significant interaction effect indicated that the negative effects of work-team identification only applied to employees with low degrees of organizational identification before the work-team restructuring.

More in general, the awareness has grown that organizational identification research should incorporate various levels within an organization that employees may identify themselves with (Albert and Whetten, 1985; Rousseau, 1998; Brickson, 2000; Pratt and Foreman, 2000; Johnson et al., 2006). Van Knippenberg and Van Schie (2000) specifically tested the importance of identification at different organizational levels. They used work-group identification and organizational identification in two different organizations but only found positive correlations between the two levels of identification in one of the two organizations. Based on their findings, they conclude that understanding the organizational attitudes and behaviour has much to gain by an open eye for the multiple foci of identification that are associated with organizational membership, and that managerial practice may benefit from an increased focus on the workgroup.

Riketta and Van Dick (2005) conducted a meta-analytical comparison of the strength and correlates of workgroup versus organizational identification and commitment. Among the thirty-eight studies included in their analysis, they found a strong positive correlation between workgroup and organizational identification. In spite of the high correlation, they also found that the two levels of identification differed in their relationship with other organizational variables. Workgroup identification was relatively strongly related to workgroup climate, workgroup satisfaction, and extra-role behaviour within the workgroup; organizational identification corresponded relatively strongly with organizational climate, organizational satisfaction and extra-role behaviour towards the organization.

More specifically, research has shown that the levels of identification may be due to different antecedents. Reade (2001) found in a multinational organization that employees' local identification was mainly affected by local characteristics, and that their identification with the overall organization was primarily influenced by global determinants. Bartels, Pruyn, De Jong, and Joustra (forthcoming) investigated the

identification at four organizational levels (workgroup, department, business unit and overall organization level). They found positive correlations between all four organizational levels of identification, but also established significant differences in the determinants of identification at the various levels. For employees' identification with workgroups and departments, the main predictor was the communication climate at the level concerned. For their identification with the overall organization, and to a lesser extent with business units, perceived external prestige turned out to be an important predictor.

In all, earlier research involving multiple levels of identification has shown that employees' identification with various organizational levels is often highly correlated. Nevertheless, two findings underline the importance of distinguishing between organizational levels in identification research. First, in specific situations (such as mergers), the relationship between employees' identification at various organizational levels may be less straightforward. Second, it appears that the determinants of identification may vary across organizational levels. The distinction between organizational levels is especially of interest in merging processes where the *superordinate* level of an organization remains stable, whereas one or more of the subordinate levels are restructured.

Another limitation of the research on identification in merger contexts is that the majority of the studies is cross-sectional: despite the fact that mergers are (often) lengthy processes, most studies have restricted their data collection to one particular moment in the process. Generally speaking, researchers have measured pre- and post-merger identification and possible determinants in a post-merger situation. Bartels et al. (2006) chose a different perspective and measured the pre-merger identification, other determinants, and expected identification with the new organization in a pre-merger situation. The cross-sectional nature of these studies can be a serious restriction for conclusions on causal relationships (e.g. Wong and Law, 1999; MacCallum and Austin, 2000; Lindell and Whitney, 2001). The only study into organizational identification in a merger context with a longitudinal approach was the aforementioned study by Jetten et al. (2002). Apart from that, Schweiger and DeNisi (1991) conducted a comprehensive longitudinal study on the related topic of organizational commitment during merger processes.

This paper describes a study that was designed to overcome the two limitations which were identified in the existing literature on identification during merging processes. We conducted a longitudinal study into the determinants of pre- and post-merger organizational identification. Furthermore, two organizational levels were included in

the measurement of identification and its determinants. As such, the study is in line with the earlier study by Jetten et al. (2002), albeit with three major differences. First, we focus on the prediction of employees' post-merger identification at two organizational levels, whereas Jetten et al. only tried to predict post-merger identification with the overall organization. Second, our study occurs on a different organizational scale: Jetten et al. studied the merger of small work-teams within an organization (17 to 22 employees), whereas our study involves the merger of university faculties (150 to 200 employees). Third, we focus on different determinants of identification, with a strong emphasis on communication variables.

We studied university and faculty identification in relation to two communication-related determinants: *communication climate*, referring to internal communication processes, and *perceived external prestige*, referring to employees' perceptions of how the outside world views their organization. These variables were complemented with an influential non-communication work-related attitude that has most often been used as a correlate of organizational identification: *job satisfaction*. All variables were measured four months before the actual merger took place, as well as two years after the merger. Before describing the design and the results of our study, we will first briefly discuss earlier findings on the impact of the determinants used.

### **4.3 Determinants of identification as a function of a merger**

In organizational behaviour literature various determinants have been related to organizational identification (cf. Riketta, 2005; Riketta and Van Dick, 2005). Various types of determinants may be distinguished: demographic variables (e.g. tenure, age, job level, gender, educational level), characteristics of the merger process (e.g. sense of continuity, communication about the merger), and pre-or post-merger organizational characteristics (e.g. communication climate, organizational prestige, job satisfaction). In our study, we focused on the latter category.

In our overview of the determinants, we will discuss earlier research on identification, both in merger and status quo contexts, as well as research on organizational commitment. Although theoretically, commitment and identification can be seen as different constructs (Van Dick 2004; Van Knippenberg and Sleebos, 2005), they often show a strong overlap (Ashforth and Saks, 1996; Gautam et al., 2004; Van Dick, 2004; Harris, 2005; Riketta, 2005). Hence our including empirical evidence with regard to organizational commitment in this study.

### 4.3.1 Communication climate

Communication climate is defined as ‘a subjective experienced quality of the internal environment of an organization: the concept embraces a general cluster of inferred predispositions, identifiable through reports of members perceptions’ of messages and message-related events occurring in the organization’ (Dennis, 1974: 29). In general, several studies have shown that organizational communication variables have a significant impact on the extent to which employees identify with their organization (Scott et al. 1999; Wiesenfeld et al. 1999; Smidts et al., 2001). Similar results were found in organizational commitment research (Welsch and LaVan, 1981; Trombetta and Rogers, 1988; Huff et al., 1989; Putti et al., 1990; Allen, 1992; Guzley, 1992; Treadwell and Harrison, 1994; Varona, 1996; Allen and Brady 1997; Postmes et al., 2001).

In a merger context, only one study has thus far included communication climate as one of the determinants. Bartels et al. (2006) found no univocal relationship between communication climate and expected post-merger identification: only for employees who were indirectly involved in the merger did communication climate before the merger appear to be a significant predictor. All other studies in a merger context that have included communication variables focused on the communication about the merger (Bastien, 1987; Schweiger and Weger; 1989; Bachman, 1993; Schweiger and DeNisi, 1991; Terry et al., 2001; Jimmieson et al., 2004; Boen et al., 2005; Van Dick et al., 2006). The results of these studies are ambiguous.

Schweiger and DeNisi (1991) found that the quality and amount of communication about a merger had a positive effect on employees’ organizational commitment. Bachman (1993) found no significant impact of management communication on identification with the merged organization. More recently, a study by Boen et al. (2005) showed that satisfaction with the information provision about the merger was not a significant predictor of post-merger identification. In contrast, Van Dick et al. (2006) found management communication about the merger to be positively related to post-merger identification. In addition to their findings regarding communication climate before the merger, Bartels et al. (2006) found a positive relation between the communication about the merger and the employees’ expected organizational identification with the new organization.

Given these mixed results and the general lack of research into the effects of communication climate before and after a merger, the present study further explores the contribution of communication climate in merger processes.

### 4.3.2 Perceived external prestige

Perceived external prestige (PEP) concerns employees' perception of how the outside world views their organization. Several studies have underlined the importance of perceived external prestige for employees' organizational identification and commitment (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991; Mael and Ashforth, 1992; Iyver et al., 1997; Mayer and Schoorman, 1998; Bergami and Bagozzi, 2000; Smidts et al., 2001; Carmeli and Freund, 2002; Herrbach et al., 2004; Carmeli, 2005; Cornwell and Coote, 2005; Lipponen et al., 2005). All these studies found strong positive correlations between PEP and organizational identification. The more employees see their organization as important in the outside world, the stronger they will identify with their organization.

Although the importance of PEP for identification with the overall organization is obvious, there is little insight into the relationship between perceived external prestige and identification with lower organizational levels. Carmeli (2005) emphasizes the multidimensional nature of PEP but only refers to the distinction between social and economic prestige. Only recently did (Bartels et al., forthcoming) conduct a study in which an organization's PEP was related to four organizational levels. They found that PEP had a stronger influence on employees' identification with the overall organization than on their identification with lower organizational levels, such as workgroups and departments. However, they only measured the PEP of the overall organization, whereas it is conceivable that specific departments also have their own PEP, and that a related construct such as perceived *internal* prestige (PIP) may affect the identification with lower organizational levels.

In all, the evidence for a relationship between PEP and organizational identification is strong, but little is known about the way PEP affects identification at various organizational levels. Moreover, the influence of PEP on organizational identification has not yet been investigated in a merger context. This study will thus focus on the contribution of two levels of PEP and PIP on two levels of organizational identification before and after a merger.

### 4.3.3 Job satisfaction

Job satisfaction is defined as the way people feel about their work. It is an emotional individual response to important aspects of someone's job (Pincus, 1986). 'Job satisfaction can be considered as a global feeling about the job or as a related constellation of attitudes about various aspects or facets of the job' (Spector, 1997, p. 2). Many studies have established the importance of job satisfaction in organizational life (Spector, 1997; Judge et al., 2001a). For example, job satisfaction appears to be

related to job performance (Petty et al., 1984; Van Yperen and De Jong, 1997; Judge et al., 2001b), organizational citizenship behaviour (Bateman and Organ, 1983; Kinicki, et al., 2002) and withdrawal behaviour such as absence and intention to leave the organization (Farrell and Stamm, 1988; Hulin, 1991; Blau, 1993; Autry and Daugherty, 2003).

More specifically, research has shown that job satisfaction is a strong positive correlate of organizational identification and commitment, both in status quo settings (Ashforth and Saks, 1996; Feather and Rauter, 2004; Van Dick et al., 2004b) and in merger contexts (Begley and Czajka, 1993; Van Knippenberg and Van Schie, 2000; Terry and O'Brien, 2001; Van Dick et al., 2006). Despite all the research attention to job satisfaction, the impact thereof on employees' identification at various organizational levels in merger contexts is still underexposed. The present study will therefore include job satisfaction as one of the determinants of organizational identification.

## **4.4 Method**

### **4.4.1 Organizational context and sample**

The research was conducted in the context of a merging Dutch university. To improve efficiency in management, thirteen faculties merged into five new organizations. The merger of two of these new faculties was monitored during a time frame of two and a half years. Both new organizations consisted of two separate faculties prior to the merger. The mergers formally took place at the beginning of 2003. Data were collected prior to the merger (T1) and two years after the merger (T2). Employees who participated in this study were both faculty staff (e.g. PhD students, teachers and (assistant) professors) and support staff (e.g. administration departments and information specialists). With both T1 and T2 respondents were equally divided among the faculties. A total of 258 employees completed the T1 questionnaire, which was a response rate of 45 percent. With T2, 187 respondents of the 258 employees of T1 were still employed at one of the two merged faculties. All 187 respondents received a T2 questionnaire. Employees who completed the T2 questionnaire amounted to 53 percent of the T1 sample (n=99).

MANOVA was used to test whether T2 respondents differed from T2 non-respondents on the dependent and independent variables at T1. Both respondents and non-respondents did not differ significantly ( $F(9,177) = 1.56; p \Rightarrow .13$ ). Respondents who did not participate in T2 were slightly less satisfied with their job ( $m=4.10$  versus

m=4.37 on a five-point scale) and their superior (m=4.00 versus m=4.20) at T1. Despite these differences, it may be concluded from the absolute scores that both T2 respondents and non-respondents were satisfied with their job and their superior at T1. In all, non-respondent bias does not seem likely.

The sample displays the following demographic characteristics: males slightly outnumbered females by 3:2; 61% of the respondents' age was between 30 and 50; 59% had been employed for more than 5 years; 73% had a full-time employment in a tenure track position; 74% was faculty staff and 26% was support staff. Except for gender, all demographic variables are representative for the staff of the two merged faculties at T1 and T2. To check for the relevance of the overrepresentation of male respondents, we used MANOVA, which revealed no significant differences between men and women on all variables at T1 ( $F(9,89) = 1.04$ ;  $p \Rightarrow .42$ ) and T2 ( $F(9,89) = 1.31$ ;  $p \Rightarrow .24$ ).

#### **4.4.2 Procedure for data collection**

For both respondent groups, data were collected using self-administered questionnaires. The questionnaires were sent via internal mail to the entire population of employees of both faculties at T1 and at T2. To increase the response, employees were informed that questionnaires would be personally collected by the researcher within the next two weeks. The researcher personally collected data several times during this period. If respondents had not filled out a questionnaire at the time of collection, they could also return their questionnaire via internal mail. The data collection procedure was the same at T1 and at T2.

#### **4.4.3 Pre-merger and post-merger measures**

Apart from questions about the respondents' background, the questionnaire covered nine topics at T1 and T2. The following variables were measured: faculty identification, university identification, communication climate at faculty level, communication climate at university level, communication climate with superior, PIP faculty, PEP faculty, PEP university, and job satisfaction.

Faculty and university identification were measured using an 11-item scale based on Mael and Ashforth (1992) and Smidts, Pruyn and Van Riel (2001). Sample items were: 'I feel strong ties with [name University or Faculty]', 'I am glad to be a member of [name University or Faculty]', and 'When I talk about [name University or Faculty], I usually say *we*, rather than *they*'. Scale reliability in current study was high for all identification scales at T1 and T2 (Cronbach's  $\alpha$  between .88 and .91).

Communication climate at faculty and university level were measured using an 11-item scale based on Smidts, Pruyn and Van Riel (2001). Example items were: 'Generally speaking, everyone at [name University or Faculty] is honest with one another', 'If I talk with colleagues at [name University or Faculty], I feel I am being taken seriously', and 'Colleagues at [name University or Faculty] genuinely listen to me when I say something'. Scale reliability was high for both communication climate scales at T1 and T2 (Cronbach's  $\alpha$  between .88 and .92).

Communication climate with superior was measured using a 7-item scale based on Smidts, Pruyn and Van Riel (2001). Example items were: 'Communication between me and my superior is open', 'My superior understands me, when I'm talking to him/her', 'Communication between me and my superior is healthy'. Scale reliability was high at T1 and T2 (Cronbach's  $\alpha$  .94 and .93).

PIP faculty, PEP faculty, and PEP University were measured using three 10-item scales based on Mael and Ashforth (1992) and Smidts, Pruyn and Van Riel (2001). Example items were: '[Name organization] has a good reputation' and '[Name University or Faculty] is regarded as pleasant to work for'. The reliability of the scales were adequate at both T1 and T2 (Cronbach's  $\alpha$  between .74 and .86).

Job satisfaction was measured using a 3-item scale based on Smidts, Pruyn and Van Riel (2001) and Spector (1997: 19). The three items were: 'All in all I am satisfied with my job', 'In general, I don't like my job', and 'In general, I like working here'. The reliability of the scale was adequate at both T1 and T2 (Cronbach's  $\alpha$  .77 and .81, respectively).

#### **4.4.4 Analysis**

We first analysed the degree of congruence between the both faculties, using MANOVA and ANOVAs to compare the scores on all T1 variables. Subsequently, the development of all variables between T1 and T2 was analysed, using paired sample t-tests and correlation analysis. We then used sequential methods to determine the unique contribution of each T2 predictor. Forward regression analyses were conducted to examine the relative impact of T1 and T2 variables on faculty and university identification. In a forward regression analysis, the first predictor entering the equation is the one with the largest simple correlation with identification. If this predictor was found to be significant, then the predictor with the largest semi-partial correlation is entered, and this is repeated until a predictor does not make a significant contribution (Stevens, 2002). In other words, forward regression analysis answers the question what a certain predictor adds to the prediction equation, over and above the

variables already in the equation. Finally, forward regression analysis was used to determine which predictors were significant in explaining the increase or decrease in identification between T1 and T2. As predictors we used difference scores between T1 and T2 of the measured variables.

## 4.5 Results

First MANOVA was applied to test whether variables differed between both faculties at T1, but no significant difference were revealed between the two ( $F(8, 89)=1.03$ ;  $p=.42$ ). Furthermore, a series of ANOVAs showed that none of the variable scores differed significantly between the two faculties at T1. Therefore, all analyses below will be reported on the aggregate data of both faculties ( $n=99$ ).

Table 4.1 shows the results of the paired t-test conducted on all variables comparing the respondents' pre- and post merger scores. Faculty identification showed a significant decline between T1 and T2 ( $t=-3.26$ ;  $p<.01$ ). University identification did not differ significantly between T1 and T2. These results suggest that the merger only affected the employees' identification with the organizational units that were directly involved in the merger. Of the variables that were used as predictors in this study, three variables scored significantly lower at T2: PIP faculty, ( $t=-3.88$ ;  $p<.001$ ) communication climate superior ( $t=-3.88$ ;  $p<.001$ ), and job satisfaction ( $t=-3.68$ ;  $p<.01$ ). One variable had a significantly higher score at T2: PEP university ( $t=3.31$ ;  $p<.01$ ). The other variables all had lower scores at T2, but these changes were not significant. In all, the merger seemed to have a detrimental effect on several variables that involved the faculty level and/or the immediate daily working experiences of employees; the only positive change concerned the more stable university level. All variables, except for communication climate at the faculty level, showed significant positive correlations between T1 and T2.

Table 4.1 Means, standard deviations, correlations and paired t-tests (n=99)

Variables	Time 1 Mean (sd)	Time 2 Mean (sd)	Correlation	t-value
Faculty identification	3.30 (.69)	3.09 (.57)	.48***	-3.26**
University identification	3.30 (.61)	3.21 (.59)	.58***	-1.52
Communication climate faculty	3.30 (.60)	3.24 (.50)	.17	-.80
Communication climate university	3.11 (.48)	3.10 (.46)	.59***	-.19
Communication climate superior	4.20 (.65)	3.96 (.77)	.52***	-3.39**
PIP faculty	2.90 (.43)	2.70 (.49)	.38***	-3.88***
PEP faculty	3.24 (.46)	3.19 (.39)	.25*	-.92
PEP university	3.36 (.40)	3.49 (.41)	.54***	3.31**
Job Satisfaction	4.37 (.64)	4.13 (.70)	.54***	-3.68***

Note. \*p<.05, \*\*p<.01, \*\*\*p<.001. PEP = Perceived external prestige; PIP = Perceived internal prestige; 5-point Likert scales are used.

Table 4.2 shows the forward regression results of the impact of the variables at T2 and T1 on *faculty identification* at T2. All significant predictors at T1 and T2 explain 54 percent of the variance. Communication climate faculty at T2 appears to be the strongest predictor of faculty identification ( $\beta=.58$ ;  $p<.001$ ) and is responsible for a significant difference in explained variance ( $\Delta R^2=.33$ ;  $p<.001$ ). Faculty identification at T1 ( $\beta=.31$ ;  $p<.001$ ) is the only significant T1 predictor. Furthermore, university identification T2 ( $\beta=.27$ ;  $p<.01$ ), and university communication T2 ( $\beta=-.20$ ;  $p<.05$ ) are significant predictors of faculty identification at T2. Thus, faculty identification at T2 appears to be explained more by T2 variables than by T1 variables.

Table 4.2 Regression for impact of T1 and T2 variables on faculty identification at T2

Predictors	$\Delta R^2$	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
		$\beta$	T	$\beta$	t	$\beta$	t	$\beta$	T
Communication climate faculty T2	.33***	.57	6.86***	.50	6.57***	.45	6.13***	.58	6.11***
Faculty identification T1	.14***			.39	5.10***	.32	4.31***	.31	4.10***
University identification T2	.05**					.24	3.14**	.27	3.58**
University communication T2	.02*							-.20	-2.05*
$R^2$		.33		.47		.52		.54	
F		47.09***		42.63***		34.32***		27.65***	
Df		1, 97		2, 96		3, 95		4, 94	

Note. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; Excluded variables: Communication climate superior T2, PIP and PEP faculty T2, PEP university T2, job satisfaction T2, university identification T1, communication climate faculty, university and superior T1, PIP and PEP faculty T1, PEP university T1, job satisfaction T1.

Table 4.3 shows the forward regression results of the impact of the variables at T2 and T1 on *university identification* at T2. All significant predictors T1 and T2 explain 51 percent of the variance. University identification at T1 seems to be the strongest predictor of current university identification ( $\beta = .49$ ;  $p < .001$ ) which accounts for 25 percent of the variance. Compared to the results of faculty identification, different determinants appear to have a significant impact on university identification. Particularly T1 variables seem to be the most significant predictors of T2 university identification. Furthermore, job satisfaction T2 ( $\beta = .38$ ;  $p < .001$ ), PEP university T1 ( $\beta = .23$ ;  $p < .01$ ) and job satisfaction T1 ( $\beta = -.26$ ;  $p < .01$ ) are significant predictors of university identification at T2.

Table 4.3 Regression for impact of T1 and T2 variables on university identification at T2

Predictors	$\Delta R^2$	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
		$\beta$	T	$\beta$	t	$\beta$	t	$\beta$	T
University identification T1	.34***	.58	7.09***	.48	5.81***	.39	4.54***	.49	5.43***
Job satisfaction T2	.08***			.31	3.71***	.27	3.35**	.38	4.36***
PEP university T1	.05**					.25	2.98**	.23	2.89**
Job satisfaction T1	.04**							-.26	-2.81**
$R^2$		.34		.42		.47		.51	
F		50.19***		35.25***		28.39***		24.97***	
Df		1, 97		2, 96		3, 95		4, 94	

Note. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; Excluded variables: Communication climate faculty, university and superior T2, PIP and PEP faculty T2, faculty identification T1, communication climate faculty, university and superior T1, PIP and PEP faculty T1.

After examining the determinants of faculty and university identification at T2, we focused on the explanation of differences and similarities between T1 and T2. As pointed out in table 4.1, faculty identification showed a significant decline after the merger, whereas university identification did not. We conducted forward regression analyses to find out which determinants were significant predictors of the development in identification between T1 and T2.

Table 4.4 shows the forward regression results of the impact of the variables on the difference in *faculty identification* between T1 and T2. The determinants explained a considerable proportion of the variance ( $R^2 = .34$ ;  $p < .001$ ). The strongest predictor appeared to be the difference in communication climate at faculty level ( $\beta = .48$ ;  $p < .001$ ). In other words, the more difference employees perceived between T1 and T2 communication climate at the faculty level, the more they differed in faculty identification. Moreover, difference in university identification ( $\beta = .23$ ;  $p < .01$ ) was a significant predictor of difference in faculty identification. A third significant predictor was the difference in communication climate with superior ( $\beta = .17$ ;  $p < .05$ ). In line with earlier results (see table 4.2) communication variables appear to play the most important role in predicting differences between faculty identification before and after the merger.

Table 4.4 Forward regression for impact of T1 and T2 variables on  $\Delta$  faculty identification

Predictors	$\Delta R^2$	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
		$\beta$	t	$\beta$	T	$\beta$	t
Difference in communication climate faculty	.25***	.50	5.72***	.48	6.05***	.48	5.69***
Difference in university identification	.06*			.25	2.96**	.23	2.79**
Difference in communication climate superior	.03*					.17	2.00*
$R^2$		.25		.32		.34	
F		32.70***		22.05***		16.49***	
Df		1, 97		2, 96		3, 95	

Note. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; Excluded variables: Difference in communication climate university, PIP faculty, PEP faculty, PEP university, in job satisfaction.

Finally, table 4.5 shows the forward regression results of the impact of the variables on the difference in *university identification* between T1 and T2. In contrast with faculty identification, the only significant predictor for difference in university identification appeared to be the difference in job satisfaction ( $\beta = -.43$ ;  $p < .001$ ). The determinant explained 18 percent of the variance. All other variables were not significant. At university level only a non-communication variable seemed to matter. Communication variables, in contrast to faculty identification, did not significantly contribute to difference in university identification.

Table 4.5 Forward regression for impact of T1 and T2 variables on  $\Delta$  university identification

Predictors	$\Delta R^2$	Model 1	
		$\beta$	t
Difference in job satisfaction	.18***	.43	4.74***
R <sup>2</sup>			.18
F			22.46***
Df			1, 97

Note. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; Excluded variables: Difference in faculty identification, communication climate university, communication climate faculty, communication climate superior, PIP faculty, PEP faculty and PEP university.

## 4.6 Discussion

### 4.6.1 Main conclusions

The results of this study shed light on the way organizational identification develops during a merger and the variables that affect this process. Several conclusions may be drawn. In line with previous research, employees' pre-merger identification appears to be an important antecedent of their post-merger identification (e.g. Van Knippenberg and Van Schie, 2000; Bartels et al., 2006). These earlier results, however, are amended by our analysis of the two organizational levels. First, pre-merger identification appears to primarily influence post-merger identification at the same organizational level. Second, results suggest that the influence of pre-merger identification may be moderated by the continuity of the organizational level. At the university level, which was not affected by the merger, the employees' pre-merger and post-merger identification appeared to be more or less stable, and pre-merger identification proved to be by far the strongest predictor of post-merger identification. At the faculty level, where the merger took place, employees' identification showed a significant decrease, and pre-merger identification, although still an important antecedent, explained considerably less of the variance in post-merger identification. This observation corresponds to earlier research, which has shown that a sense of continuity is an important antecedent of employees' post-merger identification (e.g. Van Knippenberg et al., 2002; Ullrich et al. 2005).

A second conclusion involves the determinants of employees' identification at the two organizational levels. It appears that determinants of overall organizational

identification differ from the determinants of employees' identification with a lower organizational level. This is in line with earlier research in non-merger settings (e.g. Van Knippenberg and Van Schie, 2000; Reade, 2001; Riketta and Van Dick, 2005). More specifically, in accordance with earlier findings in a status quo setting (Bartels et al., forthcoming), we found that internal and external communication variables related to different levels of identification. Internal communication climate appeared to be especially important for the identification with the lower organizational level (it was by far the most important predictor of post-merger faculty identification), whereas perceived external prestige only played a role in employees' identification with the overall organization. In the earlier study by (Bartels et al., forthcoming), an alternative explanation for their conclusions would be that not all variables were measured at all organization levels. Compared to this earlier study, we included measurements of communication climate at the highest organizational level, and measurements of prestige at the lower organizational level, and showed that these extra variables did not contribute to the explanation of employees' identification at the two organizational levels. As such, our results reinforce the earlier research findings of Bartels et al. (forthcoming).

Another striking difference between the determinants of employees' identification involves the relationship between the two levels of identification. We found that university identification affected employees' post-merger identification with the faculty, whereas faculty identification did not affect employees' post-merger university identification. This may refer to structural differences between the two levels of identification, but may also have to do with the (in)stability of the organizational levels concerned. A structural difference would suggest that organizational identification at the higher level affects identification at lower levels, and not the other way around. However, earlier research by (Bartels et al., forthcoming) suggests that identification with lower organizational levels may, in principle, affect overall organizational identification. An explanation based on the (in)stability of the organizational level(s) concerned could suggest that the employees' identification with the stable organizational level affects their identification with the level at which the merger takes place. However, this interpretation contradicts earlier findings by Bartels et al. (2006), which showed that employees' identification with a stable subordinate organizational level did not affect their expected post-merger organizational identification. Therefore, we tentatively conclude that the role of stability may differ between *subordinate* and *superordinate* organizational levels. Apparently, employees' identification with a stable superordinate organizational level may affect their identification with a merging organizational unit.

A third conclusion concerns the development of post-merger identification over time. As a result of our longitudinal research design, we were able to assess the effects of determinants both in the pre- and in the post-merger stage on post-merger identification. Our results suggest that pre-merger determinants affect the extent to which employees identify themselves with the newly merged organizational units (faculties) and the overall organization. Interestingly, there appears to be a difference between the lower-level organizational units and the overall organization in this respect. At the faculties level, most significant determinants were found in the post-merger measurement (communication climate at T2, university identification at T2, and university communication at T2). This is the level where the changes have occurred and where the employees must reorient themselves on their identification. At the university level, on the other hand, most significant determinants were found in the pre-merger measurement (university identification at T1, perceived external prestige at T1, and job satisfaction at T1), which reflects the more stable nature of the employees' identification on this level.

On a more general level, our study underlines the importance of measuring employees' identification at different organizational levels with longitudinal research designs.

#### **4.6.2 Management implications**

The results of this longitudinal study offer various starting-points for the management of employee identification, both in times of mergers and in general. First, the extent to which employees identify with the organization (or an organizational unit) before a merger appears to have a lasting effect on the extent to which they will identify after the merger. It is therefore important to monitor and facilitate employee identification not only in merger situations but also as a continual process.

Second, it is important to realize that in many organizations there will be more than one organizational level with which employees can and probably will identify. In times of mergers, these levels in the organization may even play a beneficial role. In this study, we found that a stable superordinate level may serve as the binding agent for employees, and contribute to the identification with a lower organizational level that is subject to change. It seems plausible, but has yet to be investigated, that a stable subordinate level plays a similar role in times of mergers. Managers may develop strategies of manoeuvring between organizational levels that remain stable during a merger or reorganization and levels that are unstable.

Third, it is important to realize that the determinants of employees' identification differ between the overall organization and lower organizational levels. On the lower organizational levels, communication variables play a significant role. Whereas various earlier studies have focused on the communication about the merger, our results underline the relevance of communication climate in the pre- and post-merger situation. Employees' perceptions of open and honest communication before and after an organizational restructuring seems to have a major influence on their identification with the organization. We would therefore recommend to monitor the communication climate in organizational (sub-)units on a regular basis. On the higher organizational level, the perceived external prestige and job satisfaction appear to be relatively important. For this type of identification, organizations should focus more on HRM and (internal) reputation management.

#### **4.6.3 Limitations**

One limitation of this study concerns the generalization of the results. First, we only collected data within one particular type of organization. Universities can be characterized as rather bureaucratic organizations with many highly specialized professionals. Similar research in different types of organizations would be needed to replicate our findings. Second, we only collected data at one university. However, it must be stressed that we investigated two separate merger processes in the university, that the two faculties could be seen as independent (sub-)organizations, and that the results of the two faculties showed a strong similarity.

A general flaw in longitudinal field research is the possible influence of time itself. Between the two measurements, respondents were lost due to turnover, retirement or lay-offs during the research period. However, no significant differences on all variables at T1 were found between respondents and non-respondents at T2, which does not imply the risk of non-respondent bias in this study. Furthermore, during the research period, several uncontrollable events may have had an impact on the process of identification. Uncontrollable events are more rule than exception during merger processes. In our study one particular event stood out. One month after the first measurement, one of the buildings of the university was destroyed by a fire. As a result, several respondents lost their office and (parts of) their belongings. An event like this may have had an impact on employees' identification with the faculty or the overall organization. However, in an analysis comparing the respondents who were directly involved in the fire and those who were not, no significant differences were found at T2, which was more than two years after the fire.

#### **4.6.4 Directions for future research**

In line with our main conclusions we suggest that future research into the role of identification at different organizational levels in pre- and post-merger situations would be of interest to shed more light on the results of merger processes. Specifically, the way overall and lower-level identification processes interact with each other seems to be a relevant direction for future research. It is quite feasible that both bottom-up processes (in which lower-level identification affects higher-level identification) and top-down processes (in which higher-level identification affects lower-level identification) may occur. This is particularly of interest in merger situations where employees' identification with stable organizational levels may facilitate their identification with the merging units. Future research could, for instance, focus on the role that stable subordinate levels play in merger situations.

In our study, we focused on internal and external communication variables and job satisfaction before and after a merger as determinants of organizational identification. Together, these variables appear to explain a large amount of variance of post-merger identification. Other studies have focused primarily on merger characteristics, such as intergroup distinction, status, communication about the merger, and sense of continuity, which have also proven to have an impact on identification processes (e.g. Terry et al., 2001; Van Knippenberg et al., 2002; Bartels et al., 2006; Van Dick et al., 2006). Future research should combine the two perspectives and compare the effects of pre-merger organizational characteristics, post-merger organizational characteristics, and merger characteristics.

# 5

## Horizontal and vertical communication as determinants of professional and organizational identification<sup>4</sup>

### 5.1 Abstract

Earlier research has shown a positive link between communication climate at a specific organizational level and the identification of the employee with that level. This paper presents the results of a study of the relationship between (professional and organizational) identification and (horizontal and vertical) communication. A study was carried out at a large hospital with multiple locations. Findings show that although employees identify more strongly with their profession than with their organization, there is a positive connection between professional and organizational identification. Dimensions of vertical communication are important predictors of organizational identification, whereas dimensions of horizontal communication are important predictors of professional identification.

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## 5.2 Introduction

Organizational identification plays a significant role in many organizations (Ashforth and Mael, 1996; Foreman and Whetten, 2002; Mael and Ashforth, 1992; Tajfel and Turner, 1985). Organizational identification can be defined as: ‘The perception of oneness with or belongingness to an organization, where the individual defines him- or herself in terms of the organization(s) in which he or she is a member’ (Mael and Ashforth, 1992, p. 104). A strong identification of employees with their organization can result in a greater work satisfaction, a lower absentee rate, a smaller staff turnover and greater cooperative behaviour (e.g. Bartel, 2001; Dutton, et al., 1994; Riketta, 2005; Smidts, et al., 2001; Van Dick et al., 2004).

Although the notion that employees are able to identify with various groups is not new (Albert and Whetten, 1985; Brickson, 2000; Pratt and Foreman, 2000; Rousseau, 1998), organizational identification has long been approached as a one-dimensional construct. In the majority of studies, the emphasis is on the degree to which employees identify with the organization as a whole (Ashforth and Saks, 1996; Mael and Ashforth, 1992; Foreman and Whetten, 2002; Smidts et al., 2001). Only more recently has it become apparent that employees are able to simultaneously identify with different groups within an organization. There are thus more organizational levels at which identification can occur, such as the workgroup, the divisional, and the overall organizational level (Ashforth and Johnson, 2001; Foreman and Whetten, 2002). Various studies have shown that the identification of employees with a specific organizational level positively correlates with their identification with other organizational levels (Bartels et al., 2006; Baruch and Winkelman-Gleed, 2002; Riketta and Van Dick, 2005; Van Knippenberg and Van Schie, 2000).

Besides identifying with various levels in the organization, it is also possible that employees identify with their entire profession(al group) (such as truck drivers, doctors, researchers). This is called professional identification (Scott, 1997; Scott et al., 1999). Professional identification denotes the degree to which employees identify themselves with the profession that they practise and the typical characteristics thereof.

To date, few studies have been conducted into the antecedents of professional identification (Johnson et al., 2006). The focus has primarily been on the relationship between professional and organizational identification (e.g. Scott, 1997; Scott et al., 1999) and on the differences in importance between the two (Johnson et al., 2006; Russo, 1998). These research findings show that there is usually a positive connection

between organizational and professional identification (Bamber and Iyer, 2002; Russo, 1998) and that professional identification is stronger than organizational identification (Apker and Fox, 2002; Russo, 1998; Scott et al., 1999). Similar findings have been described in the domain of commitment research, where positive links were found between occupational and organizational commitment (Saks, 1995; Somech and Bogler, 2002; Somech, 2005; Wallace, 1993). Although, theoretically speaking, identification and commitment are not the same (Meyer et al., 2004; Van Dick et al., 2004), they are strongly related constructs (Gautam et al., 2004; Siegel and Sisaye, 1997; Witt, 1993). Findings of the earlier research into occupational and organizational commitment have thus been considered in this paper.

Much is already known about the antecedents of organizational identification. Research has shown that the distinguishing ability of the organization (Mael and Ashforth, 1992), the perceived external prestige (Bhattacharya et al., 1995; Smidts et al., 2001) and the degree of overlap between the personal identity of the employees and the identity of the organization (Bergami and Bagozzi, 2000) influence the degree to which employees identify with the organization. More recently it has become apparent that the communication climate is an important antecedent of organizational identification (Bartels et al., 2006; Smidts et al., 2001; [reference deleted for review purposes]).

As opposed to the relationship between communication climate and organizational identification, little is still known about communication climate as antecedent of professional identification. As professional identification and organizational identification are strongly linked, and communication climate positively influences organizational identification, it is interesting to find out what role communication climate plays in the relationship between both forms of identification. The objective of this study is thus to offer more insight into the relationship between communication climate and professional and organizational identification. The main focus is on the direction of the communication in the hierarchy of an organization – namely vertical versus horizontal communication – as a determinant of identification. Horizontal communication refers to communication between colleagues on an equal hierarchical level. Vertical communication is communication that travels up and down in the hierarchy, for example between top management and work floor and vice versa.

### 5.3 Communication climate and identification

The communication climate concerns the collective communication components of the work environment, such as the perceived accessibility of management to employees and the reliability of the information circulated in the organization. Communication climate can be described as: 'A subjective experienced quality of the internal environment of an organization: the concept embraces a general cluster of inferred predispositions, identifiable through reports of members' perceptions of messages and message-related events occurring in the organization' (Dennis, 1974, p. 29).

Communication climate has been described in a variety of dimensions (e.g. Dennis, 1974; Postmes et al., 2001; Postmes, 2003; Redding, 1972; Smidts et al., 2001), such as in terms of the hierarchical position of the sender and recipient, the direction of the communication, the level of abstraction, the function of the communication, and its content and form. Relevant and often used dimensions of communication climate, as regards content, include 'adequate information', 'open and honest communication', 'participation in decision-making', and 'support of top management' (Dennis, 1974; Guzley, 1992; Putti et al., 1990; Smidts et al., 2001; Trombetta and Rogers, 1988; Varona, 1996; Wallace, 1995; Welsch and LaVan, 1981).

Despite the importance of communication and the influence it apparently has on organization identification, little is known about the nature of the connection between communication climate and the way in which employees identify themselves with various levels of an organization [reference deleted for review purposes]. Even less is known about the degree to which the assessment of the horizontal and vertical communication in an organization influences employees' identification or commitment. The only study that addresses the influence of horizontal and vertical communication on organizational commitment is by Postmes et al. (2001), who found that the assessment of both types of communication were positively linked to organizational commitment. Important to note here is that the assessment of vertical communication was a stronger predictor than horizontal communication (Postmes et al., 2001).

#### 5.3.1 Vertical communication

Vertical communication helps to define the organization and understand what it stands for (Dutton et al., 1994). Vertical communication, such as information about the organization's strategy and objectives and current developments, helps an employee to determine his/her position in an organization. As a rule, vertical

communication is work-related and travels top-down and bottom-up in the organization's hierarchy (Downs and Adrian, 2004; Goldhaber, 1993). Top-down communication mainly comprises information that defines the organization's strategy. This includes dimensions of communication climate such as 'adequate information provision', 'support of top management' and 'reliability of top management'. Bottom-up communication is the information sent from work floor to management level and concerns, for example, the opportunities to participate in the decision-making (participative decision-making). Vertical communication can reduce uncertainty about the organization's stance and help employees to comprehend and define what it stands for (Postmes et al., 2001). Being well informed about the mission, organizational goals and accomplishments allows the employee to recognize the specific characteristics of the organization (Dutton et al., 1994). Vertical communication also allows the organization to inform its employees how it distinguishes itself from other organizations (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Cheney, 1983; Postmes, 2003). Vertical communication is thus a condition in communicating the distinguishing characteristics of an organization (Smidts et al., 2001).

### **5.3.2 Horizontal communication**

Horizontal communication is both task-related and informal and occurs between people on equal footing in the hierarchy (Postmes, 2003). Task-related communication concerns the exchanging of task information, such as the fine-tuning of activities. Informal contact includes conversations between employees about more private matters, not particularly vital for task performance (Postmes et al., 2001). Task-related horizontal communication with colleagues might well influence the sense of identification with and belonging to the profession. In a workgroup are people who aspire to the same goal and often also have the same profession. In the eyes of an individual, colleagues belong to a social category within the organization (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). In a workgroup or among colleagues, most discussions relate to the tasks and responsibilities of the department which cover common ground with a person's profession. Research has shown that communicating with colleagues within a group can be conducive to cohesion (Levine and Moreland, 1990). Moreover, it has recently been established that the more positive employees appreciate the communication climate at workgroup level, the stronger they identify with this workgroup [reference deleted for review purposes]. Wallace (1995) demonstrated that the support of colleagues is an important antecedent of professional commitment. In order to be able to support a colleague, a certain degree of horizontal communication between colleagues is necessary. These findings suggest that horizontal communication has a positive influence on professional identification.

On the basis of the abovementioned findings from earlier research, the following hypotheses were formulated for this study:

*Hypothesis 1: There is a positive connection between professional identification and organizational identification.*

*Hypothesis 2: The more positive employees assess the vertical communication, the stronger they will identify with their organization.*

*Hypothesis 3: The more positive employees assess the horizontal communication, the stronger they will identify with their profession.*

## **5.4 Method**

### **5.4.1 Context**

The relationship between communication and employee identification was studied at a regional hospital. This hospital ranks among the largest non-academic hospitals in the Netherlands. The hospital is currently spread over five locations and has a workforce of around 4000.

### **5.4.2 Procedure**

Eight hundred questionnaires were sent to a selection of the entire staff. The Personnel and Organization Department drew this random sample on the basis of personnel numbers. The questionnaires were distributed via the internal mail with an accompanying letter from the cluster manager of the Public Relations Department. Respondents could return the questionnaire in a sealed envelope. Absolute anonymity was stressed in the introduction letter. In the fortnightly newsletter, employees were reminded to fill in the questionnaire by the hospital's Board of Directors.

### **5.4.3 Measurement instrument**

Besides general information, the questionnaire also sought answers regarding identification with the organization, identification with the profession, the perception of vertical communication and the perception of horizontal communication. Use was made of 5-point Likert scales.

Organizational identification was measured by means of an 11-item scale by Mael and Ashforth (1992) and Smidts et al. (2001). Examples of items were: 'The successes of [name organization] are my successes' and 'When I speak about [name organization], I usually refer to *we* and not *they*'. The scale for organizational identification was reliable ( $\alpha = .89$ ). Professional identification was also measured

with an 11-item scale based on Mael and Ashforth (1992) and Smidts et al. (2001). Examples of items were: 'The successes of [name profession] are my successes' and 'When I speak about [name profession], I usually refer to *we* and not *they*'. The reliability of this scale was high ( $\alpha = .91$ ).

Vertical communication was measured on the basis of 16 items by Dennis (1974) and Postmes et al. (2001). Exploratory factor analysis showed that vertical communication comprises four dimensions, which together explain 64% of the variance. Dimensions that could be distinguished were: 'Satisfaction with the communication of organizational goals by top management', 'Participation in decision-making', 'Adequate information' and 'Reliability of information from top management'. The found dimensions of vertical communication agree to a large extent with those distinguished by Dennis (1974). The Cronbach's alphas of the four dimensions were high: between .80 and .94.

Horizontal communication comprised 14 items based on Dennis (1974) and Smidts et al. (2001). Exploratory factor analysis showed that two dimensions of horizontal communication could be distinguished, namely: 'Satisfaction with horizontal communication' and 'Level of contact with colleagues'. The Cronbach's alphas of the two dimensions were high for dimension 1 ( $\alpha = .92$ ) and sufficient for dimension 2 ( $\alpha = .68$ ).

#### **5.4.4 Respondents**

In total, 347 (of the 800) questionnaires were filled in and returned. This means a response percentage of 43.4%. Considerably more women (73.3%) filled in the questionnaire than men, but this proportion corresponds with the overall man-woman ratio of the hospital's workforce. Many respondents had worked at the hospital for 1-5 years (34.3%). The average number of years of service was 11.9. The actual figures concerning the composition of employees were requested in order to examine whether this sample was representative. It appeared that there was a slight over-representation of men. An ANOVA demonstrated that there were no significant differences between men and women in organizational identification, although women did appear to identify themselves somewhat stronger with their profession than men. Furthermore, the number of respondents in the age bracket 18-30 was somewhat over-represented. However, ANOVAs demonstrated that there were no significant differences in professional and organizational identification between the various age groups.

## 5.5 Results

### 5.5.1 Descriptive statistics

Table 5.1 shows the averages, standard deviations and correlations of all communication and identification variables. Table 1 moreover shows that professional identification ( $m=3.82$ ) is considerably higher than organizational identification ( $m=3.25$ ). A paired t-test demonstrates that this difference is significant ( $t(347)=-19.39$ ;  $p<.001$ ). Respondents identify themselves stronger with their profession than with the organization. This holds for all professional groups in the hospital. Noteworthy here is the strong positive correlation between professional and organizational identification ( $r=.54$ ;  $p<.01$ ).

Table 5.1 Correlation matrix of all identification and communication variables (n=347)

Variable	Average (sd)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Organizational identification	3.25 (.60)	-							
Professional identification	3.82 (.54)	.54**	-						
<i>Vertical communication</i>									
Satisfaction with communication about goals by top management	2.64 (.67)	.36**	.16**	-					
Participation in decision-making	2.63 (.69)	.49**	.25**	.57**	-				
Adequate information	3.25 (.68)	.42**	.23**	.62**	.49**	-			
Reliability of info from top management	2.90 (.77)	.40**	.24**	.57**	.49**	.50**	-		
<i>Horizontal communication</i>									
Satisfaction with horizontal communication	3.88 (.52)	.24**	.34**	.17**	.23**	.13*	.16**	-	
Level of contact with colleagues	4.08 (.46)	.12*	.26**	-.03	.05	-.03	-.01	.53**	-

Note: \*p<.05, \*\*p<.01.

Organizational identification is connected with all variables measured. The dimensions of vertical communication show a strong connection with organizational identification. Of all the communication dimensions, 'participation in decision-making' bears the strongest connection with organizational identification ( $r=.49$ ;  $p<.01$ ). There is also a strong mutual connection between the dimensions of vertical communication; as also a positive connection between the dimensions of horizontal communication and organizational identification. However, the dimensions of vertical communication appear to be considerably more strongly connected with organizational identification than with the dimensions of horizontal communication.

Professional identification also shows a significant connection with all variables measured. The dimensions of horizontal communication correlate somewhat stronger with professional identification than with organizational identification. To test the hypotheses, structural equation modelling in Amos was used.

### **5.5.2 Horizontal and vertical communication and identification**

Figure 5.1 is an overview of the relationships between the variables. All shown relationships between the variables are significant at  $p<.01$  except for the relationship between professional identification and organizational identification ( $\beta=.20$ ;  $p<.05$ ). The overall model fitted well ( $\chi^2=48.24$ ,  $p=.000$ ;  $\chi^2/d.f.=2.84$ ;  $GFI=.97$ ;  $CFI=.97$ ;  $TLI=.94$ ;  $RMSEA=.073$ ).

Figure 5.1 also shows that professional identification is positively connected to organizational identification. Hypothesis 1 was hereby confirmed. Organizational identification is a somewhat stronger predictor of professional identification ( $\beta=.33$ ) than professional identification is of organizational identification ( $\beta=.20$ ). Hypothesis 2 was subsequently confirmed. There is a significant influence of vertical communication on organizational identification ( $\beta=.50$ ). Furthermore, Figure 1 shows that horizontal communication is a predictor of professional identification ( $\beta=.29$ ). Hypothesis 3 was hereby confirmed. The explained variances were reasonably high, particularly given the fact that in this study all communication variables were used to predict identification. Professional identification was explained for 32% by organizational identification and the measured communication variables. Organizational identification was even explained for 42%. Finally, the Figure shows that horizontal communication correlates significantly with vertical communication ( $r=.25$ ).

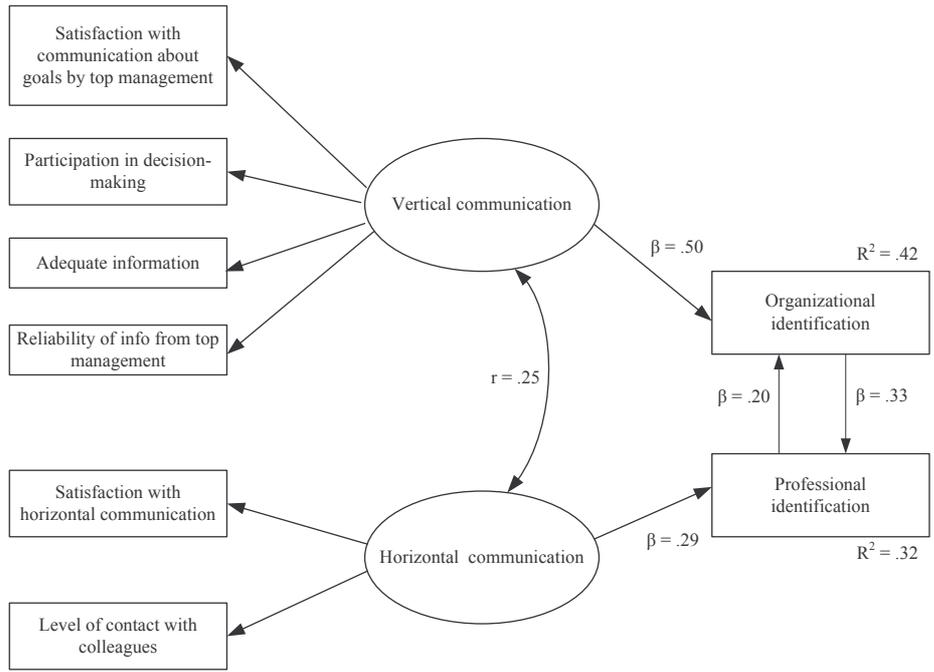


Figure 5.1 Relationships between communication variables and identification

## 5.6 Discussion

### 5.6.1 Conclusions

The findings of this study show that there is a positive connection between professional and organizational identification. This present research thus corroborates earlier studies in which positive connections were found between professional and organizational commitment (e.g. Wallace, 1995; Scott et al., 1999). It moreover appears from the current study that communication climate positively influences identification at various levels in the organization. Also Smidts et al. (2001) and Bartels et al. (2006) found a positive connection between communication climate and organizational identification. More specifically, Postmes et al. (2001) found that commitment can be better explained through vertical than horizontal communication. Earlier research [reference deleted for review purposes] already demonstrated that identification with a specific organizational level (workgroup, department) could best be predicted by the perception of communication climate on that organizational level. The added value of this study, however, is the focus on the influence of the direction

of the communication on professional and organizational identification respectively. Vertical communication is more strongly connected with organizational identification, whereas horizontal communication is more strongly connected with professional identification. Identification with the organization as a whole does not therefore depend first and foremost on the quality of contact with immediate colleagues within a workgroup or department, but more on the appreciation of the communication from and with top management.

In this study, the idea that communication climate is complex and multi-dimensional (Bartels et al., 2006; [reference deleted for review purposes]) becomes quite evident. In earlier research, particularly the intrinsic multi-dimensionality of communication climate was addressed (Dennis, 1974; Welsch and LaVan, 1981; Trombetta and Rogers, 1988; Putti et al., 1990; Guzley, 1992; Varona, 1996). Besides the various intrinsic dimensions, this current study has shown that communication climate must also be distinguished in a horizontal or vertical component as well as the fact that each component plays its own specific role when predicting various forms of identification.

### **5.6.2 Management implications**

Insight into the existence of different identities in an organization is crucially important for managing communication therein. Identifying with one's profession is not the same as identifying with the entire organization. Communication about the strategy and goals of the organization, encouraging participation in decision-making and supplying adequate information can contribute to a stronger identification of employees with the organization as a whole.

At the same time, the degree of contact with colleagues appears to be an important predictor of professional identification. By capitalizing on the interests of the professional and encouraging mutual contact, a manager can achieve more than by solely communicating organizational goals.

This research has confirmed the positive relationship between organizational and professional identification. It must nevertheless be borne in mind that professional identification is more stable than identification with an organization. This might also become apparent from the fact that organizational identification is a stronger predictor of professional identification than vice versa. A doctor could work, as it were, for more than one organization. In that respect, professional identification could have less influence on organizational identification. However, once a doctor works for a specific organization, (s)he can derive his/her identity as a doctor from that

organization. Organizational identification thus becomes a stronger predictor of professional identification than professional identification of organizational identification.

The professionals' interests are not naturally at loggerheads with those of the organization, although employees do identify themselves more strongly with their profession than with the organization they work for. A constant weighing between the importance of communication about organizational goals and individual ones would appear to be crucial here.

### **5.6.3 Restrictions of this research**

The most important restriction of this research is the cross-sectional nature of the study. As the measurement took place at a single point in time, it cannot be determined if the conclusions still apply in the long term. The solidarity with the profession is relatively safer and less dependent on external factors than the involvement with an organization. A longitudinal study could give a decisive answer as to whether the conclusions of this research still apply in the long term.

The majority of earlier studies into organizational identification were conducted in professional bureaucracies or organizations with a divisional structure (Mintzberg, 1983), often with more than 500 employees. Typical of the professional bureaucracy is that authority is derived from expertise, not hierarchy. Many norms and values from outside one's own organization (for example those of medical professional groups) determine the norms and values within the organization. Studies into organizational identification in large professional bureaucracies are numerous (e.g. Postmes et al., 2001; Russo; 1998; Scott et al., 1999; Smidts et al., 2001; Wallace, 1993). This current research was also conducted in a professional bureaucracy. On the one hand this might well produce a one-sided picture of organizational identification. On the other hand it does considerably simplify comparisons with other studies into identification processes, which enables conclusions to be generalized more easily.

### **5.6.4 Further research**

It has recently been shown that it is interesting to measure both communication climate and identification at various levels in the organization (Bartels et al., 2006; [reference deleted for review purposes]). Furthermore, various studies have demonstrated that identification with the workgroup is stronger than organizational identification, because the workgroup is more real, tangible and more accessible (Foreman and Wetten, 2002; Riketta and Van Dick, 2005; Scott et al., 1999). As is also the case with a workgroup, being a member of a professional group is much more

specific than being a member of an abstract organization (Van Knippenberg and Van Schie, 2000). One difference between workgroup identification and professional identification, however, is that a professional identity was acquired at school. This means the employee has often had a longer period of time in which to adopt the characteristics of that specific professional identity. A person can moreover identify him-/herself with a profession throughout one's entire life. This need not be dependent on the organization for which one works. People often have more in common with those with the same profession as themselves (Johnson et al., 2006). It would be interesting to include several organizational levels (such as workgroup level) in a comparison of identification processes between profession and organization. The antecedents of workgroup identification might offer more insight into the process of professional identification.

The results show that people identify more strongly with their profession than with their organization, although the reason why does not become apparent. This study did not differentiate between traditional professions. In general, traditional professions are specific ones with a clear task description, such as doctor and nurse, and general professions, such as policy worker and transport worker (Wallace, 1993). It will be interesting to find out if there is a connection between how concretely and unambiguously people experience their own profession and the degree of professional identification. Those who are of the opinion that that they do not have an unambiguous and real profession might well be able to become more strongly attached to the organization, because they can more easily derive an identity from it.

The present study was conducted at a specific point in time. Professional identification appears to be a more stable factor in someone's life than organizational identification. Longitudinal research with more moments of measurement over a period of time can answer the question to what degree differences and similarities exist in the stability of identification with different groups in an organization, and what the influence of communication climate can be thereon.

# 6

## General discussion

First, this chapter summarizes the main conclusions of the four studies conducted. Subsequently, the theoretical and management implications will be discussed. Finally, some limitations and directions for future research are described.

### **6.1 Main findings per study**

Before drawing general conclusions, in this section a brief summary will be given on the main findings per study. The most important aspect of the first study (chapter two) was the fact that organizational identification and its antecedents were investigated from a pre-merger perspective. This study confirms the assumption that if employees are aware of a forthcoming merger, they have ideas about the post-merger situation and the possible outcomes for their own situation. Communication about and before the merger process was measured as one of the possible determinants of expected post-merger identification. Furthermore, a distinction was made between employees who were directly involved in the merger process and employees who were indirectly affected by the merger. Results showed that pre-merger identification has a positive effect on expected post-merger identification. Besides, workgroup identification before the merger was positively correlated with organizational identification before the merger. Communication climate before the merger had a positive effect on expected organizational identification for the indirectly involved employees. Communication about the merger process itself had a positive effect on expected organizational identification for the directly involved employees.

Elaborating on the results of the first study, study two emphasized the multidimensional construct of organizational identification and its relationship with communication climate. In a status quo setting, employees' identification, communication climate and perceived external prestige was measured at different organizational levels. The results showed that there are positive connections between identification at various organizational levels. These correlations increased in strength if organizational levels were more closely related (e.g. correlations between workgroup and department were stronger than between workgroup and overall organization). Results further showed that internal organizational factors, such as perception of the internal communication, have a greater influence on identification with proximate organizational levels. External factors such as perceived external prestige (PEP) appear to have a greater influence on identification with the more distal levels of the organization.

In the third study (chapter four) a longitudinal approach was used to investigate the multidimensional relationship between communication climate and identification. This study was conducted in a merger context; identification and its antecedents were measured before and after the merger at two organizational levels. The results described in the earlier chapters were confirmed. Like in study one (chapter two), employees' pre-merger identification appears to be an important antecedent of their post-merger identification. Pre-merger identification primarily influenced post-merger identification at the same organizational level. Besides, like in study two (chapter three), results confirmed the idea that antecedents of employees' identification with the overall organization differ from the determinants of identification with a lower organizational level. Again, communication climate was more important in explaining employees' identification with the proximate organizational level, whereas perceived external prestige only influenced identification with the overall organization.

Finally, the fourth study (chapter five) investigated whether the direction of communication (vertical versus horizontal) mattered in having an influence on two forms of identification, professional and organizational identification. This study was conducted in a status quo setting. Like in the former studies, positive correlations were found between different forms of identification (i.e. professional and organizational identification). Furthermore, vertical communication was directly related to organizational identification and only indirectly to professional identification. Horizontal communication was a predictor of professional identification and only had indirect relations with organizational identification.

Several theoretical and management communication implications for dealing with multiple organizational identification environments may be derived from the studies. In the next section, general conclusions are drawn and theoretical implications are described.

## **6.2 General conclusions and theoretical implications**

### **6.2.1 The multidimensional nature of members' identification**

A first set of concluding remarks refers to the multidimensional nature of identification. The conducted studies confirm the idea that organizations are not holistic entities but consist of several organizational units and sub-units. Results of the studies confirm the existence of multiple organizational identification environments (Albert and Whetten, 1985; Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Brickson, 2000; Barker and Tompkins, 1994; Pratt and Foreman, 2000). In addition to Foreman and Whetten (2002), the current studies report empirical evidence for this idea. More specifically, members' identification with so-called lower-order identities (e.g. profession, workgroup or department) seems to have different antecedents than their identification with higher order identities (e.g. the overall organization). Internal communication variables seem to have more effect on lower order identities, while external variables have a stronger connection with higher order identities.

In addition to the multidimensional nature of identification, results from the current studies seem to be in line with Ashforth and Johnson's model (2001) on nested identities. This thesis gives new insight into the different forms of identification in organizations. In the discussion on how organizational members deal with competing identity claims (Pratt and Foreman, 2000; Pratt and Rafeali, 1997), the current studies show that employees perceive several organizational identities as complementary. If employees identify with proximate lower-order identities, they seem to perceive these identities as part of larger more distal organizational levels. Furthermore, if employees identify with an organization before a merger, they will also be likely to do so after the merger. All studies showed that employees' identification with lower-order identities were positively related to their identification with higher-order identities. Apparently, employees who consider themselves to be part of a proximate workgroup may perceive more distal organizational identities as an extension of their workgroup.

### **6.2.2 Organizational change and development of identification over time**

Furthermore, this thesis extends previous research on organizational identification by investigating identification processes over time. People always seem to have an idea on how organizational characteristics fit in their schema of self. Even in times of change, employees actually do have images of future organizational identities. The results imply that pre-merger antecedents affect post-merger identification at different organizational levels. Like in status quo settings, the impact of these antecedents seems to be different when comparing subordinate levels with more superordinate levels of identification. Thus people have the notion of multiple organizational identification environments at all times, in status quo settings as well as during organizational change. More specifically, organizations seem to have stable as well as unstable identity environments. This is line with Rousseau (1998) who distinguishes employees' situated identification, which could be explained as a consequence of unstable identities, versus employees' deeply structured identification with more stable identities.

More recently, Brown et al. (2006) compared identities by dividing them into central, enduring and distinctive (CED) aspects of identity (based on Albert and Whetten's 1985 definition of organizational identity) versus all possible aspects of identity. Central, enduring and distinctive, referring to the more deeply structured identification processes, the latter (all possible aspects) to situational identification. Especially in the context of organizational change (like mergers) stable organizational levels could be used as a basis for employees' identification to deal with the more unstable organizational levels. A strong sense of continuity (in the case of perceived stability of an organizational level) leads to strong identification (e.g. Terry and O'Brien, 2001; Van Knippenberg et al., 2002; Van Knippenberg and Van Leeuwen, 2001). If, consequently, employees perceive unstable organizational identities as an extension of stable ones, identification with these unstable could be influenced.

Besides, the (in)stability of superordinate (higher-order) identities could have different effects on employees' identification than the (in)stability of subordinate (lower-order) identities. As indicated, superordinate identities may have different antecedents than subordinate identities. Furthermore, stable identities have different characteristics than unstable identities. In this respect, several authors have stated that a strong, stable superordinate identity can substantially shape people's behaviour even if they identify strongly with subordinate organizational levels (Gaertner et al., 1996; Huo, Smith, Tyler and Lind, 1996; Rousseau, 1998). On the other hand, in the context of organizational change, employees' identification with these subordinate organizational levels (e.g. workgroups) may be a substitute for overall organizational

identification (Cianni and Wnuck, 1997). One could argue that this depends on which identity is stable and useful as a basis for employees' deep structured identification.

### **6.2.3. The role of communication and perceived external prestige**

A third contribution to the literature on organizational identification is that this thesis offers a better understanding of the role of organizational communication in identification processes. In commitment research, there was some strong evidence that communication had positive effect on organization commitment (e.g. Guzley, 1992; Trombetta and Rogers, 1988; Postmes et al., 2001; Welsch and LaVan, 1981) However, the results in this thesis extends Smidts et al.'s (2001) study who were the first to provide evidence that positive evaluations of communication climate had a positive effect on their organizational identification. From this thesis it appears that communication variables play an important part in shaping all kinds of different organizational identities. It does not seem to matter whether workgroup identities, professional identities, old identities or new identities are involved; perceptions of internal and external communication variables influence employees' identification.

However, the nature of the relationship between communication and identification seems to depend on whether identities are proximate or distal, and stable or unstable. Each communication component plays its own specific role when predicting different forms of identification. Apparently employees use different strategies for identification with different organizational identities (Larson and Pepper, 2003). Furthermore, Smidts et al. (2001) found that the relative impact of both communication climate and perceived external prestige on organizational identification can differ between organizations. The current studies extend this idea by suggesting that if organizational identities are salient and proximate, people seem to be able to judge communication between the members of these identities. Evaluations of this communication are subsequently used for identification with this proximate organizational level. A positive self-image is then derived from someone's evaluation of the quality of internal communication. For strong employee identification with abstract organizational levels, it is more important to have a positive image of the organization's external environment. Current studies suggest that at overall organizational level, someone's self-image and pride seems to be influenced by his/ her perceived external prestige.

### 6.3 Management implications

Employees' identification is multidimensional, develops over time and can be managed by communication. This conclusion leads to several implications for internal marketing strategies.

#### 6.3.1 Multiple organizational identification management

Managing organizations as mere 'holistic' corporate identities seems to overlook the complexity of members relationships with organizations. Using mission statements and communicating corporate values (Balmer and Wilson, 1998; Melewar and Jenkins, 2002; Van Riel and Balmer, 1997) for making the overall organization identity more accessible is only half of what is necessary to bind employees to the organization. Organizational identification cueing tactics (e.g. Scott and Lane, 2000), with the purpose of managing the salience of identities, should emphasize the existence of different organizational identification environments. Organizations are a melting pot of different organizational (sub-) identities with their own sub-climates influencing employees' identification at this specific level of the organization. Corporate identity strategies can only be useful if an actual *we* on corporate level is experienced by employees. Management has to be aware of much more *we* versus *them* situations than just on the corporate level. Trying to affect workgroup identification requires different strategies than influencing employees' identification with the overall organization. In this respect Van Dick (2004) states: 'If the team climate in an organization is perceived as problematic, nothing will change if the organization as a whole undertakes a corporate identity program. However, it might be more helpful to design programs that enhance team spirit and team identification of single units in the organization (p. 196)'.

More in general, a stakeholder approach to organizational identities could be used to managing employees' multiple identifications. In this respect, Gioia (1998) states that the development of organizational identity is a process which depends on interaction with internal and external stakeholders. Using such a stakeholder approach in managing organizational identification could also mean integrating (identity) management perspectives with marketing management perspectives (Dacin and Brown, 2006). Instead of segmenting organizations in obvious internal and external stakeholder groups (e.g. workgroup, departments, customers), management could focus on new organizational groups formed by informal networks (Cardador and Pratt, 2006). Thus, there should be more focus on organizational members as being part of different social internal and external networks instead of emphasizing (internal) employees versus (external) customers. Furthermore, using multiple

stakeholder strategies, specific marketing tools (e.g. segmentation and positioning) could be used to strengthen identification with several organizational units. In this respect, Cardador and Pratt (2006) argue that identification management for multiple stakeholders could be based on more market-oriented sub-categories. They have some alternative suggestions for this new kind of market segmentation: physical proximity, reward-based control and temporal contact. According to Cardador and Pratt, it is possible that managing the identification of customers who have fairly consistent physical proximity and contact with organizationally relevant others (e.g. as in consumption communities) will be more like managing employees' identification than it is like managing the identification of customers low in proximity and temporal contact.

In summary, using insight in marketing tools for explaining the relationship between organization and its members could be very useful in complex organizations that intertwine with different organizational environments. Managing identity salience by knowing what kind of needs different internal and external stakeholders have could be a starting point for integrating these organizational behaviour management and marketing management approaches.

### **6.3.2 Identification management and organizational change**

In times of change (e.g. mergers) initial employee identification before the actual changes, appears to have a lasting effect on employees' identification after the change. In status quo settings, proximate identities seem to be nested in more distal identities. These proximate identities are perceived as stable environments, which are the basis for identifying with more distal identities. In a merger setting, this pre-merger identification seems to play the role of proximity stable identity, which is nested in (expected) identification after a merger. As a consequence, identity management focusing on stable as well as unstable identities should be an important issue in status quo settings as well as during organizational merger processes. Monitoring and facilitating employee identification in the organization should therefore be a permanent organizational strategy.

Elaborating on the multiple stakeholder approach, in times of organizational change, management should take into account the different needs of directly and indirectly involved organizational members. Directly involved organizational members should be informed on the process of organizational change and on its positive outcomes which are directly relevant to directly involved members. Management strategies for future identification of indirectly involved employees in organizational change should emphasize the continuation of the sound relationship between indirectly and directly

involved employees, even after merger has taken place. Integral though different communication strategies could be used as a tool to shape employees' expectations of the various organizational units and sub-units.

### **6.3.3. The role of communication and perceived external prestige**

Members' identification itself is something one can not influence. However, it can be managed through communication. What kind of communication strategies should be used to strengthen identification, depends on the organizational context. However, three important communication strategies seem to emerge from the studies conducted. At organizational level members' self-esteem seems to be dependent on how outsiders view their organization. Explicit communication on the success of the organization could enhance employees' perceived external prestige, which in turn leads to stronger identification with the overall organization. Secondly, at a proximate level communication management should focus on the quality of internal relations between employees. Positive evaluations of communication climate leads to stronger member identification with proximate organizational levels. A third communication strategy is especially important in times of organizational change (e.g. mergers). Communicating on the process and outcomes of a merger should be a constant activity which starts long before a merger takes place.

More in general, management should be continuously concerned with the balance between communicating about organizational mission, goals and values and perceptions of communication within and between organizational sub-units. The outcomes of corporate communication activities should be in line with internal communication at more proximate organizational levels. Using leaflets and posters promoting mission statements and corporate values should only be used if the values communicated in these statements can easily be translated into everyday organizational life.

From a Social Identity perspective, communication management should consider emphasizing specific characteristics like self-esteem, *us* versus *them*, permeability, social mobility and status to control employees' perceptions of differences between organizational sub-identities. Self-esteem could be cultivated by confirming that employees are members of successful sub-units. Communication workgroup successes could enhance someone's pride in being part of this workgroup. However, management should be aware of the possible competition between workgroups when *us* versus *them* aspects are communicated. On the other hand, communicating aspects of perceived external prestige in times of organizational change could foster employees' organizational identification. Furthermore, *us* versus *them* comparisons at

organizational level could be used to deal with possible contradictions between different sub-units in the organization. Drawing attention to comparisons with external environments could prevent internal struggle. However, this should be guided by managing perceptions of permeability of boundaries between these sub-units in order to be able to successfully implement *us* versus *them* strategies. Symbolic management on organizational prestige could be used for influencing employees' identification with more abstract levels of the organization. While using teambuilding as a management tool to improve identification would be more appropriate for more proximate tangible organizational levels like workgroups and departments.

#### **6.4 Limitations and future research**

The current studies have some limitations and generate several ideas for future research. First, this thesis consists of a quasi-experimental case study (chapter two), two cross-sectional studies (chapters three and five) and one longitudinal case study (chapter four). Although the results in the longitudinal study confirm the ideas postulated in the cross-sectional studies, future studies could use a multi-method approach to unravel the complex relationship between stakeholders and organizations. Moreover, most of the research on organizational identification concentrates on current or past organizational members. Less is known about the antecedents and consequences of customer-company identification (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Ahaerne, Bhattacharya and Gruen, 2005). Future longitudinal field experiments could be used to shed light on how customer-company identification is influenced by organizations' marketing communications. For example, manipulating forms of communication or message contents in image campaigns on organizational values could clarify the relationship between external communication and customer-company identification. Furthermore, following the multiple stakeholder approach, the influence of these campaigns on organizational members' identification can be studied simultaneously. Besides longitudinal research designs, content analysis (on messages), social network analysis (on internal and external stakeholders), or critical incident techniques could be used in future research. For example, analysing workgroup memos and comparing them with messages on the organization's intranet, mission statements' values and organizational messages in advertising could shed more light on the relationship between the perception of communication climate at different organizational levels and actual communication content used by management or sub-groups of the organization.

Future research could also emphasize different organizational contexts. Current studies were all conducted in formal bureaucratic non-profit organizations. Future research on multiple organizational identification could extend to less formal organizational structures such as matrix structures, competing project groups or organizational agents who are company- as well as customer-oriented. Thus the idea of stakeholders being in a central versus peripheral position in a social network, which was recently addressed by Kuhn and Nelson (2002), could shed more light on nested and cross-cutting identity networks inside and outside the organization. Chapter two sheds some light on the role of directly and indirectly involved stakeholders in a merger context. Research into the relationship between communication and identification could emphasize individuals' network positions or roles (Kuhn and Nelson, 2002). Several authors suggest that employees who play a central role in social networks identify stronger with their organization (e.g. Andrews, Basler and Coller, 1999; Wasserman and Faust, 1994). However, there is still little insight into the relationship between someone's role in a social (communication) network and multiple organizational identification environments (Kuhn and Nelson, 2002). More specifically, the role of so-called boundary spanners is interesting, because they may operate as central and peripheral actors in different social networks of the organization.

According to Postmes (2003), organizational communication is multifaceted. In this thesis, the multidimensional nature of communication was recognized by distinguishing: (1) communication climate at different organizational levels, (2) horizontal versus vertical communication, (3) communication before, during and after a merger, and (4) internal communication versus perceived external prestige. Current studies give a quite differentiated as well as an overall picture of the impact of communication on members' identification with different organizational levels. However, a broader approach to communication could be used for future research. Especially chapter five, on the impact of vertical and horizontal communication on professional and organizational identification, is explorative. Although, results of this last study are clear-cut, future research in different organizational settings is necessary.

More in general, as in studies on identification, literature seems to have developed several approaches on organizational communication. Corporate communications scholars for instance draw special attention to managing corporate cultures and values (e.g. Balmer, 2001; Van Riel, 2003). Communication climate literature seems to divide scholars who believe communication satisfaction is part of communication climate on the one hand (e.g. Redding, 1972; Dennis, 1974; Smidts et al. 2001), and

scholars who state that communication climate is part of communication satisfaction (Downs and Hazen, 1977; Gray and Laidlaw, 2004). Scholars on organizational behaviour could focus more on incorporating these different approaches of internal and external communication to find out whether there are conceptual and empirical overlaps or differences in the impact on stakeholders' identification with different kind of organizational identities.

Finally, if an organization's internal marketing orientation is part of the organizational culture of this organization, research into the impact of this culture on members' identification would be important. The discussion of organizational culture as conceptual framework was beyond the scope of this thesis. (For an overview on approaches of organizational culture see for example Schein (1992), Ashkanasy et al. (2001), Martin (2002).) However, climate could be stated as a short-term more manageable condition of organizational culture (e.g. Goldhaber, 1993). Thus, if communication climate is part of a more enduring organizational culture, it would be interesting to incorporate organizational (sub-)culture as well as climate characteristics in future research. It would also be interesting to investigate if communication climate plays a mediating role between organizational (sub-culture) values and organizational identification. Integrating internal marketing orientations in the organization could become easier by managing these different communication climates.

In sum, current organizational life has numerous short-term and long-term complex multiple relationships with several stakeholders. The notion of holistic organizations having corporate cultures and using these as guidelines for organizational members' identification seems to be somewhat outdated. It would therefore be interesting in future (marketing) communication research to consider organizations more as several internal and external organizational identification environments with multiple stakeholder which could be central or peripheral in several organizational communication networks.

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## Summary

### General Introduction

People often define themselves in terms of certain group memberships. These social identities are common in current life. People see themselves as being part of a country, gender, race, political movement, sports team or organization. In turn, these groups depend on their members to survive. Tajfel (1972) defined social identity as the individual's knowledge that he (or she) belongs to certain groups together with some emotional and value significance to him (or her) of the group membership. A specific form of group identification is called organizational identification (OI). Organizational identification is a way to explain the relationship between individuals and the organization they work for. Organizational identification can be defined as the perception of oneness with or belongingness to an organization, where the individual defines him or herself in terms of the organization(s) of which he or she is a member. Organizational identification has proven to be an important factor in organizational life. Research in the past thirty years has shown that employees who identify strongly with their organization demonstrate positive attitudes and behaviours towards the organization for which they work.

Employees' attitudes and behaviours have become highly important for organizations. Many profit organizations are increasingly concerned with providing services. At the same time, non-profit organizations (e.g. universities, hospitals and police departments) are likewise becoming more service-oriented. Non-profit organizations are increasingly accountable for their results. Instead of just offering courses, performing surgery, or preserving the public order, these non-profit organizations must consider students, patients or civilians as customers who are not only affected by the organization's actions but also judge them. In these circumstances, managing employees' organizational identification appears to be a crucial success factor.

In this thesis, the relationship between employees and their organization is explored further by examining the link between employees' evaluations of organizational communication and their identification with the organization. It is assumed that effective organizational communication, in which the needs of individual employees

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are considered, may be an important instrument to manage their organizational identification.

## **Chapter 2**

In order to investigate the development of organizational identification during a merger, a quasi-experimental case study was conducted on a pending merger of police organizations. The research was conducted among employees who would be directly involved in the merger and among indirectly involved employees. In contrast to earlier studies, organizational identification was measured as the expected identification prior to the merger. Five determinants were used to explain the employees' expected identification: (a) identification with the pre-merger organization, (b) sense of continuity, (c) expected utility of the merger, (d) communication climate before the merger, and (e) communication about the merger. The five determinants appeared to explain a considerable proportion of the variance of expected organizational identification. Results suggest that in order to obtain a strong identification with the soon to be merged organization, managers should pay extra attention to current departments with weaker social bonds as these are expected to identify the least with the new organization. The role of the communication variables differed between the two employee groups: communication about the merger only contributed to the organizational identification of directly involved employees; and communication climate only affected the identification of indirectly involved employees.

## **Chapter 3**

Earlier studies have shown that perceived external prestige and communication climate influence organizational identification. Chapter 3 presents the results of a study of the influence of communication climate and perceived external prestige on organizational identification at various organizational levels of a regional police organization. In total, 314 respondents filled out a questionnaire on communication climate, perceived external prestige and organizational identification. The results of this study show that communication climate has the strongest link with employees' identification with the daily workgroup and a weaker one with the organization as a whole. It also appears that perceived external prestige has a stronger influence on the identification with the organization as a whole than on the identification at the more

concrete organizational levels (such as the department or workgroup). This research offers reasons to assume that organizational identification and communication climate are multiple constructs. If management wishes to influence organizational identification through a bottom-up process, it is wise to pay particular attention to the communication climate in the workgroups. Influencing organizational identification with the organization as a whole is better conducted through perceived external prestige.

## **Chapter 4**

Chapter 4 presents the results of a longitudinal study into the determinants of organizational identification at two organizational levels. The research was conducted in the context of a merging Dutch university. Respondents filled out a questionnaire on communication climate, perceived external prestige, job satisfaction and organizational identification four months before the merger (T1) and two years after the merger (T2). Results indicate that pre-merger identification primarily influences post-merger identification at the same organizational level. Furthermore, determinants of overall organizational identification differ from the determinants of employees' identification with a lower organizational level. Internal communication climate was especially important for the identification with the lower organizational level. Perceived external prestige only played a role in employees' identification with the overall organization. The results in this chapter underline the importance of measuring employees' identification at different organizational levels with longitudinal research designs.

## **Chapter 5**

Chapter five presents the results of an exploratory study of the relationship between (professional and organizational) identification and (horizontal and vertical) communication. A study was carried out at a large hospital with multiple locations. Findings show that although employees identify more strongly with their profession than with their organization, there is a positive connection between professional and organizational identification. The added value of this study is the focus on the influence of the direction of the communication on professional and organizational identification respectively. Vertical communication is more strongly connected with organizational identification, whereas horizontal communication is more strongly

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connected with professional identification. Identification with the organization as a whole does not therefore depend first and foremost on the quality of contact with immediate colleagues within a workgroup or department, but more on the appreciation of the communication from and with top management.

## **General discussion**

The conducted studies confirm the idea that organizations are not holistic entities but consist of several organizational units and sub-units. Members' identification with so-called lower-order identities (e.g. profession, workgroup or department) seems to have different antecedents than their identification with higher-order identities (e.g. the overall organization). Internal communication variables seem to have more effect on lower-order identities, while external variables have a stronger connection with higher-order identities. In the discussion on how organizational members deal with competing identity claims, the current studies show that employees perceive several organizational identities as complementary. All studies showed that employees' identification with lower-order identities were positively related to their identification with higher-order identities. Apparently, employees who consider themselves to be part of a proximate workgroup may perceive more distal organizational identities as an extension of their workgroup. Employees' identification is multidimensional, develops over time and can be managed by communication. A stakeholder approach to organizational identities could be used to managing employees' multiple identifications.

It appears that communication variables play an important part in shaping all these kinds of different organizational identities. It does not seem to matter whether workgroup identities, professional identities, old identities or new identities are involved; perceptions of internal and external communication variables influence employees' identification. Three important communication strategies seem to emerge from the studies conducted. First, at organizational level explicit communication on the success of the organization could enhance employees' perceived external prestige, which in turn leads to stronger identification with the overall organization. Second, at a proximate level communication management should focus on the quality of internal relations between employees. Third, communicating on the process and outcomes of organizational change should be a constant activity which starts long before a merger takes place.

More in general, management should be continuously concerned with the balance between communicating about organizational mission, goals and values and perceptions of communication within and between organizational sub-units. A balanced combination of integral and differentiated communication strategies could be used as a tool to shape employees' expectations of the various organizational units and sub-units.

In sum, current organizational life has numerous short-term and long-term complex multiple relationships with several stakeholders. The notion of holistic organizations having corporate cultures and using these as guidelines for organizational members' identification seems to be too limited. It is therefore crucial to consider organizations as internal and external organizational identification environments with multiple stakeholders who may take a central or peripheral position in various organizational communication networks.

# Samenvatting

## Algemene introductie

Mensen definiëren zichzelf vaak in termen van de groepen waar ze lid van zijn. Zo kan iemand een identiteit ontleen aan het feit dat diegene inwoner is van een land, lid wordt van een politieke beweging, zichzelf als fan van een sportvereniging beschouwd of of lid is van een organisatie. Mensen hebben deze zogenaamde sociale identiteiten nodig, maar tegelijkertijd zijn deze groepen of organisaties voor hun voortbestaan afhankelijk van de leden van deze groep. Tajfel (1972) definieerde sociale identiteit of sociale identificatie als 'de wetenschap dat een individu weet dat hij (of zij) tot een bepaalde groep behoort, met deze groep een emotionele band heeft en betekenis hieraan verleent'.

Organisatie-identificatie (of: medewerkersidentificatie) is een specifieke vorm van sociale identificatie en wordt gebruikt om de relatie te verklaren tussen individuen en de organisatie waarvoor zij werken. Organisatie-identificatie kan worden gedefinieerd als 'the perception of oneness with or belongingness to an organization, where the individual defines him or herself in terms of the organization(s) in which he or she is a member' (Mael en Ashforth, 1992, p.104). De kern van deze definitie is dat werknemers zich één voelen met de organisatie waarvoor ze werken, waardoor ze geneigd zijn zichzelf te beschrijven in termen van de kenmerken van die organisatie. De mate waarin werknemers zich daadwerkelijk verbonden voelen met hun organisatie blijkt bepalend te zijn voor het succes van deze organisatie. Onderzoek in de laatste dertig jaar heeft aangetoond dat een sterke organisatie-identificatie bijvoorbeeld leidt tot een positievere houding ten aanzien van de organisatie, meer arbeidstevredenheid, een lagere intentie om ander werk te zoeken en zelfs tot de bereidheid om financiële offers te brengen.

De aangetoonde positieve invloed van organisatie-identificatie op de houding en het gedrag van organisatieleden is van groot belang voor zowel commerciële als non-profit organisaties als gevolg van de veranderende maatschappij. Niet alleen commerciële organisaties houden zich naast het aanbieden van producten en diensten steeds meer bezig met het ontwikkelen van beleid op het gebied van customer service. Ook non-profit organisaties (bijvoorbeeld universiteiten, ziekenhuizen en de politie)

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ontwikkelen zich steeds meer tot klantgerichte dienstverlener en worden daarnaast vaker afgerekend op concrete resultaten. Denk hierbij bijvoorbeeld aan de prestatiecontracten die het ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties in 2003 heeft afgesloten met alle Nederlandse regionale politiekorpsen. Scholen, ziekenhuizen, en politieorganisaties kunnen zich niet alleen maar productgericht bezighouden met het aanbieden van opleidingen, het uitvoeren van chirurgische ingrepen of het bewaren van de openbare orde. Ze dienen studenten, patiënten of burgers te beschouwen als klanten die door het beleid van deze organisaties worden beïnvloed. Deze kritische consumenten beoordelen organisaties dan ook op basis van deze invloed op hun welzijn. In een tijd waarin ook non-profit organisaties steeds meer afgerekend worden op de kwaliteit van de diensten die ze leveren, kan het managen van medewerkersidentificatie wel eens van cruciaal belang zijn.

In dit proefschrift wordt verondersteld dat effectieve organisatiecommunicatie een belangrijk instrument kan zijn voor het managen van organisatie-identificatie. Communicatie is effectief wanneer wordt ingespeeld op de behoeften van de individuele medewerker. Hoe de evaluaties van organisatieleden over organisatiecommunicatie gerelateerd is aan hun identificatie met de organisatie, is het centrale onderwerp van dit proefschrift.

## Hoofdstuk 2

Om de ontwikkeling van organisatie-identificatie tijdens een fusie te onderzoeken, werd een quasi-experimentele case-study uitgevoerd in een ophanden zijnde fusie van politieorganisaties. Het onderzoek werd uitgevoerd onder werknemers die direct of indirect bij de fusie waren betrokken. In tegenstelling tot eerdere studies werd organisatie-identificatie gemeten als verwachte identificatie voorafgaand aan de fusie. Vijf determinanten werden gebruikt om de verwachte toekomstige medewerkersidentificatie te verklaren: (a) identificatie met de organisatie vóór de fusie, (b) gevoel van continuïteit, (c) het verwachte nut van de fusie, (d) communicatieklimaat vóór de fusie, en (e) communicatie over de fusie. De vijf determinanten bleken een groot deel van de verklaarde variantie van verwachte organisatorische identificatie te verklaren. De resultaten suggereren dat huidige afdelingen met zwakkere sociale banden zich het minst met de nieuwe organisatie identificeren. Managers die in een situatie verkeren waarin een fusie ophanden is zouden derhalve extra aandacht aan deze afdelingen moeten besteden. De rol van de communicatievariabelen verschilde tussen de twee werknemersgroepen: communicatie over de fusie zorgde alleen bij direct betrokkenen voor een sterke

organisatie-identificatie; het communicatieklimaat vóór de fusie beïnvloedde alleen de identificatie van de indirect bij de fusie betrokken werknemers.

### **Hoofdstuk 3**

Eerder onderzoek heeft uitgewezen dat gepercipieerde externe waardering en communicatieklimaat van invloed zijn op de organisatie-identificatie van werknemers. In hoofdstuk 3 staat de vraag centraal in hoeverre beide factoren van invloed zijn op de identificatie van werknemers met diverse niveaus binnen hun organisatie. Om die vraag te beantwoorden zijn er vragenlijsten verspreid binnen een regionale politieorganisatie. Uit de resultaten blijkt dat communicatieklimaat gerelateerd is aan de identificatie van werknemers met lagere organisatieniveaus (de werkgroep, de afdeling) en dat gepercipieerde externe waardering correspondeert met de identificatie van werknemers met hogere organisatieniveaus (de organisatie als geheel, het district). Deze resultaten veronderstellen dat organisatie-identificatie en communicatieklimaat multidimensionele concepten zijn. Als het management organisatie-identificatie via een bottom-up proces wil beïnvloeden, is het verstanding om vooral aandacht te besteden aan het communicatieklimaat binnen werkgroepen. Medewerkersidentificatie met de organisatie als geheel kan beter worden beïnvloed via waargenomen externe waardering.

### **Hoofdstuk 4**

Hoofdstuk 4 beschrijft de resultaten van een longitudinale studie naar de determinanten van organisatie-identificatie op twee organisatieniveaus. Het onderzoek is uitgevoerd in de context van een fuserende Nederlandse universiteit. De respondenten vulden een vragenlijst in over communicatieklimaat, waargenomen externe prestige, arbeidstevredenheid en organisatie-identificatie vier maanden vóór de fusie (T1) en twee jaar na de fusie (T2). De resultaten wijzen erop dat de medewerkersidentificatie voor een fusie de belangrijkste voorspeller is van identificatie na de fusie op het zelfde organisatieniveau. Verder verschillen de determinanten van overall organisatie-identificatie van de determinanten van medewerkersidentificatie met een lager organisatieniveau. Het interne communicatieklimaat was vooral belangrijk voor de identificatie met het lagere organisatieniveau. De waargenomen externe waardering speelde alleen een rol in medewerkersidentificatie met de overall organisatie. De resultaten in dit hoofdstuk

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onderstrepen het belang van het meten van medewerkersidentificatie op verschillende organisatieniveaus met longitudinale onderzoekontwerpen.

## Hoofdstuk 5

Hoofdstuk vijf beschrijft de resultaten van een inventariserende studie naar het verband tussen (professionele en organisatie) identificatie en (horizontale en verticale) communicatie. Het onderzoek werd uitgevoerd bij een groot regionaal ziekenhuis. De bevindingen tonen aan dat hoewel de werknemers zich sterker met hun beroep dan met hun organisatie identificeren, er een positief verband bestaat tussen professionele en organisatorische identificatie. Deze studie toont aan dat de richting van communicatie bepalend is voor de invloed op zowel professionele als organisatie-identificatie. Horizontale communicatie hangt sterker samen met professionele identificatie, terwijl de verticale communicatie sterker samenhangt met organisatie-identificatie. Medewerkersidentificatie met de organisatie als geheel hangt niet in eerste instantie samen met de kwaliteit van contact met directe collega's binnen een werkgroep of een afdeling, maar hangt meer af van de waardering van de communicatie van en met het topmanagement.

## Algemene conclusies

De gerapporteerde studies bevestigen het idee dat organisaties geen holistische entiteiten zijn, maar bestaan uit verscheidene organisatorische eenheden en subeenheden. Medewerkersidentificatie met zogenaamde *lower-order* identiteiten (zoals beroep, werkgroep of afdeling) wordt door andere determinanten beïnvloed dan medewerkersidentificatie met zogenaamde *higher-order* identiteiten (zoals business units of overall organisatie). Interne communicatievariabelen lijken meer effect te hebben op *lower-order* identiteiten, terwijl externe variabelen een sterker verband tonen met *higher-order* identiteiten.

In de discussie over hoe organisatieleden omgaan met concurrerende identiteiten, tonen de studies in dit proefschrift aan dat werknemers verschillende organisatie-identiteiten als complementair beschouwen. Met andere woorden, in de ogen van werknemers vullen de verschillende identiteiten elkaar als het ware aan. Uit alle studies bleek dat de medewerkersidentificatie met *lower-order* identiteiten positief

samenhangt met medewerkersidentificatie met de meer abstracte *higher-order* identiteiten, zoals de organisatie.

Deze medewerkersidentificatie is multidimensioneel, ontwikkelt zich in de tijd en kan beïnvloed worden door communicatie. Een stakeholder benadering van organisatie-identiteiten kan worden gebruikt als hulpmiddel voor het managen van deze medewerkersidentificatie met verschillende organisatieniveaus. Daarbij lijkt het zo te zijn dat als medewerkers zichzelf zien als onderdeel van een werkgroep of afdeling, ze de meer 'verder weg gelegen' organisatieniveaus als verlengde hiervan zien.

Communicatievariabelen spelen een belangrijke rol bij de vorming van al deze verschillende organisatorische identiteiten. Het maakt daarbij niet uit of de communicatie betrekking heeft op werkgroepidentiteiten, professionele identiteiten, vroegere identiteiten of toekomstige identiteiten: De evaluatie van interne en externe communicatievariabelen beïnvloedt in het algemeen de identificatie van werknemers. Op basis van de uitgevoerde studies kunnen drie belangrijke communicatiestrategieën worden geformuleerd. In de eerste plaats heeft expliciete communicatie over het succes van de organisatie als geheel, invloed op de waargenomen externe waardering van werknemers. Dit kan vervolgens leiden tot sterkere medewerkersidentificatie met de overall organisatie. Ten tweede dient communicatie op werkgroep- en afdelingsniveau de kwaliteit van interne relaties tussen werknemers in acht te nemen. Ten derde is communicatie over het verloop en de resultaten van organisatieveranderingen (zoals fusies) een voortdurend proces. Dit proces zou moeten beginnen ver voordat een dergelijke verandering feitelijk wordt doorgevoerd.

In meer algemene zin dient communicatiemanagement voortdurend gericht te zijn op de bewaking van het evenwicht tussen communicatie over de missie, organisatiedoelstellingen en -waarden enerzijds en de perceptie van medewerkers over de communicatie binnen en tussen organisatorische subeenheden anderzijds. Om de werknemerspercepties over de diverse organisatorische eenheden en de subeenheden te beïnvloeden, is een uitgebalanceerde combinatie van zowel integrale als gedifferentieerde communicatiestrategieën een noodzakelijk middel.

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Het getuigt dan ook van een te beperkte zienswijze wanneer organisaties benaderd worden als holistisch eenheden waarbij communicatie over 'corporate culturen' wordt gebruikt als richtlijn voor het beïnvloeden van medewerkersidentificatie. Het is daarom essentieel om organisaties te beschouwen als interne en externe organisatie-identificatie omgevingen. In die complexe omgevingen bevinden zich meerdere stakeholders die een centrale danwel perifere positie in verschillende organisatorische communicatienetwerken kunnen innemen en van daaruit betekenis verlenen aan de organisatie, communicatie en zichzelf met alle gevolgen van dien.