

‘Breaking Up is Hard to Do’: Identity Work in the HR Department

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Five key words: Human Resources Department,
Dis-identification,
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Group Identity.

Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to explore overarching themes regarding identity and the HR department. Our aim is to address some of the more recent developments in HR identity issues, such as dis-identification and how it relates to the changes that have occurred of late within the HR department.

Methodology: Our method is qualitative and our perspective is interpretivist.

Theoretical perspectives: Our frames of reference included the concept of identity work, SIT, SJT and dis-identification. We also looked at the ideas of 'dirty work'.

Empirical foundation: We studied two organizations. We conducted 17 semi-structured interviews plus several informal conversations. We also carried out some observation of work settings.

Conclusions: We believe we saw much evidence of identity work in the two workplaces we studied, both inside and outside the HR department. We believe that the members of the HR department that specifically deal with organizational strategy have had to deal with a stigma of dirty work in recent years and that it was their very response to this that triggered much of the negativity and confusion that surrounds the department to this day.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CIPD	Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (UK & Republic of Ireland)
HR	Human Resources
HRM	Human Resource Management
KIF	Knowledge Intensive Firm
SEK	Swedish Krona, the currency of Sweden
SHRM	Strategic Human Resource Management
SIT	Social Identity Theory
SJT	System Justification Theory

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

A shared interest in the HR field and HR functions led us to one day question the reason for, and the origins of, the negative spin that so often surrounds this field¹. Our initial assumptions laid much of the blame solely at the feet of other non-HR employees, those employees who had little real interaction with their own HR department and who therefore possessed poor understanding of the HR *raison d'être*. We started to question whether or not this negativity and confusion would affect the extent to which HR employees actually saw themselves as a part of, or even identified with, their organizations. This then brought us to question the very processes of identity construction and formation and caused us to wonder whether this negativity and confusion hampers or hinders identity formation for those that claim to be a part of the HR function.

Although much has been written on the subject of identity² and identity at the workplace³, we have not come across much literature dealing exclusively with the HR department and identity work. We decided that the literature regarding Social Identity Theory (SIT)⁴ would be a good starting point for our research. One of the main ideas of SIT is that personal identity can be distinguished from social identity and that group membership plays an important role in the development of social identity; 'There is the assumption that individuals have a basic need for favorable self-identity, and that the status of groups to which we belong helps us to achieve such positive self-identity...such positive evaluations are made on a comparative basis – we nourish our self-identities

¹ There are so many examples of this negativity; an article on www.managementtoday.com opened with the sentence: 'Apparently three quarters of us now think HR is either a complete waste of space, or positively harmful...' Gwyther (ed.) (2008). This negativity has even made its way onto popular television, for example on an American sitcom called *The Office*, the office manager comments '...I have a very strong prejudice against human resources. I believe the department is a breeding ground for monsters.' *The Office Quotes* (2008)

² For example: 'Self-definitions are important because they help situate individuals in the context and, thereby, suggest what to do, think, and even feel (Ashforth & Mael, 1996; Wiley & Alexander, 1987).' Ashforth and Kreiner (1999), p. 417

³ For example 'Being a team member and/or a member of the wider corporate family may then become a significant source of one's self-understanding, self-monitoring and presentation to others.' Alvesson and Willmott (2002), p. 630

⁴ There is an abundance of literature on SIT. Two examples of those that most informed and influenced our reading include: Ashforth and Mael (1989) and Korte (2007)

when ‘our’ group out performs another group.’⁵ SIT will be discussed more in depth later in this paper.

1.2 The HR function

In order to have a full understanding of the HR department, we decided that it was essential to look carefully at the history and development of the very function that lies at the heart of this research project, that of human resource management (HRM). Some argue that the key principles and practices of HRM have existed since the dawn of mankind. During tribal times, knowledge was recorded and passed down to youth regarding safety, health, hunting and gathering. Screening tests for employees have been traced to 1115 B.C. in China.⁶ Further the early apprentice system saw the master craftsman taking responsibility for the health and well being of the apprentice on the job. The Industrial Age brought about rapid changes to the worker experience. Gone were the days of a personal relationship between master and apprentice and instead workers became more expendable as the assembly line was born.⁷ Frederick W. Taylor was a prominent figure during this time. His concepts of efficiency and standardization of work routines for low-level production workers encouraged the origination of modern HRM. As employees became more disgruntled about unsafe working conditions, monotony and low wages, the personnel administration was formed in the late 1800s and early 1900s.⁸ During the 1920s the field of human relations⁹ emerged in an effort to increase productivity.¹⁰ Elton Mayo’s work, conducted between 1924 and 1932, continued to be important during the 1940’s as a greater understanding of the employee’s social needs was developed.¹¹ This importance was especially pronounced after World War II when there was a labor shortage that forced companies to pay more attention to the worker’s needs. During the 1960s and 1970s a different group of managers emerged, influenced by

⁵ Alvesson et al. (2001), p. 5

⁶ Mote (2007)

⁷ This kind of thinking was epitomized by Henry Ford, ‘who often wondered why workers brought their heads to work when all he really needed was their hands and feet’. Losey (1998)

⁸ Companies realized that they could not meet production schedules without the staff and so they formed departments to deal with basic personnel management functions, such as: employee selection, training and compensation.

⁹ Also known as industrial or personnel relations

¹⁰ New programs were implemented that included medical aid and sick benefits, vaccinations and holidays.

¹¹ The Hawthorne Studies challenged the notions of Taylorism and first introduced the idea that employee motivation affected productivity greater than the physical conditions of work.

the social upheaval in the struggle for desegregation in the United States; ‘This group of managers emphasized the relationship between employers and employees, rather than scientific management.’¹² This is considered to be the beginning of the modern concept of human resource management. The beginning of the 1980s brought about the conception of the field of Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM). The linking of strategic planning and human resources management were thought to be next step in the evolution of the field of human resources.

So HRM is a field that has thus far seen much chop and change. And it seems to be gearing up for even more. A 2007 CIPD survey states: ‘The great majority of respondents (81% of the 787) report that their HR function has changed its structure in the last five years, with just over half of these (53%) having done so in the last year.’¹³ We plan to look at the reasons behind these changes in our analysis section, and we will lean on our two target organizations for some concrete examples.

1.3 Research Focus

We felt that we should develop a greater understanding about the very concept that is identity. We also agreed that our research focus would acknowledge that major changes are indeed occurring within the field of HR, and would look at whether identity issues lie at the heart of this upheaval. We therefore decided that our research focus would be on identity work at all levels of the HR function and also to look at where the HR department is at, and to where it is heading, in two very different organizations.

We decided to focus on two organizations in completely different industries. We chose to look at Procordia Food AB (Procordia) and a Swedish University Hospital (UH)¹⁴. We decided to contact these two organizations because we felt that looking at two such different workplaces would call into play several factors that would serve to make our study more interesting. Firstly, we thought that the public sector versus the private sector

¹² Losey (1998)

¹³ Gifford (2007). This is a survey based on questionnaires filled out by 787 employees in the UK. Of these, approx 57% of respondents describe themselves as heads of HR functions, 26% say they are board members and the rest class themselves as HR managers (8%), HR experts (3%) or business partners (2%).

¹⁴ The University hospital will be referred to as the UH due to a request for anonymity.

could be an interesting aspect to look at. We wondered whether changes to a public organization HR department would occur at a slower pace than similar changes in the private sector. If this did turn out to be the case - why should this be so? Could this possibly be due to salary and/or resource differences between the two sectors? Could it be the fact that a public organization is accountable to the public for its spending practices whereas a private organization is not? Does this dependence on the taxpayer's money hinder their ability to make rapid and/or bold changes to the HR department? We also agreed that it might be interesting to compare changes occurring in a medium-sized organization with those taking place in a larger organization. We were interested to see whether size affected the role and intensity of identity processes in play.

In short, our research questions boil down to two: What has caused these recent changes within the HR function? And where is the HR department headed next?

Other questions that will keep us anchored when exploring this sea of change include: Who, or what, provided such impetus for change? What forms does identity assume in the workplace? Do identity issues lie at the heart of these changes? Could it be that the HR department themselves have finally tired of the negativity and confusion that they face every workday? Could it be that other personnel have grown tired of paying for a HR department that demands relatively high wages for a certain qualification, yet often acts out a supporting, background role?¹⁵

1.4 Aims

The purpose of this paper is to explore overarching themes regarding identity and the HR department. When we looked to the literature and theory for answers to some of our questions they were not there. Therefore, our aim is to try and fill some of the gaps in the literature. We are hoping to make a contribution to this field by delving into some of the more recent developments in identity issues, such as dis-identification and how this process relates to the HR department.

¹⁵ The thoughts of Thomas A. Stewart make for interesting reading: he reported that HR employees spend 80% of their time on basic administrative tasks. He claimed: 'Nearly every function of this department can be performed more expertly for less by others.' Stewart (1996)

1.5 Thesis disposition

We will try to achieve our aims and address our research focus by beginning with an explanation of how we actually approached this study. This will be addressed under the *Methods* section. We will then turn to our *Frames of Reference* wherein we will deal with the theories and concepts we find to be the most relevant to our research. Next we will briefly introduce the two organizations we have chosen to study in the *Case Description* section. This will then lead us to our *Analysis* where we hope to address the issues raised in our introduction and to come up with some ideas of our own with regard to what is happening within the HR function. We will then check these ideas against our data to see how they fit. We will finish up with a *Conclusion* where we plan to address avenues for future study and also the particular limitations of this research project.

2. Methods Section

2.1 Perspectives

Once we had put together a general set of research questions and issues, we decided that the next issue to be addressed was that of research strategy and approach. The methods section of a research paper is essentially where answers to procedural questions are to be found. From the very start, we both felt that our chosen method should be qualitative and that we wanted to approach our research from an interpretivist perspective.

We find it important to note here that the ‘we’ in this paper refers to two female students who are of much the same age and who have studied the same masters courses for the same length of time, under the same lecturers. We therefore approached our research with similar thoughts and like ideas. The fact, then, that we both opted for the above method and perspective may not be all that surprising and further, may not be taken as an indication that this approach was the only, or even the best, one to take.¹⁶ On the other hand, given our particular research interest and subsequent questions, we do feel that

¹⁶ ‘...I am less impressed if two U.S. students, having undergone the same training and socialization for a particular professor, agree in their judgments. Two or more persons may easily share the same biases or, to put it differently, employ the same vocabulary, ignorant of alternative languages and of ways making sense of what they see or hear.’ Alvesson (1996), p. 460

these are good vantage points from which to study our issues. Therefore, as per the following, we hold our choices to be defensible.

Firstly, it is commonly held that social science generally¹⁷ gives space to two research methods - qualitative research and quantitative research. To greatly simplify a greatly complicated area - qualitative research methods are usually employed by the researcher who is interested in studying subjects, as opposed to studying statistics. More specifically, qualitative methods ‘...start from the perspective and actions of the subjects studied...’¹⁸ and ‘...rely on nonquantitative (or nonstatistical) modes of data collection and analysis.’¹⁹ Acknowledging the argument that no great conflict exists in actuality between the two approaches, but considering that our aim was to garner depth and detail in complex organizational contexts occupied and driven by complex individuals, we found the decision to go qualitative an uncomplicated one, to say the least.

Secondly we considered interpretivism to be most the most interesting, and relevant, perspective for our particular study. It is interesting to note here the remarks of Bryman and Bell²⁰ on the gravitation of researchers towards particular research approaches. These authors report that tendencies are such that they allow for the composition of a general characteristics list for both of the above research methods. A preference for the interpretivist mode is listed as a qualitative ‘characteristic’. Prasad and Prasad sums up the essentials of interpretivism thus; ‘The goal...is not to capture some preexisting or ready-made world presumed to be available out there but to understand this process of symbolic “worldmaking” (Schwandt, 1994) through which the social world is ongoingly accomplished.’²¹ Basically, what we wanted to do with this research project was to explore our research questions via comments made by relevant individuals. We also

¹⁷ Some researchers also like to have space to combine the two methods. We use ‘generally’ because this issue has drawn some debate over time, e.g. ‘The status of the distinction (between qualitative and quantitative research) is ambiguous because it is almost simultaneously regarded by some writers as a fundamental contrast and by others as no longer useful or even simply as ‘false’ Bryman and Bell (2003), p. 25

¹⁸ Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2000), p. 3-4

¹⁹ Prasad and Prasad (2002), p. 6

²⁰ ‘As a research strategy, it (qualitative research) is inductivist, constructionist and interpretivist.’ It is important to note here that these characteristics are of a general nature and Bryman and Bell do follow up on the above statement with a qualification; ‘...qualitative researchers do not always subscribe to all three of these methods.’

Bryman and Bell (2003), p. 279

²¹ Prasad and Prasad (2002), p. 7

wanted to try to get an understanding of their understandings and their attempts at identity work. Thus, once again, we felt that the epistemological decision was an obvious one to make.²²

So Bryman and Bell make it quite clear that a qualitative researcher feeling interpretively inclined is not exactly extraordinary.²³ However there is one area in which we diverge slightly from the given character sketch and that is in our view of theory in relation to research. Theory tends to be treated by researchers either as a product or as the raw material. Bryman and Bell indicate that many qualitative researchers tend to see it as the former. However, it can also be treated as a ticket to illumination and fantasy, where ‘it is the unanticipated and unexpected... that are of particular interest.’²⁴ We are in favor of employing the latter approach in our study of SIT and the HR department, and therefore we are attempting to make use of abductive methods²⁵.

2.2 Data

2.2.1 Data generation

As has been outlined in our introduction, we undertook a study of two - very different - organizations and work settings; a large Swedish University Hospital (UH) and a medium-sized Swedish food corporation (Procordia). The empirical aspect of our study basically consisted of a total of 17 semi-structured interviews, several informal conversations with the same interviewees and some observation of work settings.

Each individual was interviewed once at their place of work; most interviews took place in the interviewee’s office with the exception of production staff interviews at Procordia and the Staff Nurse’s interview at the UH.²⁶ We felt that conducting the interviews at each interviewee’s place of work was a good idea as (a) it allowed us to observe the

²² Interpretivism is a relatively broad term, but we don’t wish to limit our study by choosing one interpretive approach in particular. We do plan to lean on hermeneutics as our central perspective, but we also plan to make use of critical voices where our analysis calls for something more, and we even lean slightly on the ideas underlying grounded theory in relation to our data analysis. This represents our attempts at reflexivity.

²³ Bryman and Bell (2003), p. 25

²⁴ Alvesson and Kärreman (2007), p. 1266

²⁵ ‘(Alvesson & Kärreman) are also the most explicit about how abduction might be furthered if researchers systematically searched for deviations in what is to be expected in particular empirical contexts given the available theory.’ Van Maanen et al. (2007), p.1153

²⁶ The reason for this was simply that these employees do not have their own offices.

general work environments, artefacts, individual offices etc. and (b) it resulted in minimal disturbance to both the organizations and to the employees. We gained access to all employees through the Personnel Service Manager at the UH and through a Senior HR Manager at Procordia. We asked our ‘contacts’ in both organizations for access to HR department personnel, and to other employees from different departments and at varying organizational ‘levels’. It was our thinking that such access would allow us to hear about relevant issues from several perspectives or standpoints. 9 of the 17 interviews took place at Procordia and the remaining 8 took place at the UH. The breakdown of interviews is as follows:

→ At the UH, interviews were conducted with:

- 1 Personnel Service Manager
- 2 Personnel Specialists
- 1 Recruitment Assistant
- 1 Controller of Division
- 1 Chief Staff Nurse
- 1 Chief Doctor
- 1 Staff Nurse

→ At Procordia, interviews were conducted with:

- 2 Senior HR Managers
- 1 Senior HR Specialist
- 1 HR Administrator
- 2 Production Managers
- 3 Production Workers

Each interview lasted between 30 – 90 minutes and was semi-structured, in that we had a list of questions (see appendices B and C) which were constructed so that they were relevant to our themes and topics, but also so that they allowed for much free conversation and indeed steering by the interviewee. The interviewers also asked further, spontaneous questions where situations allowed. All interviewees were asked to read, sign and date a simple Letter of Consent (see appendix A) before the interview began. At this stage of the interview we emphasized that all information given would be

confidential and that no individual names would appear in our final paper. We believed that this underlining of confidentiality could increase the chances of our interviewees speaking more freely and openly. This, we hoped, would lend more authenticity and trustworthiness to our collected data and therefore to our study. Finally, all interviewees agreed to future contact by phone or by email were further questions to arise during our data analysis process.

We feel it is important to include some notes here in relation to sampling. While we essentially heard voices from the various organizational areas/levels we had requested, due to several factors, we did - to an extent - rely on convenience sampling. Firstly, there was the language 'issue'. Swedish is the language used on a day-to-day basis at both of the organizations we were working with. While this did not seem to be any obstacle in gaining access to the organizations themselves, we feel that it may well have influenced who was available for interviewing. Further it is possible that the flow and direction of some of the actual interviews suffered slightly where an interviewee struggled with finding the perfect term and phrase, and equally where the interviewer struggled with coming to the interviewee's assistance without leading or biasing answers. Fortunately, this problem was atypical but, nevertheless, it deserves some acknowledgement. Secondly, there was a strike by The Swedish Association of Health Professionals in motion before and during our interview period. We feel this may also have affected the availability of certain interviewees at the UH. Finally, our own time constraints meant that we had to cancel various interviews scheduled for later dates by our two contacts. These interviews could well have provided a more comprehensive data set for us to work from.

2.2.2 Data analysis

All interviews took place in the first/second week of May 2008 and all, except for two, were recorded.²⁷ As soon as possible after recording, each sound file was converted to

²⁷ One personnel specialist preferred not to be recorded, but agreed to allow the interviewer to take notes. 6 pages of notes were therefore taken during this particular interview. During a second interview with a HR Manager, the recording equipment failed. However, the problem was realized almost immediately and so notes were taken during the

the written form. Unfortunately, time constraints meant we stopped just short of transcribing all of our collected data verbatim, but we spent much time listening, and re-listening, to each recording and taking extremely detailed, accurate notes for later analysis and study.²⁸ Further, we kept saved copies of all recordings so that they could be accessed at any time should the need arise. Several informal conversations with interviewees, in particular with our two contacts, also took place - in addition to all initial contact concerning access. These informal conversations concerned general organizational issues, and included discussions on organizational structure and culture. These meetings were not recorded, but notes were simultaneously, or soon thereafter, made so as to reduce possibilities of error or inaccuracy as much as possible. Upon compilation of our notes and observations, we went through everything we had thus far collected and then identified five major themes that we considered to be omnipresent in the data.²⁹ We then loosely grouped all comments, statements and interpretations on the grounds of theme. Sorting through the data in this way allowed us to approach our data analysis process in a more structured, organized way. Finally, then, we re-contacted some interviewees with further questions where we found answers to be somewhat imprecise or unclear.

2.3 Possible limitations of the study

We are aware that the decision to rely on interviews as our main source of empirical data means that we must be very careful when reflecting upon our collected data. As Kuhn stated: ‘Interpretive methodologists have long questioned an exclusive reliance on interviews, holding that responses cannot be assumed to provide unmediated access to psychological states or external organizational realities, and may be better understood as the product of the local context or self-presentation concerns.’³⁰ Alvesson has also noted that an interview represents a ‘socially and linguistically complex situation. It is important not to simplify and idealize the interview situation...’³¹ We have tried to avoid

interview and more were taken immediately afterwards. We therefore feel that the data taken from both of these meetings is both reliable and accurate.

²⁸ These interview notes amounted to approx. 60 pages of interviewee statements and observations.

²⁹ These themes were: Identity work, (Mis-)Understanding, Relationships, Value/Worth and Integration.

³⁰ Kuhn (2006), p. 1344

³¹ Alvesson (2003), p. 14

any over-reliance or over-simplification by attempting to remain constantly aware of the limitations and restrictions of our methodological choices while analyzing and understanding all collected data. Further we tried to prepare ourselves by researching the actual setting up of the interview setting, and by familiarizing ourselves with qualitative interview techniques and ideas before any of said interviews actually took place.³²

We hope that our attempts to remain aware and prepared, throughout this entire research project, add to the authenticity and trustworthiness of this study.

3. Frames of reference

In this section, we will introduce the five theoretical ideas and concepts that we find to be most relevant to our research findings and our understandings. We will then further explore each idea, and the relationships between these ideas, in the next section.

3.1 Identity work

In our introduction, we drew on Ashforth and Kreiner's definition of identity as a 'sense of self'. It is therefore no great stretch to define identity work as attempts to construct that very sense of self. Alvesson and Sveningsson have defined identity work as: '...people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness.'³³ One interesting aspect of this concept, one that may not be so immediately apparent, is the idea that this type of work is potentially unending; '...on-going struggles around creating a sense of self and providing temporary answers to the question 'Who am I? ('Who are we') and what do I (we) stand for?'³⁴

Many individuals and many disciplines have successfully challenged the notion that individuals construct and hold firm to a stable identity for life. Because of the focus of this paper, we will confine ourselves here to identity work in the workplace. And

³² We drew on many 'how to' guides on the qualitative interview, for example Bryman and Bell (2003); also <http://www.public.asu.edu/~kroel/www500/Interview%20Fri.pdf> and www.socsci.uci.edu/~cohenp/regwe/intrain.pdf

³³ Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003), p. 1165

³⁴ Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003), p. 1164

organizational literature is rife with papers peddling the idea that identities seldom sit still.³⁵ Empirical studies detail employees describing themselves, and, presumably then, seeing themselves, in terms of their organization or perhaps their workgroup. But what happens when that employee leaves that firm? Or when the organization decides some sort of makeover is needed, and that same employee is thrust into another workgroup? Identity work is therefore seen as a somewhat disruptive, often uncomfortable activity where the individual involved has mixed feelings about self and surroundings. It is essential that individuals be able to engage in some restoration work and identify somehow, elsewhere. It is important to add that this doesn't mean why's and who's are necessarily ever-present in everyone's everyday life, but the basic idea is that they will, and do, crop up in times of change or insecurity; 'Identity work may either, in complex and fragmented contexts, be more or less continuously on-going or, in contexts high on stability, be a theme of engagement during crises or transitions...Conscious identity work is thus grounded in at least a minimal amount of self-doubt and self-openness...'³⁶

3.2 Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory (SIT) is a social psychological perspective conceived by Henri Tajfel³⁷ and John Turner³⁸ in 1979. SIT is based upon the concept that people tend to classify themselves and others into particular social categories, such as organizational membership, gender, age or religious affiliation. Social categorization serves two functions. Firstly, it helps individuals to systematically define others, thus sorting out their social environment. A person is given the characteristics associated with the particular category assigned, possibly leading to the unreliability of stereotyping. Secondly, individuals can then define who they are or make sense of themselves, in relation to the social environment. The social categorization process tends to exaggerate the similarities of those in the same group and exaggerate the differences between those in different groups. The primary motive for these exaggerations is to enhance self-esteem.

³⁵ 'The growing body of empirical evidence continues to indicate how important it is to give full recognition to the active 'work' which people do on their identities.' Watson (2008), p. 125

³⁶ Alvesson and Willmott (2002), p. 626

³⁷ 1978, 1981; Tajfel and Turner 1985

³⁸ 1975, 1982

SIT characterizes the concept of self as containing a personal identity and a social identity. Personal identity refers to the specific attributes of a person, i.e. physical features, traits and characteristics. Social identity is formed primarily from a person's perceived and/or real memberships in certain groups. Therefore, social identification³⁹ occurs when individuals feel they are connected to a group in some way. Ashforth and Mael characterize social identification as 'a perception of oneness with a group of persons.'⁴⁰ By adopting the identity of the group, the personal identity recedes to the background, and the identity as a member of the group becomes more important.⁴¹ Under the influence of social identity, individuals may demonstrate behavior that conflicts with their personal identities.⁴² Korte explains that, 'as group members, individuals may take or advocate more extreme positions than they might personally. Essentially, groups ascribe an identity, along with its behavioral norms, values, and beliefs, to their members, as well as to other groups.'⁴³ Research has found that the power of social identity is generally more powerful than personal identity.⁴⁴

Another important component of Social Identity Theory is that of social comparison. Social comparison refers to the process of comparing one's own social group to that of others. SIT proposes that people strive to maintain a positive social identity when comparing their social group (in-group) with other groups (out-groups). Thus, a positive comparison would help to enhance their self-esteem. Some groups have more power, prestige or status than others groups, so by comparing two groups against each other, group status can be determined. In the event of an unfavorable comparison, the group member may try to leave the group, find ways of bolstering the group's identity or even compare it to a group with a lower status.

To illustrate the concept of SIT further, it is important to understand the study that Tajfel based it upon.⁴⁵ Schoolboys were randomly assigned groups, which were as meaningless

³⁹ Ashforth and Mael (1989) use social identification and group identification interchangeably.

⁴⁰ Ashforth and Mael (1989), p. 20

⁴¹ Korte (2007)

⁴² Ashforth and Mael (1989)

⁴³ Korte (2007), p. 169

⁴⁴ Hogg and McGarty (1990)

⁴⁵ Tajfel (1970)

as possible. They were then asked to assign points to members of both their groups and other groups, anonymously. The study concluded that even under the most minimal conditions in-group favoritism occurred. In-group bias has been found to be pervasive, in the SIT research. Group members are prone to think that their group is superior to other groups. This is a manifestation of the need for a favorable or positive group identity.

3.3 System Justification Theory

System Justification Theory (SJT), first advanced by Jost and Banaji in 1994, gives one perspective on how group members respond to external threats against their status and identity coming from stigmatization. SJT proposes ‘that tainted groups accept, internalize, and even promulgate their own less-than-desirable position relative to others in society.’⁴⁶ Jost and Banaji thought that stereotypes act to justify an ideology and ‘therefore legitimate the status disadvantages associated with the status quo.’⁴⁷ People often go along with this status quo even if it is detrimental to them. The research indicates that stigmatized groups engage in ‘negative in-group stereotyping, out-group favoritism, internalized inferiority, low collective esteem, and in-group disidentification.’⁴⁸

One question that Jost thought had not been properly answered was ‘why do people engage in system justification?’⁴⁹ According to Kreiner et al.⁵⁰ at least three reasons have been given. The first is that people believe in a ‘just world.’ Blasi and Jost paraphrasing Melvin Lerner⁵¹ put it best: ‘Human psychology is such that we tend to assume that people (including ourselves) get what they deserve and deserve what they get.’⁵² The second reason given is that group members want to accept the status quo view because it helps them to ‘reduce the inconsistency between what they think they deserve and what they get.’⁵³ The third reason is that rejecting or challenging the authority of institutions is extremely hard for people. This acceptance of the dominant ideology is argued to produce

⁴⁶ Kreiner et al. (2006), p. 623

⁴⁷ Kreiner et al. (2006), p. 623

⁴⁸ Kreiner et al. (2006), p. 623

⁴⁹ Jost (2001), p. 101 as quoted in Kreiner et al. (2006), p. 623

⁵⁰ Kreiner et al. (2006)

⁵¹ Lerner (1980) as quoted in Blasi and Jost (2006)

⁵² Blasi and Jost (2006) p. 1124

⁵³ Kreiner et al. (2006), p. 623

what Karl Marx calls false consciousness. False consciousness is defined as ‘beliefs that are contrary to one’s personal or group interest and which thereby contribute to the maintenance of the disadvantaged position of the self or the group.’⁵⁴ The status hierarchies of today’s modern occupational structure will clearly produce dis-identification by certain groups within them. To put it more simply, SJT helps to explain why stigmatized groups will lean towards dis-identification.

3.4 Dis-identification

From the above sections, it is clear that identity in the workplace that has long been recognized as not only a very interesting, complicated area to study, but also a potentially lucrative one to exploit. The idea that employees can and do form new identities at certain stages of life means an opening has appeared where organizations can try to manage or control the direction of the new identification work, for example; ‘At the organizational level, leaders seek to strengthen member identification because it is thought to facilitate a firm’s adaptation to change through its retention of a loyal workforce despite disruptions of work conditions (Pfeffer 1994).’⁵⁵

For all of these reasons, SIT and identity work have become regulars in organizational literature. There is, however, one aspect of identity work that has been surprisingly neglected - the concept of dis-identification. Spicer explains that dis-identification essentially involves ‘...a sense of active separation between one’s own identity and the identity of another group, and a negative categorization of this other group.’⁵⁶ Obviously this can be contrasted with identify work where, to draw once again on Alvesson and Sveningsson’s definition, the focus is on ‘coherence’ and ‘distinctiveness’. Dis-identification marks the definite move away from a group and an identity and therefore works by highlighting differences. It is interesting to note that different authors have given different labels to this same process, for example Fiol talks about

⁵⁴ Jost and Blasi (1994), p. 3 as quoted in Kreiner et al. (2006), p. 623

⁵⁵ Or a more poststructuralist approach: ‘... Willmott (1993) emphasizes that management is more concerned to promote a hegemonic, insidious form of control that works by subsuming individual identity and inhibiting critical self reflection and individual choice... In this way the expression of individual identity and values is overwhelmed by the value systems of the corporation.’ Robertson and Swan (2003), p. 837

⁵⁶ Spicer (2006), p. 4

‘deidentification’⁵⁷. Fiol sees the deidentification process as ‘...events that signal that the present framework for understanding no longer works...Deidentification leads to a temporary loss of meaning that spells ambiguity and uncertainty and opens the space for new possibilities.’⁵⁸ Further, Lewin talks about the ‘unfreezing process’⁵⁹ as a ‘loosening of individual ties to a group identity.’⁶⁰ The difference between the labels seems to lie with the proportion of negativity the author understands the process to embody. Some authors understand the process to be purely negative – a move away from a group and the associated identity. But others seem to envisage a positive dimension to the process. How does this work?

It is important to be aware that the loss or loosening described above can affect some individuals quite strongly. Keeping in mind the idea that ‘Individuals identify with a group for a sense of pride, involvement, stability, and meaning’⁶¹; when something happens to sever or weaken identity ties, it means questions will quickly start bubbling back up to the surface. ‘Social identification is the perception of oneness with or belongingness to some human aggregate. As such, social identification provides a partial answer to the question: Who am I?’⁶² It is therefore important for individuals to be able to actively indulge in creative identity work when doubt has been cast upon their understood identity. And so, we agree with those authors who hold that dis-identification should also have a ‘positive’ dimension, a production element: ‘...dis-identification work can also involve creative action...It is creative insofar as it establishes and affirms a certain collective identity.’⁶³ We will discuss these ideas further in the analysis section of this paper.

To his study on dis-identification, Spicer adds an interesting, cautionary note about the creative phase: ‘This is danger that if an organization gains its identity from establishing itself in contrast to another group, it may remain trapped in a kind of ‘negative’ identity

⁵⁷ Fiol (2002)

⁵⁸ Fiol (2002), p. 659

⁵⁹ Lewin (1951) quoted in Fiol (2002), p. 655

⁶⁰ Lewin (1951) quoted in Fiol (2002), p. 656

⁶¹ Korte (2007), p. 170

⁶² Ashforth and Mael (1989), p. 21

⁶³ Spicer (2006), p. 14

(Brown, 1995). This is particularly pertinent in organizations or movements where collective identity is established on the basis of harm done by the group which we seek to dis-identify from.’⁶⁴ In a warped way this leads this dis-identifying group bound to the original group thus entering a spiral of negativity that is presumably in neither groups interests; ‘There is the assumption that individuals have a basic need for favourable self-identity, and that the status of groups to which we belong helps us to achieve such positive self-identity.’⁶⁵

3.5 Dirty Work

Dirty work is a concept that was introduced to the identity field by an American sociologist named Everett Hughes.⁶⁶ He originally used the terms to refer to tasks or jobs that would be seen as disgusting, degrading or demeaning to the people who performed them. Society assigns these tasks to individuals and then stigmatizes them for doing them, even though they are a ‘necessary evil,’ in a sense. Douglas’⁶⁷ work on purity and pollution helps explain this concept further. He argues that ‘societies equate cleanliness with goodness and dirtiness with badness, such that cleanliness and dirtiness assume moral overtones.’⁶⁸ Two articles written by Ashforth and Kreiner have also contributed hugely to the concept. Building on the previous ideas, they identify two criteria as ‘seminal’ to the concept of dirty work; ‘...dirty work is both necessary and polluting and, thereby, that the work threatens to brand the workers themselves as polluted.’⁶⁹ Therefore, people who deal with pollution, or perform dirty work, must be somehow separated from the rest of society to maintain the order of cleanliness.

Early work on occupational stigmas conducted by Goffman⁷⁰ and Hughes⁷¹ posed three ways that a person or group could be stigmatized: through physical, social or moral taints. Neither author specified exactly what they meant in each category. However, later work

⁶⁴ Spicer (2006), p. 14

⁶⁵ Alvesson et al. (2001), p. 5

⁶⁶ (1951)

⁶⁷ (1966)

⁶⁸ Ashforth and Kreiner (1999), p. 416

⁶⁹ Ashforth and Kreiner (1999), p. 416

⁷⁰ (1963)

⁷¹ (1951, 1958)

by Ashforth and Kreiner⁷² elaborated upon all three. They developed two criteria for each of the three forms of taint derived from their reading of research on dirty work and occupational stereotypes. Physical taint refers to occupations that are directly in contact with garbage or death (e.g., janitor or embalmer) or ‘performed under highly noxious or dangerous conditions (such as roofers or soldiers).’⁷³ Social taint refers to occupations that have regular contact with stigmatized groups (e.g., public defenders because of their close contact with people the general public consider to be guilty) or occupations that have some sort of servile relationships built into them (e.g., maid or customer service clerk). ‘Moral taint refers to occupations that are regarded by a significant portion of society to be sinful or of dubious virtue (such as erotic dancers or pawnbrokers) or in which deceptive or intrusive methods are commonly used (e.g., telemarketers or repossessioners).’⁷⁴

4. Case Description

As mentioned earlier, our two research organizations are: a Swedish University Hospital and Procordia Food AB.

The UH in question is one of Sweden’s leading university hospitals. It is a large hospital that has secured a name and a reputation in several fields that transcends Swedish borders. It has an annual turnover of over SEK 3 billion and has a long history⁷⁵. 2000 or so patients are seen at this UH on a daily basis and over 500 medical and nursing students train here at any given time. Healthcare, research and education are counted as the three main tasks performed here. According to the Personnel Service Manager at this UH, knowledge is extremely important: ‘...good healthcare and then research...We are a knowledge organization. Well, we’d like to think we are...’ This hospital holds approximately 7000 in its employ and boasts a complex organizational structure. Six main Divisions⁷⁶ can be counted here, as can many more clinics - all of which are linked

⁷² (1999)

⁷³ Kreiner et al. (2006) p. 620

⁷⁴ Kreiner et al. (2006) p. 620

⁷⁵ Figures as presented on an introductory document for all new recruits and jobseekers.

⁷⁶ The divisions are as follows: Emergency, Medicine, Reconstructive surgery, Pediatrics/urology/gynecology, Psychiatry, Laboratory medicine.

to one of the six Divisions. The HR function at this UH has, at the behest of Division bosses, undergone a relatively recent overhaul.⁷⁷ Certain aspects of the HR function were deemed not available or accessible enough to satisfy the needs of the Divisions; namely those provided by the personnel service section. The much shuffling and reshuffling which followed this announcement gave birth to four separate, yet connected, groups; ‘We are four different teams, in each team we are four specialists...we try to help each other when questions are difficult.’⁷⁸ Each group has been charged with looking after, and dealing with problems of, particular divisions and clinics; ‘We are not a HR department, we are part of the function, we are in the divisions now.’⁷⁹ Approximately 100 people (assistants and specialists) work with HR tasks at this UH.

Procordia Food is one of Sweden’s top food corporations. They are one of the leading producers and marketers of food products in Sweden. According to one employee, their goal is ‘to continue to be strong on the market and also to grow...’ (Senior HR Manager). They were founded in 1995 through the merger of Felix, Ekströms and Önos. Those three companies are part of their strong brand names, others include: BOB, Risifrutti, FUN Light and Grandiosa. The product range consists primarily of pizza, ready meals, pickled vegetables, fruit and berry products, sauces and potato products. The organization has about 1500 employees in eight locations around Sweden.⁸⁰ Their biggest plant is located in Eslöv and that is where the interviews were conducted. They have a staff of about 770 employed in Eslöv.

Procordia Food’s annual turnover is about 3 billion SEK. They are the market leader in Sweden in 20 of the 25 product segments where they are active. Procordia Food’s volume of sales is 212,000 tons a year. The Norwegian company Orkla ASA, which bought Procordia in 1995 from its owner Volvo, owns Procordia Food. In 1996 BOB was incorporated into Procordia Food. Orkla ASA has about 34,000 employees and has a

⁷⁷ We find it noteworthy here that when asked about these changes many of the hospital interviewees seemed nonplussed; for example ‘There is always some change here.’ [Controller of Division]

⁷⁸ Personnel Specialist at the UH

⁷⁹ The UH Personnel Manager.

⁸⁰ Seven of the eight locations, are manufacturing plants and they are located in Vansbro, Örebro, Kumla, Färjestaden, Fågelmara, Tollarp and Eslöv. One is a subsidiary, located in Åhus.

turnover of about 14 billion Norwegian kronor. Orkla was described by one employee as being ‘as big in Norway as Ericsson is in Sweden’ (Senior HR manager). They manufacture in 40 plants in Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Austria, the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, Estonia and Lithuania. Procordia Food and Orkla have a combined total of 350 years of experience in developing, manufacturing and marketing food.⁸¹

The actual HR department of Procordia is quite small; consisting of about 7 people. Even though they are a relatively small department, one manager said that ‘HR has a helicopter view of the whole organization.’ Each person has their own area of expertise, divided along the lines of recruitment, organizational development, union negotiations, production work, administration, quality, health, safety and environmental issues. One HR employee described HR as having ‘contact with every division.’ The main HR team has offices in the headquarters at Eslöv. They also have HR ‘contact people’ who work in the factories.⁸² They describe themselves as being a tight-knit department who works very closely together.

5. Analysis

5.1 Identities in motion

As was mentioned in the methods section, we identified various themes from the data that we collected. The theme that we found to be most prominent was that of Identity Work. It was therefore important for us, as a first step, to agree on the various types of identity that would be most relevant to our discussions and research. We took the idea of individual identity to task first. We felt that this idea, at its simplest, referred to the notion of ‘Me, Myself and I’, or perhaps more eloquently, to the ‘sense of self’.⁸³ Giddens preferred to define it thus: ‘Self-identity...is the self as reflexively understood by the person...’⁸⁴ It is important to note here that individual identity exists at a personal and a

⁸¹ Procordia Food (2008)

⁸² Note: none of the ‘contact people’ were interviewed.

⁸³ Many authors seem to rely on ‘sense of self’ to explain the concept of identity. We came across it first in Ashforth and Kreiner (1999)

⁸⁴ Giddens (1991) p. 53 as quoted in Alvesson and Willmott (2002), p. 626

social level⁸⁵. The second identity idea we were interested in exploring is that of group identity. Group identity essentially refers to the finding of an association with a particular group. When Ashforth and Mael discuss group identification, they see it as the individual perception of being ‘...psychologically intertwined with the fate of the group.’⁸⁶ Finally then, we considered organizational identity to be important to this study. There are many different definitions of organizational identity in the literature; however, Alvesson and Empson seem to have hit a good note with their definition: ‘...we use the expression organizational identity to convey the idea that organizational members construct a common perception of their organization as having certain key characteristics, as being distinctive from other organizations in some respects, and as showing a degree of continuity over a period of time and in varying circumstances.’⁸⁷

Now that we have outlined the three types of identity that we consider to be relevant in this paper, we will next analyze how those types of identity actually play out in our two targeted workplaces. We are interested in whether or not those three different types of identity do exist, whether one type clearly dominates and what is happening in terms of actual identity work in these organizations.

5.1.1 Individual identities

Beginning first with the UH, we can clearly see evidence of individual identities in play. Direct questions concerning the individual’s own identity that were asked during the interviews were frequently met with comments like: ‘the work is just a part of my life...I am me...I have my personality, part of me is my job...I am myself’ (Chief Doctor). Some interviewees acknowledged the presence of work in their own individual identities in a neutral way: ‘...you see yourself through who you are at work...’ (HR Specialist), and some in a more negative way: ‘There is too much work in my identity...I’m only mom at the weekend...’ (HR Specialist). One interviewee at the UH made an interesting observation when asked about her own personal identity: ‘The most important...is the

⁸⁵ ‘According to social identity theory, self-definitions are an amalgam of the idiosyncratic attributes (e.g., assertive, ambitious) and social identities (e.g., gender, occupation) that are most relevant...’ Ashforth and Kreiner (1999), p. 417

⁸⁶ Ashforth and Mael (1989), p. 21

⁸⁷ Alvesson and Empson (2008), p. 2

role as a mother and wife, family stuff and then the working identity is also very, very important...but in different periods of life this differs...'

Individual identity is also evident in Procordia. Firstly, it is clear that some people have thought about their individual identities before. For example, a production manager who was asked how important her occupation was to her identity responded: 'I've been trying to answer this question for myself.' While others struggled more with the concept, 'I don't see myself. I haven't thought about it' (Production worker). Many people wanted to make clear distinctions between who they were at work and who they were at home; 'You're always two different people, one here [at work] and one at home' (Production worker). Interestingly, in response to a question about the importance of occupation to identity, similar responses came from two additional production workers: 'I'm not my job, I'm me...here, of course, my job and me go hand and hand. Outside, I'm not my job' and 'Of course, it's a part of me when I'm doing my job but the work is not me.' A couple of the people interviewed spoke about the circular aspect of their individual identity, as is shown in these examples: '...I also think how things are in your private life naturally affects how you are in your professional life...' (Production Manager) or 'If the work is functioning good and the family is functioning good, you feel good. It's a circle' (Production Worker).

5.1.2 Organizational identities

In the UH, any references to the organization as a team seemed to invite initial hesitation and restrained agreement. For example, when asked whether the UH was a team, the Controller of Division responded: 'No, unfortunately...you have different clinics, different departments, even in the administration you can see very much different cultures but I think its because there is a lot of people – its almost impossible to get the same culture with so many people and they don't try to either...' This reluctance to label the UH a 'team' was usually put down to size, for example the Recruitment Assistant, in discussing the idea of the UH as a team, put her reluctance to agree to the tag down to the fact that her workgroup had 'not so very much' contact with others in the hospital. She explained that the UH was 'such a big place...very big wards...so many people.' A

Personnel Specialist at the UH was in complete agreement: '(the UH) is a very large hospital with departments placed in different houses which makes it easy for either house to make their own culture...' Another Personnel Specialist likened each clinic at the hospital to 'a small company'. Any references to an actual organizational identity, or a 'we' which referenced the whole hospital, usually came after initial negativity and was usually in reference to another (type of) workplace, for example '...we hear all the time that the private industry do things like this, like that...things that we could never do with our employees...it's a very different organization' (Chief Staff Nurse). The most common comparison made was between the UH [1] and another large UH [2] with which 'our' UH frequently collaborated and consulted '...a (UH [1]) spirit, absolutely...it's a nice hospital but we are in the shadow of (UH [2]) somehow...we talk a little bad about them...there is competition...it is old bullshit...' (Chief Staff Nurse).

Overall, a sense of the organization being a team seemed to be quite strong in Procordia. Many of the interviewees described a shared connectedness. One of the production workers put it like this: '...in some ways it's [the organization] linked together.' The Senior HR manager described it as: 'We are a team in the way that we are depending on each other.' Some even went so far as to say that they perceived Procordia to be like a family in some ways. However, most interviewees were in consensus that there was still work to be done before the entire organization could be labeled a team. 'We have to do more to find the team spirit of Procordia. To look at the whole value chain and find respect for other functions' (Senior HR Manager). Another employee described the struggle to get there by saying: 'I see Procordia as having an ambition to be a team...we're not there yet' (Senior HR Manager). There were some employees who felt especially invested in the company and they felt that others, who had worked at Procordia awhile, were as well. The following comment from a production manager was quite interesting in that respect: 'I've seen every turn the company has made for the past ten almost twenty years. So it feels like you have some kind of responsibility of what's happened to this company. I think that's a strength for Procordia. We have a lot of workers here and staff, who have been here for quite a long time and feels this way about the company.'

5.1.3 Group identities

Group identities play a very large role within the UH. We believe that there is space here for chicken and egg style questions in that this may well be either the result or the cause of a weak or a less salient organizational identity. In any case, it is important to note here that the word ‘group’ allows for various possibilities; when we refer to the prevalence of group identities in this paper, we are sometimes referring to a professional identity, sometimes a workgroup or departmental identity and sometimes to both. In the UH case, we believe that we can see evidence of both workgroup and professional identities. For example when the Staff Nurse was asked about her clinic, she enthusiastically explained ‘...our clinic is very special...you can go and ask anybody...it’s wonderful...it is a very positive clinic...we are very easily helping each other... we are a great team from top to bottom.’ This is similar to another, somewhat less effusive, response to a question about the recruitment team: ‘we have a good group, we have fun...we work well together...we are very important for all employees...’ (Recruitment Assistant). The Chief Staff Nurse mused: ‘We are very important...where would the hospital be without the surgical ward?’

Evidence of professional identities is also ever present, with much reference made in interviews to particular staff qualifications and specializations. For example the HR Manager at the UH underlined how well qualified doctors are: ‘specialists have up to 11 years higher education’, and a HR Specialist did the same for nurses: ‘Nurses are very career-minded...very interested in specializing, very focused on that.’ The HR Manager also explained that most of the HR personnel now working at the UH have specific HR qualifications. She deems it essential for those applying to HR positions to hold a HR qualification. She also reflected specifically on professional identity within the HR function: ‘identity would also have been created in their university years...its not the piece of paper but the years of socializing with others that study the same as you that makes you feel a part of something...it’s the other people that are in the field.’

Departmental identity was clearly demonstrated in the case of Procordia. Comments were mainly positive, for example the HR Administrator spoke highly of her department. The

strength of this identification centered on her understanding that within her department, roles were similar. She described herself as a very caring person and also said: ‘...we care a lot about our employees to see that they can reach their goals.’ Also, when asked whether Procordia was a team, a Production Manager responded: ‘Production factory is a team...when you work in production you really must be one in the team. You [should] not be one player, [you should not] play for yourself.’ So instead of responding about the entire organization, he focused his attention on his department. This could indicate that he has a very strong workgroup identity; likewise it could also indicate that he does not have a strong degree of organizational identity. On the other side of things, the HR department also expressed how well they worked together as a department with the following response: ‘...we all understand each other. We are involved in each other...I hope that our employees can see that, that we are really connected here at the HR department’ (HR Administrator).

In conclusion we feel confident in asserting that each of the three identity types do indeed exist in the UH and in Procordia. Further, we understand the data to indicate that these identities appear to both grow and diminish over time and often appear to exist simultaneously - this understanding also finds support in much organizational literature: ‘Shifting identity positions is certainly common in contemporary work life...’⁸⁸ We also see indications that different identities appear more dominant in different workplaces. In the UH we saw signs that group identities were beating stronger and faster than one, overall organizational identity; but with Procordia we got the feeling that group identities and organizational ideas were almost on par. Several interesting suppositions find space here. Perhaps it is the case that it is just the way that these two particular organizations operate and therefore these signs have no general applicability. Or perhaps it is the case that it is simply easier to plant and grow an organizational identity where your acreage is smaller and more manageable. Perhaps it is even the case that any workplace that lays claim to so many professionals, and professional identities, has less chance of cementing a single organizational identity. As we have already mentioned earlier, organizational identity is seen by many an author to be an effective regulatory tool: ‘We regard identity

⁸⁸ Alvesson et al. (2006), p. 12

regulation as a pervasive and increasingly intentional modality of organizational control...'⁸⁹ It is also frequently posited that in order to use it like so with any success, you have to de- and re-program employees⁹⁰. Keeping in mind that the UH in question boasts over 7000 employees, many of which are highly aware of the fact that 'I have to get education to get where I am' (Chief Staff Nurse) and therefore '...we think we are special...each one of us...' (Chief Staff Nurse), perhaps any programming of such employees is less than straightforward. But these are ideas for another day and another paper.

In short, we believe we can see clear evidence of organizational identity work in our collected data⁹¹. We now plan to zoom in on identity work at the group level, and therefore focus specifically on the group that inspired this paper - the HR department and its particular identity issues. Ashforth and Mael posit: 'Given the number of groups to which an individual might belong, his or her social identity is likely to consist of an amalgam of identities, identities that could impose inconsistent demands upon that person.'⁹² With regard to the HR department we believe that we can see clear evidence of such demands, certainly in the literature, but also within our two organizations. We believe the uncertainty and negativity that we discussed in our introduction may be the toll that is being paid for these demands not being properly met.

5.2 HR – a Dirty Department?

*'It is probably the very definition of a necessary evil for a 21st century business...I think most of it is expensive, bureaucratic hogwash.'*⁹³

⁸⁹ Alvesson and Willmott (2002), p. 622

⁹⁰ 'In order to reconstruct the newcomer's social identity, such organizations often remove symbols of newcomer's previous identities; restrict or isolate newcomers from external contact; disparage newcomer's status, knowledge, and ability; impose new identification symbols; rigidly prescribe and proscribe behavior and punish infractions; and reward assumption of the new identity' Ashforth and Mael, p. 28

⁹¹ Although we do acknowledge that: 'It is relevant to note here how the research interview itself acts as an open-ended input to identity work. Research interventions such as interviews or questionnaires do not measure the "truth" of identity but interactively provoke its articulation and may stimulate a reappraisal of identities (see Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000).' Alvesson and Willmott (2002), p. 39

⁹² Ashforth and Mael (1989), p. 29

⁹³ Johnson (2008)

We believe that HR employees of today can, generally speaking, be placed in either of two camps. In one camp, we have the HR employees who would like to deal predominately with strategy⁹⁴ issues (we call these employees ‘SHRs’). In the second camp we have the HR employees who deal primarily with administrative, more traditional issues in the HR department (we call these employees ‘AHRs’). We argue that the relevancy of the ‘dirty work’ ideas, as outlined in our *Frames of Reference* section, lies in the evolution of these two camps. The first idea we would like to visit is that employees outside the HR department may well consider (some of) the work of the HR function to be dirty work. Our reasoning goes as follows. HR work traditionally centered on administration and paperwork. Obviously administrative work carried out in an administrative environment is highly appropriate and not in the least dirty. However, with time often comes change and the HR function is no exception. As mentioned above, the HR camps that have evolved have pitched their tents in two very different areas. SHRs have little interest in the administrative tasks of old, in the administrative tasks that make up the working world of AHRs⁹⁵. These tasks and this identity simply don’t fit with their own identity constructions. And yet, in many organizations, SHRs seem to be unable to shake their ties to the AHR camp. It seems as if employees in general still tar all HR workers with the administrative brush. For example, Johan Berglund wrote: ‘Managers with a degree in business think that HR-specialists lack knowledge of business administration and do not have sufficient understanding of the operations to be considered vital in the strategic work with the staff.’⁹⁶ In other words, we believe that where the above assumptions hold fast, SHRs are deemed to lack the requisite knowledge, and therefore the key, to enter and contribute to a strategic discussion. And this is where dirt factor comes in. SHR work has essentially been socially tainted by virtue of the servility aspect of administrative work. Where this association continues to

⁹⁴ ‘The normal way we tend to talk of strategies is as plans and, in the organizational context, we tend to talk of them as the plans the people in charge of organizations make to fulfill whatever goals they have set for that enterprise’ p15 and ‘strategic human resourcing is to be understood as the establishing of principles and the shaping of practices whereby the human resources which an organization, seen as a corporate whole, requires to carry out work tasks that enable it to continue successfully into the long term.’ Leopold et al. (2005), p. 20

⁹⁵ ‘Respondents cite a range of drivers for changing the structure of HR. Among these, by far the most common reason given is to enable HR to become a more strategic contributor, this being indicated by 54% of respondents whose organisations have changed their structures in the last five years.’ Gifford (2007)

⁹⁶ Berglund (2005), p.1

exist, SHRs are considered to be the servers in this strategy world, not the served⁹⁷. Where top business players understand all HR workers to be administrative workers, but SHRs insist on being involved in strategic decisions and meetings - surely these players fear this involvement will pollute the sanctity of (clean) strategic environments? Therefore as dirty workers, how could SHRs ever work together with strategists as equals? There will always be a status and power differential where there is the stigma of dirty work. And we suggest that there will always be negativity directed towards a polluting group moving into a clean environment.

We find much evidence in academic and popular literature to support the assertion that these assumptions do still exist.⁹⁸ We also came across evidence of dregs of same in our data, for example the Personnel Manager at the UH talked about instances where her personnel specialists have had to refuse ‘inappropriate requests’ from heads of other divisions because what the head is looking for is a ‘personal assistant not a HR specialist.’ She follows up by explaining that this is potentially problematic for herself and for her colleagues as HR personnel want to feel ‘useful’ and ‘necessary’. Situations where HR specialists have to firmly refuse a request made by the head of division would obviously have some affect on their calculation of self-worth or usefulness. However we believe that, on the whole, the SHRs in the firms we studied have actively sought to change these general assumptions and misconceptions. We began this section by saying that the relevancy of the ‘dirty work’ ideas lies in the evolution of these two camps. To our minds, it was an awareness of this association to all things administrative that led SHRs to engage in identity work, that is react by ‘breaking up’, or dis-identifying with AHRs. We will discuss this more fully in the next section.

We find it important to underline two things at this point. Firstly, we are not painting administrative work as dirty per se. We are certainly not labeling the entire HR department dirty. It is our understanding that dirt only becomes relevant to HR work once

⁹⁷ ‘...dirtiness is a social construction...it is not inherent in the work itself...but is imputed by people’ Ashforth and Kreiner (1999), p. 415

⁹⁸ ‘HR professionals are spending most of their time on administrative tasks, leaving strategic considerations by the wayside.’ Reade (2004)

it has been taken out of the administrative environment and seated at a strategy table where the above presumptions sit. Secondly, it is important to note that, generally speaking, SHRs actually do not work with traditional HR issues and so the administrative association is actually a misconception. Nevertheless, we feel justified in classing SHRs as dirty workers and in judging their actions as actions of stigmatized employees on the basis of this very misconception. We base this on the role played by environment in identity construction (SIT), which lends validity to Ashforth & Kreiner's idea that '...dirtiness is a social construction...it is not inherent in the work itself...but is imputed by people.' Therefore, whether the association is real or perceived, SHR work has been tainted, and as such, polluted.

5.3 The Identity Work of SHRs

We have already referred to SIT claims that individuals try to identify themselves in a positive way and, in turn, rely on validation from others. So if dirty workers are stigmatized by society or considered to be polluted or polluting, how do they then retain a positive identity?⁹⁹ Above we painted SHRs as potentially dirty workers whenever they step into the strategic ring. According to SIT this should pose major problems identity-wise. But it was interesting for us, in combing through our data, to discover that we didn't find much reflection by SHRs on their worth or usefulness. They all seemed pretty self-assured that they were an invaluable part of their respective organization. A Senior Manager at Procordia asserts: 'I think my role is important - to [carry out] the company's HR vision...I think I have a key role, in that way.' The UH Personnel Manager states: 'Our (chiefs) that are our customers – they appreciate us and our service...' In fact one of the Personnel Specialists at the UH went as far as to assert: 'It is meaningful work even if we don't save people's lives...we should have better salaries than the nurses because we don't get the same benefit from working at a hospital...' We'd also like to point out here that this self-assurance does not stop with our interviewees. A 2007 CIPD study of SHRs reported: 'Respondents were asked to rate how they think their chief executives would score the performance of the HR function in a number of different dimensions. The

⁹⁹ '...it is not surprising that a great deal of qualitative research indicates that people performing dirty work tend to be acutely aware of the stigma that attends their work...' Ashforth and Kreiner (1999), p. 418

results don't show a great deal of variance, with the majority of cases being rated 'positive' or 'strongly positive'. In fact, in almost all dimensions, half or more of respondents think that their CEO would rate them positively, and between a fifth and a third (21% to 34%) think their CEO would be strongly positive.¹⁰⁰

If SHRs are indeed the dirty workers in the sense/situations that we have suggested they are, the question then arises – why didn't we see any major identity crises in our data? Why isn't the literature highlighting it as a problem in terms of retention and turnover? Ashforth and Kreiner put forward one idea; '...we argue that the dirty work stigma facilitates the development of strong occupational or workgroup cultures.'¹⁰¹ We believe that this did indeed happen within the organizations we studied. It seems to us that the SHRs we spoke with engaged in identity work as dirty workers and therefore created a strong workgroup and SHR culture. We believe that this response was not merely set in motion to shield and protect SHRs from negativity; rather we believe that this response was designed to dispel the dirty association itself. In short, we believe that the SHRs we spoke to were mid-way through an identification process.

5.4 The process of Positive Identification

Our take on the identification process is framed by the concepts and theories we have set out in our *Frames of Reference* section. Our simplest understanding of the relationship between identification and dis-identification is that individuals, who embark on the dis-identification process, do so with a view to eventual identification. This eventual identification may be positive or it may be negative. In other words, the identification process begins with problematic identity issues and therefore a desire to identify positively with others, a need for 'oneness' with a group of persons. Or more simply the desire to create an 'us'¹⁰². From what we have read and understood, the identification process becomes more complicated in a dirty context. Basically, dirty workers will tend first towards dis-identification and follow this up with identification.

¹⁰⁰ Gifford (2007)

¹⁰¹ Ashforth and Kreiner (1999), p. 419

¹⁰² We believe this to be so whether the context is dirty or not.

We have already mentioned that dis-identification involves a focus on the negative, an emphasis on ‘who you are not’. However we believe that it is more complicated than simply the construction of a ‘them’. Further, we hesitate to use the phrase ‘negative constructions’¹⁰³ as a synonym for dis-identification. We feel it may well be misleading in that it only describes one type of dis-identification process. We would also like to point out here that, in the following sections, we draw heavily on the Kreiner et al.’s account of dis-identification by dirty workers and their ideas on how a relationship between SIT and SJT contributes to the overall identification process.¹⁰⁴ We are essentially attempting to apply their ideas to all that we have compiled on our two organizations. However, we do deviate in several places from the path they have laid out for dirty workers engaging in identity work. These deviations can usually be put down to the fact that, as we mentioned above, SHRs are not in fact engaging in dirty work. The association with dirt is based on a misconception. We also feel that Kreiner et al.’s clarification of the topic lacks a certain precision and transparency. We have therefore included a diagram below (Figure 1) which we hope will help to illustrate our understanding of the importance of dis-identification in the overall identification process, and also the importance of the roles played by, and relationship between, SIT and SJT. As will hopefully be clear from this diagram, we feel that the positive dis-identification process not only involves an understanding of who you are not (the withdrawal stage which allows for the construction of a ‘them’), but that it also involves an understanding of who you are (the creative stage which allows for the construction of an ‘us’).

¹⁰³ In the ‘Madhouse’ article [Alvesson, M; Karreman, D; Svensson, P (2006)], the phrase ‘negative constructions’ was indeed used in reference to negative identification and so was wholly appropriate. However, we think it would have been preferable for the authors to point this out.

¹⁰⁴ Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) and Kreiner et al. (2006)

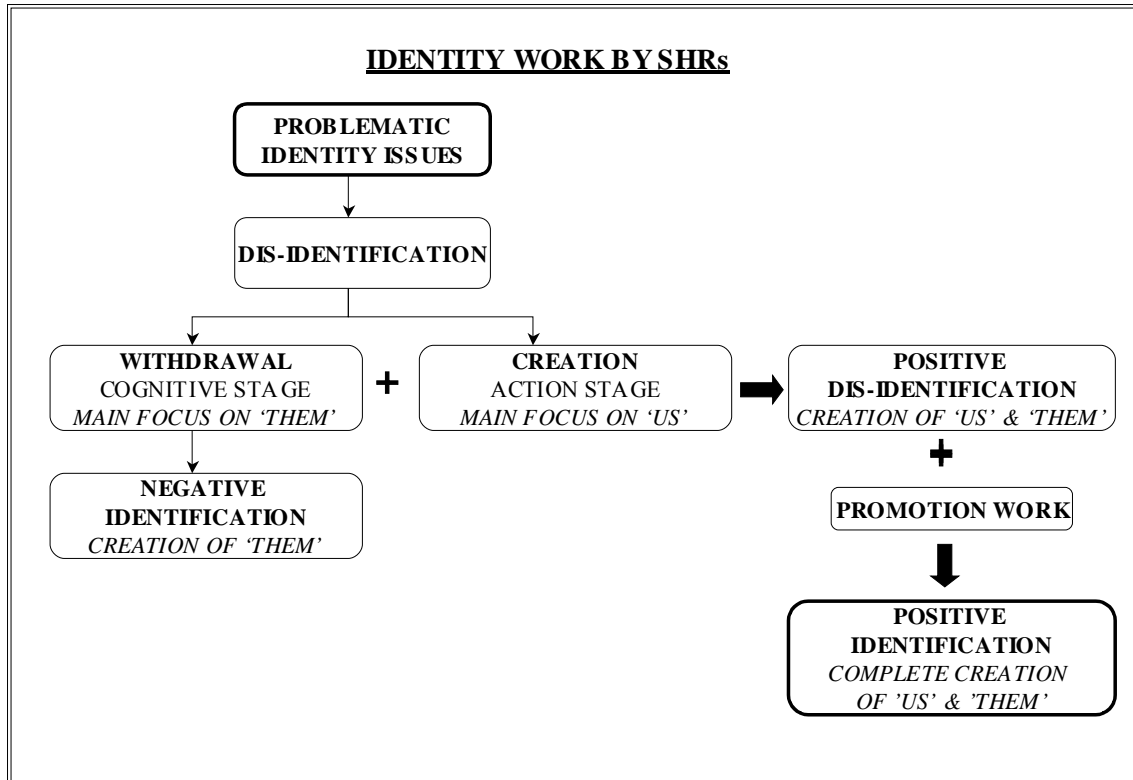


Figure 1: Identity Work by SHRs

5.4.1 Stage 1

'HR has a more important, heavy role now. I think that the administration side can be phased out' (Senior HR Manager at Procordia)

Our first proposed stop on the dirty road to 'us' is dis-identification. Looking first to withdrawal, Kreiner et al. lean on SJT to back up their proposition that at the withdrawal stage; 'Stigmatized workers will accept societal justifications of stigma, which will increase occupational disidentification.'¹⁰⁵ Basically then, we understand the withdrawal stage to be a primarily a cognitive one, where the individuals involved in the process hold the coming separation in their mind's eye and, in a way, begin to prepare themselves mentally for this disconnection. We see this phase as representing the beginnings of a 'them'. It is important to note here that there are references and empirical examples in the organizational literature, which highlight the possibility to 'stop' the identification

¹⁰⁵ Kreiner et al. (2006), p. 623

process after the withdrawal stage. For example the article ‘Madhouse’¹⁰⁶ focuses on one employee’s struggle in dealing with her sense of self. In constructing her workplace identity, the authors noted that the individual seemed to rely purely on what she was not. In other words she had allowed space for the construction of a ‘them’, but hadn’t managed to construct an ‘us’, or in this case an ‘I’. We see this as working towards negative identification¹⁰⁷ and consider it a questionable practice. Spicer also sees this as a ‘danger’; he refers to the problems of ‘becoming strangely dependent on this collective other.’¹⁰⁸ We have already referred to this in our *Frames of Reference* section.

To relate this back to our particular research focus, the data we collected seemed to indicate that something interesting had indeed happened in response to assumptions that SHRs were administrative workers. We propose that SHRs did accept and acknowledge that the function-wide traditional, administrative label was justified. And so they started to react, i.e. withdraw. However, SHRs didn’t withdraw from the entire HR function as per the examples in Kreiner et al.’s article. Instead, SHRs seemed to identify the source of the taint – AHRs - and then act on this understanding to withdraw from this group only. For example, at Procordia we were told; ‘Don’t focus on administration - that is the old fashioned way of looking at HR...’ (Senior Manager).

We believe that this response exemplifies the withdrawal stage of dis-identification and a further connection between ‘dirty work’ ideas and the HR department; that SHRs themselves view AHRs as dirty workers. We mentioned above that SHRs seemed unable to shake their ties to the work of AHRs. A situation where outsiders believed HR to be all about administration and nothing else obviously led to frustration among SHRs. It is important to note that SHRs appear to view AHR work as important work, but also as polluting - in that traditional associations have tainted or polluted the image of the entire HR function. SHRs are therefore forced to carry an administrative identity with them into the strategic arena, and they fear this burden places them in a position of servility. As

¹⁰⁶ Alvesson et al. (2006)

¹⁰⁷ For our understanding of negative identification, please see Figure 1. In ‘Madhouse’, the authors refer to this as identification ‘achieved almost completely through indirect means.’

¹⁰⁸ Spicer (2006), p. 14

we mentioned earlier, when business strategists do identify SHRs as administrative workers who exist to support and assist (as opposed to contribute), then power dynamics shift and problems arise. SHRs do not want to be associated with the lower status of administrative work. And therefore SHRs may see the work of their traditional counterparts as polluting and dirty, making AHRs ‘dirty workers’ in the eyes of SHRs.

We therefore believe that SHRs have embarked on a positive identification process. And we definitely see evidence of the withdrawal stage in our data. At Procordia, comments such as ‘I think that the administration side can be phased out’ (Senior HR manager) and ‘In a practical way, we are a part of strategic planning not just a function that implements’ (Senior HR Manager) were offered. At the UH, we heard: ‘We aren’t so much in administration any more...’ (Personnel Manager).

5.4.2 Stage 2

‘The change is that we do get a more strategic role in the company.’ (HR Specialist at Procordia)

We have already seen that two camps have informally staked out their land within the HR function. More specifically, we have seen that SHRs have made a move en masse away from the AHR camp. We argue that this is only half the positive identification story. SHRs must fully rid themselves of any trace of taint if they have any hope of successfully creating a positive identity within the business world. As per our model in figure 1, we believe that it is the summation of stage 1 plus stage 2 that results in the successful formation of a concrete ‘us’ and ‘them’, i.e. positive dis-identification. If the move away from AHRs represents stage 1, what then does stage 2 involve? In our thinking, if withdrawal is a cognitive aspect of dis-identification, then stage 2 represents a more active aspect. Or as Spicer calls it: the ‘creative’ aspect.¹⁰⁹ So how does this creativeness translate into action? When we addressed SIT in our *Frames of Reference* section, we saw that there were two important components to the theory: categorization and social

¹⁰⁹ ‘Rather, dis-identification work can also involve creative action...It is creative insofar as it establishes and affirms a certain collective identity.’ Spicer (2006), p. 14

comparison. As we understand the process, the former component means that SIT contributes to the creative work idea by focusing further on the construction of an ‘us’ (which obviously further contributes to the withdrawal stage by also strengthening the idea of a ‘them’).

We would like to explain at this stage that we see stage 1 and stage 2 as being very intimately connected and that we actually find it quite difficult to deal with them separately. The creation of a ‘them’ must surely involve the creation of an ‘us’. In fact we believe that both stages frequently occur simultaneously in the process of identification and that they, more often than not, mutually reinforce the products (a ‘them’ and an ‘us’) of the other. Nevertheless we do believe that there is good reason to treat both individually. We have dealt with withdrawal first in both our analysis and Figure 1 because we feel that awareness and subsequent acceptance logically come before the reaction. The importance of awareness and acceptance here also allowed us to consider this stage as being more cognitive. We feel that the ideas behind SIT give rise to a later reaction and arguably involve some concerted action to act upon the acceptance of such awareness. But this is not to say that once stage two begins, stage one ends. In short we see them as complementary and frequently simultaneous.

The social comparison component of SIT can take shape in a number of ways; Kreiner et al. refer to three¹¹⁰, but concentrate mainly on that of social creativity¹¹¹. We, however, find the action of ‘social mobility’ to be most relevant in terms of our own research. Social mobility is a strategy that essentially entails the movement from one group to another, ‘better’ group; ‘Individuals in a tainted group who believe they can move into a nontainted group will tend to disidentify with the former group and attempt to move into the latter.’¹¹² We believe we can see such movement both in the literature and in our data.

¹¹⁰ ‘Social Mobility, Social Competition and Social Creation’ Kreiner et al. (2006), p. 624

¹¹¹ Social Creativity is defined by Kreiner et al. as a strategy that ‘...changes the dimensions (and their valence) on which the intergroup comparison is based.’ Kreiner et al. (2006), p. 624

¹¹² Kreiner et al. (2006), p. 624

It is the case in the UH that the Recruitment Assistants sit on the first floor of the building and the Specialists sit on the second floor. While this was, in all probability, for purely practical reasons ('job seekers come into with us and ask so very much' [Recruitment Assistant]), it also seemed to serve as a physical divider. When the Recruitment Assistant at the UH was asked to talk about her role she went into great detail about all the paperwork that must be done for new recruits; '...we are the start for all new recruits...' but if anything 'difficult' comes up; '(the Personnel Manager) and the others *up there* will take over.'¹¹³ Further, when asked about social events at the UH, a Personnel Specialist mentioned '...there is talk of a party for floor 2.' Employees on floor 2 include a team of Personnel Specialists and the Economics Department. In Procordia interviews there was also evidence of an 'us' and 'them' mentality: '...you had one person who did some HR and benefits and paid out salaries and stuff...we have a tendency to climb up higher in the organization 'cause they see us as a strategic way to get the right competency in the company...' (HR Specialist).

Another area where the data highlights the separation and the consequent 'us' and 'them' is that of the language used generally by each the HR 'camps'. For example, when asked about the ways in which their teams contribute to the goals of the UH, the Personnel Manager there replied that one of her own goals for her team is to be 'service-minded' because 'Our (chiefs) are our customers.' This can be compared to the reply given by the Recruitment Assistant at the UH to the very same question: 'We are very important for all employees...we serve them very well...We must serve people, that's a ground point here.' There is a world of difference between serving all employees and being service-minded for the good of the customer¹¹⁴.

Language wise and literature wise, Johan Berglund makes reference to the change he has seen in SHR language; 'By learning management-speak the HR-specialists look to strengthen their professional identity and argue for their expertise. Learning to master

¹¹³ Our emphasis

¹¹⁴ We do acknowledge that this service/serve distinction may well be disputed if you take into account interviewees were not responding in their native tongue. However, we noted that the Recruitment Assistant used the word 'serve' consistently throughout the conversation and out of all the HR Specialists we spoke to, there was never any deviation from the word 'service'. Therefore we found it to be worthy of note.

management-speak is part of constructing a professional identity and, in the long run, part of the struggle between professional groups for power.¹¹⁵ A concrete example of this change in the language used by SHRs to communicate with ‘the business world’ lies in our data. In explaining how she communicated with her ‘chiefs’, the Personnel Manager at the UH remarked “You can do it (HR) by the books...talk to your chief about group work, working in teams, communication with employees, but I find quite few who really do that, they say instead you must lean, you must make a process flow for patients, increase your production etc...always they land on effectiveness, being more effective.’

Finally then, a study done on SHRs by the CIPD in 2007 spells out very clearly the change that has taken place; ‘...the importance respondents attach to their respective activities. Over half of respondents (58%) identify business strategy activities and nearly two-thirds (64%) identify developing HR strategy and policy as among the three most important types of task that they undertake. By contrast, only 5% of respondents list administrative activities as among the three most important types of tasks they undertake.’¹¹⁶

5.4.3 Ideology work

Turning to Ashforth and Kreiner once again, we agree that where positive dis-identification is achieved, dirty workers should next follow their actions up with some intensive ideology work. Ashforth and Kreiner define occupational ideologies as ‘systems of beliefs that provide a meaning for interpreting and understanding what the occupation does and why it matters.’¹¹⁷ These authors introduce us to three ideological techniques and explain that the purpose of ideological work is to justify work done and to identify with a work role. In our own words, we believe that work done by the stigmatized group works on its group ideology can indeed contribute to the successful completion of the process of positive identification. We also believe that ideology work is very important in a general dirty work context - but we don’t think it is so relevant for SHRs looking for identification. Ashforth & Kreiner assert that dirty work ideologies

¹¹⁵ Berglund (2005), p. 2

¹¹⁶ Gifford (2007)

¹¹⁷ Ashforth and Kreiner (1999), p. 421

have their ‘greatest impact on internal rather than external legitimacy.’¹¹⁸ We believe that the relevancy of ideology lessens for SHRs because they aren’t actually dirty workers and therefore don’t have any ideological issues to deal with. They believe in what they do and believe that they are doing a good job. We have already referred to this earlier; ‘In a practical way, we are a part of strategic planning not just a function that implements.’ (Senior HR Manager at Procordia). Therefore the fact that we didn’t see any major SHR identity crises can be attributed both to the fact that they are not in fact dirty workers at all and also to the fact that they responded as a group to form a strong workgroup identity. It was interesting for us to learn that the main problem for the SHRs we spoke with seems to be that they feel nobody really knows what they do or understands their work.

5.4.4 Promotion work

‘...a few days ago I was in one of my clinics...a whole day on one of the departments...and when I went into the coffee room, the staff came in and they asked me who I was, and they asked me what I did, and then I realized that they had no idea...absolutely no idea...they didn’t even know that we existed...that could be the case in some places, but in some places I think...they know who we are and what we do...but we have too little time to meet people and actually make a presentation about what we do and what we could have done...so I think they know who we are but they know very little about what we do...what we could do for them...’ (Personnel Specialist at the UH).

One thing that really stood out in our data – that was constant across the SHR board - was the sense of misunderstanding and confusion that surrounds the SHR position. The SHRs we spoke with did not dwell on feeling unappreciated, undervalued but there was much reference to a lack of ‘outsider’ awareness. The Personnel Manager at the UH reflected on a question about external understanding of the HR department; ‘They should have some idea based on their own experiences...but they don’t understand or know what my role is or what my development views are...I try to do some informations but...’ We find it interesting to compare this to the answer given to the same question by the Recruitment

¹¹⁸ Ashforth and Kreiner (1999), p. 421

Assistant at the UH: ‘They¹¹⁹ know that we do our best here and they know that if we can’t fix it...we have tried...they know very well what we do.’ At Procordia the same picture emerged: ‘If I should say that my work is to carry out the HR vision in the organization, if that is my main task. Maybe the organization would say also that the important part of my work is to make HR service to them. Maybe we have a little bit different picture there’ (Senior HR Manager).

In an attempt to get a well-rounded, fair picture of what was going on, we also asked all interviewees if they knew what went on in, and understood the mandate of, other departments and teams within the hospital. The majority, inside the HR function and out, declared that they would be quite confident to answer in the affirmative - there seemed to be relatively little confusion surrounding the role and existence of other workgroups; ‘Yeah, I can describe it in the wide way...’ (Staff Nurse at the UH). At Procordia we were told, ‘I think so. Mainly, the big picture’ (Senior HR Manager) and ‘Yeah. I think because I know all the departments...’ (Production Worker).

We have chosen to replace Ashforth and Kreiner’s ideology stage with a promotion stage because we believe that, unlike other dirty workers, the problem for SHRs lies with predominantly an external, as opposed to internal, uncertainty and doubt¹²⁰. We find Alvesson’s¹²¹ ideas on image work within Knowledge Intensive Firms (KIFs) particularly interesting and relevant here. He comments: ‘In the absence of the existence of tangible qualities available for inspection, it is extremely important for those claiming to be knowledge-intensive to nurture an image of being so...In view of the notoriously ambiguous character of...knowledge-intensive workers and organizations, the demands on the agents involved in terms of providing convincing accounts of what they do, and what sort of people they are, become central.’¹²² As we read it, Alvesson essentially says that where ambiguity and uncertainty surrounds workers and their work, active work is

¹¹⁹ When asked, she defined ‘they’ as being ‘the rest of the people here...the hospital.’

¹²⁰ We are not implying here that external views are unimportant for other ‘dirty workers’. We wish simply to point out the shift in balance – uncertainty and doubt of self and role do not seem to be an issue for employees inside the SHR fence; it exists for those on the outside, looking in.

¹²¹ Alvesson, M (2001)

¹²² Alvesson, M (2001), p. 870

needed to construct a clear image of what is being done. Such workers need to engage in image work, or as we have tagged it – promotion work¹²³. Firstly we find this relevant because we definitely see general ‘ambiguity and uncertainty’ around SHRs. We view the breaking up of the HR function into two camps as a significant event. Quite simply, whenever major shifts and changes (that affect organizational employees) occur within the organization - explanations and clarifications must be offered to all organizational members. That seems quite logical to us. One of the Personnel Specialists talked about how their titles changed in the UH a few years ago from Personnel Secretaries to Personnel Specialists. She noted: ‘Title is very important, when they changed my title it really disturbed them...they ask ‘so what are you specialised in?’’ We argue that, until this clarification happens on a grand scale, organizational members will hang onto their previous understandings and act accordingly.

Secondly we find Alvesson’s comments relevant to SHRs because, in our data, we came across quite a few references to the fact that HR work is hard to measure and to value, for example ‘...it’s really hard to measure, sometimes we get credit for something good or me, myself...I get some feedback...but really it’s hard to know when you have done a good job’ (Personnel Manager at the UH). In Procordia, we heard: ‘...we are a department that doesn’t bring as much money as the others...Like marketing or sales, they invest money, they get money, they see it in that way. We have [to] rely on that we do a good work with the personnel and that can’t be measured in money’ (HR Specialist). We refer once again to Alvesson’s ideas on image work in KIFs; ‘Perhaps some of these companies may bother less about the environment’s perceptions of their knowledge-intensiveness and choose instead to rely on their results to speak more or less for themselves.’¹²⁴ But if the results of the HR department’s work are actually subsumed within successes of other departments, does anyone or anything speak for them? Why aren’t they speaking for themselves? We feel that this simply further underlines the need for SHRs to promote what they do and why they do it. We argue that they have worked

¹²³ For a clearer idea of where we feel this work becomes relevant in the identification process, please refer to Figure 1.

¹²⁴ Alvesson (2001), p. 875

hard on constructing a new identity and therefore the next step is to present that new face to the organizational world.

We therefore believe that the final stage for SHRs to go through must be that of promotion work. However, we feel that there is scant evidence of promotion work to be found in our data. At Procordia there was an awareness of this need to engage in promotion work, when asked about the practicalities of her references to strategy, a HR Specialist said, ‘I think it’s mostly HR who has to be the leader of that project. Market us more, market ourselves more.’ And a harried response from the Personnel Manager at the UH to questions on promotion work; ‘...I try to do some informations but...’

We have also already mentioned above about the SHR turn to ‘management speak’. This can represent a step towards promotion in that it ensures those talking such talk will understand the SHR mandate. On this topic, Johan Berglund notes: ‘A common answer to the question how HR-specialists are to advance their positions in companies and organizations is thus to learn more management-speak and thereby perfect their arguments. Changing one’s language is a frequently suggested solution.’¹²⁵ However, while we acknowledge that while it may well be a step in the right direction, we also argue that it represents only part of the solution.

We do believe however that we see evidence in the literature that more intensive work on promotion has already begun in many workplaces. A 2007 CIPD survey showed ‘a clear upward trend in strategic input and a corresponding downward trend in administrative activities, pointing to a concerted effort to increase the added value of the HR function’¹²⁶. The diagram below shows how SHRs see their activities in terms of importance. This chart clearly reflects these trends.

¹²⁵ Berglund (2005), p. 5

¹²⁶ Gifford, J (2007)



Figure 2: ‘Where the HR function is now and where it needs to be in the future (mean scores) 2007’ – Reproduced from Gifford, J. (2007) ‘The Changing HR Function. A Survey Report’.

5.4.5 Discussion

Once again we refer back to the fact that we encountered little or no reflection by SHRs on their worth or usefulness. More specifically, we saw little negativity or doubt in the data we collected. Yet, Ashforth and Kreiner suggest that ‘occupational stigmas - as compared to other types of stigmas - may be especially damaging to an individual's identity.’¹²⁷ We proposed that the lack of ‘damage’ in our data might be attributed to the explanation that, by the time we spoke with them, the wheels of dis-identification have already been set in motion. We saw clearly that within the HR departments of the organizations we studied; one group seems to have become two. SHRs have withdrawn from the AHRs and they know, as a group, where they want to go. We argue that the SHRs of these workplaces were well on the way to achieving positive dis-identification. However, we argue that while they may have (almost) successfully positively dis-identified, they have not fully completed the positive identification process. They haven't been able to get where they want to go for a relatively long time¹²⁸. Today we are still

¹²⁷ Kreiner et al. (2006), p. 620

¹²⁸ In our introduction we noted references to strategy and HR back in the 1980s.

hearing about the connection between HR and administration. Our understanding is that the problem lies with the promotion stage. We posit that much of the remaining negativity and any confusion that surrounds SHRs boils down to the fact that other individuals/departments do not actually know what they, as a workgroup, do and can do, for the organization. There seems to have been little active work done on education and elucidation in terms of the SHR workgroup. Until this happens, we believe that organizational members will cling to old understandings that all HRs are engaged in administrative work. This has essentially become the default understanding because SHRs haven't stepped in to enlighten and illuminate. We also suggest that this is where much of the negativity and confusion surrounding the HR department kicks in. Organizational members who assume a workgroup to represent and embody one area, and proceed to act on that assumption, will presumably respond in a less than positive way to the rejection of said assumption – particularly where no clear replacement understanding is offered.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Summation of findings

To sum up, we have found that three types of identity (individual, group and organizational) do exist in both of our organizations. Individual identity was demonstrated with responses such as: 'I'm not my job, I'm me...' In the UH, group identity, both professional and departmental, seemed to be the most dominant form. However, in Procordia, there was no clear front-runner. There was evidence to support that employees were identifying both at a group and organizational level. An example of the strong group identity at Procordia is found in this statement: '...we are really connected here at the HR department.'

It is important to note that these identities are shifting and changing with time. 'Individuals and organizations are said to be better understood in terms of becoming rather than being (Ashforth, 1998).'¹²⁹ Therefore, this is a snapshot in time; this is how

¹²⁹ Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003), p. 1164

these organizations look at the moment. Identity work is simply a part of the evolution of a person's identity and we took a look at this work in the HR department in the bulk of our analysis.

We found that the employees in our HR departments had split into two separate groups: AHRs and SHRs. Using our 'Identity Work' diagram (Figure 1); we found that the SHRs we spoke to had gone through the withdrawal stage by recognizing the stigma of dirty work and separating from AHRs. An interesting response from a Senior HR manager at Procordia helped cement this idea: '...we are a part of strategic planning not *just* a function that implements.' They had then proceeded to the creation stage to form a separate identity as a group and, for the main part, seem to have succeeded. They have essentially completed positive dis-identification. We argue that the SHRs we spoke to are now stuck in the promotion work phase. Their ultimate goal is to achieve positive identification as strategists but they have not engaged in enough promotion work to let the rest of the organization in on the changes that have occurred with the HR field. A Senior HR manager at Procordia said that depending on whom you ask each person would have a different answer about what HR actually does. 'If you're management you answer one way if you're an employee you answer another way.' Therefore as we see it, SHRs are not having an identity crisis but they just have not come out the other side of the Identity Work process and completed the final phase that leads to positive identification.

6.2 Revisiting our research questions

We will next revisit our two seminal research questions. Our first question concerned the reasons behind the recent changes within the HR function. We found ourselves asking why tides have been turning once again in the HR function and we started to wonder about the role played by identity work in all of these changes. After completing this study, we believe that identity work did indeed play, and is still playing, a central part in the HR story.

Our second research question was: where is the HR department headed next? We find this to be a very interesting question that is also very difficult to answer. Firstly we feel that the break-up has been very successful and the camps will stay separate.¹³⁰ AHRs appear to be quite happy with their work and their own group identity: ‘I am very happy, even if it’s work or private. I would like to help people’ (HR Administrator at Procordia). We can also see that the SHRs we interviewed claim they know where they want to go: ‘HR needs to be more business-oriented’ (Senior HR Manager at Procordia) and also that they have opinions on where they will end up: ‘HR will become more behavioralistic...We’ll be more of a partner, a HR partner, to each chief. It will also become more economic...more production and logistics...management of knowledge will be important too’ (Personnel Manager at the UH). And as we have discussed already we believe that they see themselves as a distinct group within a more general HR function and need now to simply need to work on their self-promotion if they wish to complete the positive identification process. And this is not just to be found within our data. The 2007 CIPD Survey Report indicated this to be a general trend and represented the changes with pie charts (see below).

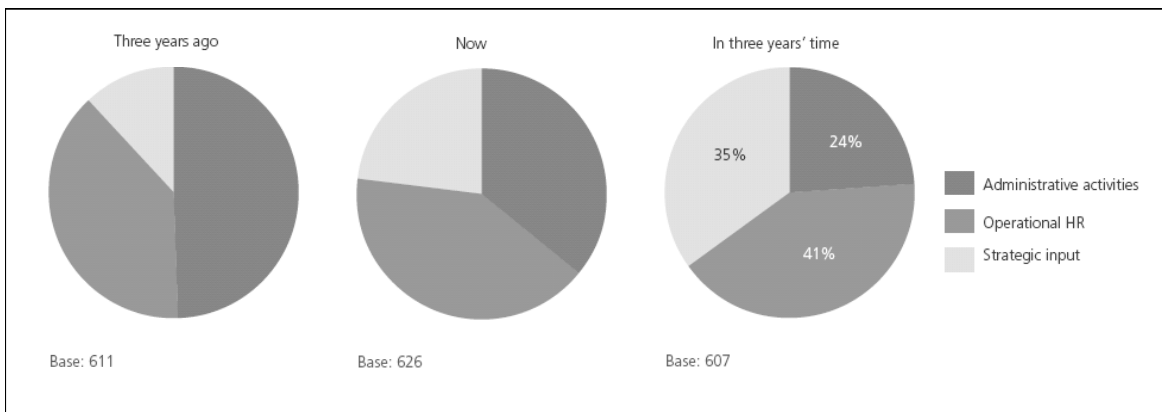


Figure 3: ‘Percentage of respondents listing activity areas among three most important/most time-consuming’. Reproduced from Gifford, J. (2007) ‘The Changing HR Function. A Survey Report’

¹³⁰ ‘In short, there is a clear upward trend in strategic input and a corresponding downward trend in administrative activities, pointing to a concerted effort to increase the added value of the HR function.’ Gifford (2007)

However, we hesitate to say that we can see where SHRs will end up. We clearly see some frustration in our data concerning where SHRs are right now: ‘we could contribute with much more if we had the time and if the managers knew what they would and could ask for...so basically we just kick the balls that they give us’ (Personnel Specialist). Also, the UH Personnel Manager commented: ‘I think they (other departments) think we are not consequent and there are chefs who are disappointed we are not always effective, going for results, making decisions and going on...Its difficult because we don’t have the role that we can make decisions...’. Perhaps this frustration will be channeled into clarifying and promoting the role and function of the SHR workgroup and therefore allowing for full positive identification for SHRs.

There is much talk among SHRs about strategy, behavioral competency, communications, and logistics¹³¹. But we have to ask - can such a marriage of disciplines really work? And, frankly, we find it hard to understand how SHRs will achieve all of the goals they are setting for themselves on the strength of the education and experience they now own. We wonder if they are not in danger of trying to be everything, yet effectively being nothing in particular and thereby damaging their credibility further. We are basically giving some thought here to the idea that part of the problem lies with SHR background and education. Perhaps a general HR study program should be the qualification of choice for AHRs. Likewise maybe individual SHRs should aim for specialization in a field of their choice, be that economics, logistics or communications – but not aim to have a surface knowledge of all. We feel that this would possibly lend more weight to the SHR struggle to secure a seat at strategic meetings.

6.3 Contribution

When you read and try and digest all of the different literature out there regarding dis-identification, the actual process can appear quite confusing and complicated. This isn’t helped by the fact that different stages of the process are given different names and meanings by different authors. Our paper is trying to contribute to the research in this

¹³¹ ‘The HR function has over the last three years doubled the proportion of time it spends on strategic inputs, at the expense of administrative activities. Further movement in the same direction is expected over the next three years.’ Gifford (2007)

field by clarifying the process. We are attempting to apply solid research to a model in order to illuminate the processes that actually lead up to positive identification. Some of the ideas of the paper may lack novelty but we argue the overall fit to be quite new. We claim novelty in that we have not come across other literature that presents the positive identification process as we have; nor have we found literature that casts the HR department in a dirty light as we chose to do. We would also hope to contribute to research on the human resources field in general by highlighting one area where we believe it is going wrong. Hopefully this can shed some light on where the HR field is heading in the future.

6.4 Future Research Ideas

As we pointed out in our analysis, we find the promotion aspect of identity work hugely important for the HR function. And, as we also pointed out, we couldn't find much evidence of this activity in either of our two organizations. We think that it would be extremely interesting to find and study an organization where the HR department has actively engaged in self-promotion work, in attempt to see whether it is, in actuality, as essential for positive identification processes in the HR department as we have chosen to paint it.

We also feel that, in the spirit of hermeneutics, revisiting the same interviewees with our understandings and interpretations of the data could have added something more to the paper. Further we feel it could be very interesting to revisit the same interviewees with a new list of questions composed on the strength of the conclusions we reached in this paper and the new ideas we have formed.

We also suggest that further interesting studies could emerge from a change of sample. We chose the two organizations we did because we wanted to see how identity work was playing out in two very different contexts. As stated in our introduction there were two main differences between our workplaces: sector and size. Firstly, we were surprised to find that the SHRs we spoke to seemed to be at pretty much the same stage in both the private and the public organization. We say surprised because, for the reasons we

outlined in our introduction, we had assumed that a public organization would be slower and more reluctant to change. There was indeed evidence that some of these reasons had taken their toll on the hospital as much reference made to money in the UH. Almost every interviewee referred to the low wages: ‘...really bad salary’ (Personnel Specialist) and ‘...it is a substantial pay cut’ (Personnel Manager), and the Economist explained that a lot of her time is spent ‘...trying to make sure there is room for those (paying) patients so that there is some real money as well as the tax payers money...now the tax payers money is not enough and we have to cut our costs in some places...’ We had thought an organizational tightening of belts would have affected, even hindered, the development and identity work of the HR department. But it didn’t seem to be so. We would like to point out at this stage that age may well have had some relevance here. Procordia is a quite a new organization (1995) and came into being by way of a merger (three existing firms). On the other hand the UH in question has a very long history; ‘(the UH) is old, very old’ (Economist at the UH). We wonder if Procordia is still getting to its feet or still focusing on establishing itself as one team: ‘We are struggling to get there but we’re not there yet’ (HR specialist). Therefore we hesitate to draw any conclusions on the role of the private versus public sector distinction in a study such as this. We feel that it could be interesting to revisit these issues with these same two organizations at a later time, in an attempt to see whether they have actually kept up the same pace or whether one has fallen behind.

Secondly we chose Procordia and the UH because we were interested to see whether size would affect the space and direction of identity work. It is the undoubtedly the case that the UH is complicated by its size and structure. We feel this may have been a factor in the fact that we had to struggle to find evidence of organizational identification here. Procordia, a considerable smaller workplace, showed considerably more feelings of ‘team spirit’. However, in terms of HR, at the UH this department has been divided and split between the different divisions and clinics - Personnel Specialists sit in teams near the divisions they answer to. This physical split means that all Personnel Specialists meet together only a few times a year, so obviously chances of a strong organizational workgroup here are slim. And yet, the Personnel Specialists that actually sit and work

together do seem to have developed their own culture and workgroup. We therefore felt that this didn't affect our conclusions and analysis. For this reason we feel confident in saying that, in terms of our particular research focus, we could not see a major difference in the two workplaces in terms of identity work, nor could we say that this was an important factor in our study. We do wonder, however, if it would make for an interesting project to study two similar sized firms in that their responses to identity threats might be even more directly comparable.

One final thing that struck us during the interviews we conducted was that on several occasions, and in response to different questions, the issue of 'Swedish-ness' came up. For example '...maybe it's a Swedish way to look after new people...but it took years for her to (settle in) and co-work' (Chief Staff Nurse at the UH) and 'I am like most other people who live in Sweden, we always try to talk about work and who we are, and what we like about our work' (Personnel Specialist at the UH). These reflections made us wonder whether our results would have been different if we had chosen to compare one of our organizations with a similar organization in another country or if we had studied an international organization in depth. We therefore feel that the impact of nationality on identity work could be another very interesting area for future research.

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Appendix A

Letter of Consent

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research project!

My name is ... and I am a business administration student at Lund University. I, together with my research partner, am writing a paper on 'identity in the workplace'. We are also looking at 'identity and the HR department'.

This interview will last no longer than one hour. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover. If time begins to run out, it may be necessary to interrupt you in order to push ahead and complete this line of questioning.

Instead of taking notes, I would like to record our conversations today. For your information, only my research partner and I will have access to these recordings and they will be destroyed after the project has been completed.
All information given will be confidential.

Participant's Agreement:

I am aware that my participation in this interview is voluntary. I understand the intent and purpose of this research. If, for any reason, at any time, I wish to stop the interview, I may do so.

I have read the above information and, with the understanding that I can stop the interview at any time and for any reason, I consent to participate in this interview.

Participant's signature

Date

Appendix B

Interviews

Questions for HR personnel

A. Interviewee Background

1. What is your job title?
2. How long have you been in your present position?
3. Briefly describe your own day to day activities here at (the organization).

B. Identity questions

4. In your own words, please describe (the organization)'s goals and its objectives. As you see it - what does your department do to contribute to (the organization's) goals and objectives?

Probing/further questions: How do you feel the HR department benefits the organization as a whole?

5. Can you describe the working relationship(s) that you, as a member of the HR department, have with others in (the organization)?

6. How would you describe the way the HR department is viewed by the rest of (the organization)?

Probing/further questions: Do you think the rest of the organization understands what you do here at (the organization)?

Would you be able to briefly describe what each of the other departments do and how they contribute to the work, goals and objectives of (the organization) - if I asked you to?

7. Do you see (the organization) as a team?

- [If no] Why not? In what ways is it not a team?

- [If yes] Do *you* feel like an important part of the team that is (the organization)?

Probing/further questions: What makes you feel like an important part of (the organization)?

8. What would you say are the shared values of the HR department here at (the organization)?

Probing/further questions: Are these the same as, or different to, values held by other departments in (the organization)?

9. Let's take identity to mean: 'how you see yourself as a person and who you believe you are'.

If I were to ask you to talk about who you are and about your own identity, what aspects of your life would you talk about? Does one aspect in particular play a bigger role than other aspects in your identity?

Probing/further questions: How important do you think your occupation is to your identity?

Appendix C

Interviews

Questions for other personnel

A. Interviewee Background

1. What is your job title?
2. How long have you been in your present position?
3. Briefly describe your own day to day activities here at (the organization).

B. Identity questions

4. Tell me about what your department does to contribute to (the organization)'s goals.
5. Please describe the working relationship(s) that your department has with other departments in (the organization) – taking into account both frequent and infrequent contact?
6. Please describe the functions and tasks of the HR department at (the organization) – as you see them.
Probing/further questions: How would you describe the way the HR department is viewed by the rest of (the organization)?
Would you be able to briefly describe what each of the other departments do and how they contribute to the work, goals and objectives of (the organization) - if I asked you to?
7. Do you see (the organization) as a team?
[If no] Why not? In what ways is it not a team?
[If yes] Do *you* feel like an important part of the team that is (the organization)?
Probing/further questions: What makes you feel like an important part of (the organization)?
8. Let's take identity to mean: 'how you see yourself as a person and who you believe you are'.
If I were to ask you to talk about yourself and about your own identity, what aspects of your life would you talk about? Does one aspect in particular play a bigger role than other aspects in your identity?
Probing/further questions: How important do you think your occupation is to your own identity?

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