

# SIZWE BANZI IS DEAD: THE ABERRANT CASE OF CONSTRUCTION SECTOR IDENTITY

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The death of Sizwe explores themes of adopted identity and aspects of migrant work-seeking, and may also be seen as the triumph of human agency over institutionalised racism. In the South African context historically, identity was statutorily assigned by racial category, and occupational identity development was stunted by restriction on permanent urban residence, and exclusion from formal qualification or artisan status. In *post-apartheid* South Africa, skills development is a key strategic instrument in the workplace, supporting acquisition of formal qualifications. The construction sector is identified as a readily accessible form of employment, particularly in developing countries. Occupational identity derives from acquisition of skills related to an identifiable occupational role. However, construction employment is characterised by short-term contracts. How do these transient work relationships, use of migrant labour and attendant labelling, affect the acquisition of skills and occupational identity? Concepts of self and identity draw upon social interactionist perspectives, Goffman's concept of performance in social interaction, and occupational science literature. This background frames a desktop review of international research into aspects of identity in the construction sector, and occupational identity as the lens to evaluate implementation of skills development in the South African construction sector, which is broadly defined to include the policy makers and industry institutions. The conclusion reached is that the sector has neither responded positively to the new dispensation, nor supported dignified development of occupational identity through implementation of skills development. The conclusion motivates for further research on the implications for occupational identity development of transient employment.

Keywords: labelling, migrant, occupational identity, skills, transient employment

## INTRODUCTION

Significant consensus exists identifying the construction sector as an easily accessible source of employment and the sector has been seen as a generator of economic development, particularly in developing countries (Wells 1986, 2007; Giang and Pheng 2011; Lopes 2012; Ofori 2012). In the South African (SA) *post-apartheid* context, the workplace is envisaged as key to implementation of skills development. The sector is perfectly placed to achieve a positive contribution to skills development. Effective implementation of the skills strategy should influence development of occupational identity and significantly contribute to the promotion of an inclusive economy, in sharp contrast to the *apartheid*-era statutorily assigned exclusion based upon racial identity. As Berger and Luckmann (1967: 194) note, historical context is critical: *[s]ocieties have histories in the course of which specific identities emerge....* The SA context is portrayed

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in the Athol Fugard play *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*. The play explores twin themes: personal identity assigned by the SA *apartheid*-era identity document, which all persons designated as ‘black’ were required to carry, and which specified where the person may live and work; and secondly, the pattern of migration of mainly men, who left their families in the designated rural homeland areas, and travelled to urban areas and mines in search of work (Marino 2010). Central character Sizwe has not been able to find employment in town, but the opportunity arises to assume the identity of someone else by taking their documents. However, Sizwe will lose his identity, and with it-his extended family connections. Sizwe and his friend discuss burning Sizwe’s identity document - Sizwe will be dead, but he will be able to remain in Port Elizabeth, to live, and work. Human agency triumphs - Sizwe and his friend Bantu have developed a strategy to subvert the *apartheid*-era restrictions. Currently, in addition to national rural-urban migration, migrants-both legal and illegal-from surrounding countries continue to seek work in the SA construction sector.

Nisbet (1966: 9) suggests the: ... *ideas we are concerned with are incomprehensible save in terms of the ideological contexts in which they first arose*. The allegorical *sizwe* - translating directly as *the nation*, illustrates the demeaning loss of personal identity and human dignity engendered by *apartheid* legislative exclusion. Consequently, one of the foundational values of the new SA Constitution is human dignity. *Everyone has inherent dignity and the right to have their dignity respected and protected* (Republic of South Africa 1996: s1 & s10). The previous economic exclusion was reinforced by poor quality education, which specifically excluded mathematics and science, and restricted advancement to tertiary education and formal qualification. Skills development is now a strategic intervention in the workplace, and the acquisition of formal qualifications a key pillar of redress. The questions addressed in this paper are: has the SA construction sector supported implementation of skills development and acquisition of formal qualifications, thereby supporting development of occupational identity? What further research on identity may enhance the construction sector performance in this regard?

## **METHOD AND PROCESS**

*Aberrant* is defined as *deviating from morality* (Collins 1994: 2). The review builds upon Hammond et al.’s (2016) study of roadside work-seekers, and considers the response to the skills development intervention of the SA construction industry, which is broadly defined to include the policy-makers, industry institutions, and contracting organisations. Occupational identity provides an investigative lens to identify progress. A literature review traces the social-interactionist foundations of identity theory, links to occupation as an aspect of identity, and the relationship to the socio-cultural context of work (Christiansen 1999; Unruh 2004). This insight frames the desk study of occupational identity as conceptualised by researchers examining the construction sector, and the SA implementation of Vocational Education and Training (VET) as a strategic developmental intervention. The review contextualises migration, and issues of labelling and identity.

## **A LITERATURE REVIEW - CONCEPTUALISING IDENTITY**

Seeking the roots of a socially derived conceptualisation of identity leads to the American symbolic interactionist tradition, initially proposed by Mead (1934), and furthered by Blumer (1954). The centrality of communication and inter-personal verbal and non-verbal communication provides the individual’s means of developing her/his sense of self; and is also the individual’s means of reflecting upon and attributing meaning to the interaction (Blumer 1954, 1962, 1969). The identity develops in a combination between information gained from the social environment, and personal reflection. For Goffman

(1959) the presentation of self is a performance; roles are conveyed as presentations, and the means of informing others about oneself. This description is relevant to the method of displaying skills acquired, the display of competence in an occupational identity, and suggests agency in the management of the performance. These two strands of identity theory, namely: the relationship of identity to social structure, and the focus on how the individual reflexively verifies identity in social interaction, were initially developed individually by Stryker and Burke, respectively. Subsequently Stryker and Burke (2000) collaborated to motivate a reconciliation of the self-verification of identity with interaction in social structures, compatible with Mead's original principles.

The works quoted above mainly reflect the sociology and social psychology disciplines. However, separate developments of occupational identity have evolved via Human Resource Development (HRD), VET, and the work of occupational scientists, which are all more closely related to skills development and the acquisition of occupation-related skills. Brown (1997) motivated that HRD and those involved in VET should pay attention to the development of occupational competence and of occupational identity, offering a model, which incorporates the development of occupational identity over time. The importance of work, and the relationship of work to the personal aspects of relationship development integral to occupational identity, is identified by Christiansen (1999). This integration is confirmed by Unruh (2004), who also considers the private as well as public aspects of occupational identity. Subsequently, a series of authors explore the development of occupational identity. Phelan and Kinsella (2009) credit Kielhofner (2002) with coining the term 'occupational identity'. These contributions acknowledge the relevance of socio-cultural influences, as well as a future orientation-personal motivation (Laliberte-Rudman 2002; Laliberte-Rudman and Dennhardt 2008). This conceptualisation frames an exploration of identity in construction management research.

### **Identity in construction - management and apprenticeship**

Two broad categories may be distinguished, namely: reviews of roles and identity of construction management, and the inculcation of skills and cultural behaviours into apprentices; both categories recognise the relevance of organisational culture to the development of identity. Brown and Starkey (2000) identify a collective organisational identity of defensiveness, and a resistance to accept organisation change. The authors suggest that this may be addressed by organisational learning. This view that organisational culture may be influenced and managed, and new entrants may be incorporated into the culture forms the foundation of employer induction programmes, and part of apprenticeship programmes. Following this logic, Phua and Rowlinson (2004: 913) adopt a positivistic approach to social identity to consider how to operationalise *culture*. The authors list a number of previous articles indicating the importance of creating cultures of partnership, in order to improve the performance of projects. The rationale here is that social identity theory may be utilised to explore how socio-psychological factors can directly affect the working relationships between project participants (Phua and Rowlinson 2004: 914). They conclude that the relationship between culture and individual behaviour is more complex than previously envisaged. Subsequently, also seeking to improve project performance, Brown and Phua (2011) investigate the activities of construction management. Their findings identify the relevance of the relationship to organisational structure, specifically in terms of managerial activities and the exercise of power, as contributing to personal identity. The emphasis is on *self*: ...*what construction managers do is grounded in their conceptions of self...* (Brown and Phua 2011:92). The motivation of the authors is to improve project management outcomes, concluding again the need for further research into the

relationship between identity and performance. At this point, it is necessary to define what constitutes an organisation. In the context of project management, it is probable that there would be a continuity of core complement, with additional professional, skilled, and unskilled persons joining intermittently as required to conclude a specific project. In such an environment, too strong a core complement culture and identity may constitute an obstacle to effective performance. In a study of social identity of managers within a large organisation in Sweden, the effect of organisational culture and the collective identity of belonging emerges from participants' life stories. The self-defining identity is consistent for: *... the majority of managers ... regardless of their different roles, functions or responsibilities.* (Löwstedt and Räsänen 2014: 1102). A central conclusion notes the risk of rejection by the strong collective culture, for those from other contexts, or professions. The authors propose the benefit of further exploration of construction-specific practices - and how these may be linked to change (Löwstedt and Räsänen 2014).

This differentiation between core and project staff is relevant to the second category of construction research, which was identified above - that of apprenticeship and traineeship. Hauschildt and Heinemann (2013) develop the relationship between identity development and interrelated fields of commitment, which they characterise as: occupational, organisational, and personal work orientation (Hauschildt and Heinemann 2013: 177-178). In researching apprentices, the authors acknowledge the importance of the actual apprenticeship and organisational context to development of commitment and identity. Brown (2004: 266) defines occupational identity as *... formation processes and patterns of strategic action relate to a number of issues at the level of the individual, the organisation and society as a whole.* These levels resonate with the original social-psychological concepts of identity (Huot and Rudman 2010). Of relevance to development of an occupational identity, the research specifically covers employed apprentices; traditionally apprentices serve their time as employees, but may not necessarily remain within the organisation once qualified. Therefore, it may be of relevance to consider how occupational identity factors continue after qualifying, where employment ends, and potentially where artisans may commence contracting. The formulation Brown (2004) proposes may hold where the artisan remains employed, but what is the strength of the craft occupational identity, when the individual is required to serve short periods on a variety of projects in transient employment relationships? The nature and format of the training experience may have relevance. Smith (2013) utilises occupational identity in an exploration of negative perceptions of traineeships in Australia. Although not exclusively related to the construction sector, occupational identity emerges as less robust in traineeships compared to traditional apprenticeships. A key aspect relevant to the construction sector and VET, is the inability to transfer from traineeship into apprenticeship. Exclusion of such articulation is pertinent to the SA experience in that similar reservations are expressed about Learnerships and the National Certificate Vocational (NCV). Comparable to traineeships, they are generally shorter than apprenticeships, but do not carry the status of the artisan Red Seal certification.

In summary, socio-cultural factors influence the development of personal identity, and occupational identity may be influenced by occupational, organisational, and social factors. Within the construction sector, complexity may be added depending upon whether the individual forms part of a core organisational complement, or regularly participates in project work, and whether at a professional or artisan level. For labourers and less skilled workers, and within developing countries, additional influences upon occupational identity are informality, and migration. In such impermanent situations of multiple casual work relationships, what influences occupational identity?

## THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONSTRUCTION SECTOR

Twin discoveries of diamonds (1867), and gold (1886), provided the impetus for international, intra-continental, and national rural-urban migration to SA. Racial conflict had previously existed, but the formalisation of these industries introduced recognition of formal qualifications, indirectly related to race. Construction constitutes a substantial portion of the mining operation and the international migrants brought formal artisan craft qualifications, from which African migrants were excluded. The strikes of 1913, 1914, and 1922 concerned wages, with qualified artisans concerned to ensure their privileged status and wage rates (Wilson 1972; Hyslop 1999). Davenport (1969) documents the State response, a concern to prevent any sense of permanence, or urban residence for the African migrants. This introduction of racial identity as the criterion for exclusion from craft qualification, and permanent urban residence, laid the groundwork for the *apartheid* formalisation of job reservation, and residential racial segregation.

### **The skills development infrastructure - concept and actuality**

In the new skills development landscape, the Construction Education and Training Authority (CETA) (RSA 2016b) is responsible for sector skills planning. The CETA receives eighty percent of the sector Skills Development Levy (SDL), which is one percent of annual company payrolls over R500 000. The CETA is charged with preparing a Sector Skills Plan, and facilitates the development of relevant VET qualifications via the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO) for registration on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) (RSA 2008). Levy-paying employers may obtain a percentage refund for submitting an annual Workplace Skills Plan (WSP) and Annual Training Report (ATR). Participating employers may qualify for additional discretionary funding to implement programmes leading to professional, vocational, and technical qualifications or part qualifications, (PIVOTAL) programmes (RSA 2012, 2013, 2016a). Under the workplace-based format, employees require a workplace experience component in addition to the knowledge and skills components to qualify, requiring a participating company to ensure employment, and registration for the appropriate formative and summative assessment – or artisan trade test.

Companies with a payroll of less than R500 000 per annum are exempt from paying the SDL, which encourages a limitation on permanent staff numbers, and excludes the small enterprises from participation, other than when they are able to participate in strategic projects funded via the National Skills Fund, provincial or metropolitan funded projects, or initiatives such as those of the Master Builders Association. Secondly, the CETA statistics indicate very low levels of sector employer participation: of 49,161 registered companies, 2,281 are levy-paying, and of those, 2,094 submit WSPs and ATRs (Nethengwe 2017). Although large employers participate in skills development, they represent a small proportion of the CETA sector. Thirdly, the informal sector appears to constitute an unknown but considerable component of the sector activity, as indicated by Statistics South Africa (CETA 2017: 9). This conclusion is supported by the recently launched Afrimat Construction Sector Index (ACI), which measures use of building materials and indicates greater activity within the sector than previously formally reported (Afrimat 2017). Collectively, these points raise questions for policy-makers on skills development, but also suggest unaccounted for levels of informal skills acquisition, and potential attendant identity development.

As part of a comprehensive post-school education and training strategy, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) has invested significantly in Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges to provide formal VET

qualifications. Monitoring and evaluation of progress is conducted against strategic objectives (DHET 2015). Recent reports (PMG 2017) do indicate high drop-out or failure rates, bringing into question the return on investment of TVET colleges. Powell and McGrath (2014) and McGrath and Powell (2016) criticise the predominantly quantitative evaluation methods used to measure VET college performance, suggesting a better evaluation method would be the UNESCO human development focus, which considers ...*individual well-being*... and what people actually do (Powell and McGrath 2014: 136). One conclusion may be that the emphasis on qualified workers is unnecessary in a sector where formal qualifications are not requested as a matter of course (Cattell 1994). There has been limited implementation of recognition of prior learning (Blom *et al.*, 2007). Here, the SA context is key. The Presidential Commission on Labour Market Policy (1996:41-43,109) established that quality-assured, credit-bearing, portable qualifications were an essential transformation requirement. Consequently, the DHET will continue to pursue achievement of formal qualifications. It would be informative to ascertain from those who have dropped-out, or failed, how they utilise what they have learnt.

A significant element in unequal or volatile societies is the limitation of career choice occasioned by survival pressures (Powell and McGrath 2014). In the construction sector, multiple factors confound acquisition of skills, and development of occupational identity, such as: informal and transient employment relationships; persistently high levels of unemployment; intra-continental economic migrants; and a rejection of recognition for informally acquired skills. Additional limiting factors are: the low levels of mathematics and science of school-leavers, which restricts access to apprenticeships; and an extremely high youth (defined as under 35 years of age) unemployment level, which encourages young people to sign up for any programme providing a stipend. Economic pressure on youth to take what is available appears to hamper any sense of development of occupational identity. The extent to which policy-makers, State departments, and industry institutions have collectively co-ordinated regulatory frameworks to achieve transformation within the sector is also questionable. Finally, a significant constraint remains inadequate participation by employers in skills development structures.

### **Migration - identity and labelling**

In addition to the conceptualisation of identity developed through social interaction, sociological interpretation has moved from a static or fixed concept, to that of a continually evolving concept, which has significance for migration and transient work circumstances (Huot and Rudman 2010). In this context, the behaviour of the SA migrant roadside work-seekers demonstrates human agency in affecting their surroundings and social circumstances. Having travelled to the country, both legally and illegally, and despite the constraints and restrictions, individual occupational identity is claimed and owned by the display of craft tools, or display of handheld signs by roadside work-seekers (Hammond *et al.*, 2016). As established, in some cases the claim is based upon formal vocational training, such as by the Zimbabwean work-seekers, but in other cases skills have been acquired from observation and experience, and the coaching of fellow workers, or socially responsible and interested employers. How society envisages and labels the work-seeker constitutes an important element. Examples of such societal influences are the descriptions of roadside work-seekers (Hammond *et al.*, 2016), where men with a wide range of construction-related skills are defined in research as: *day labourers* (Blaauw *et al.*, 2016). The terminology explicitly reduces the occupational identity to that of *labourer*, with concomitant reduction in the value of skills that may be rendered, and potential payment for their services. The exclusion is compounded by the interpretation and implementation of the transformation statutes: Broad-based Black

Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE) (RSA 2003), and Employment Equity (EEA) (RSA 1998). Large corporations do not employ non-SA work-seekers, as they do not enhance the B-BBEE scorecard rating. Although informality, migration, and lack of recognition for informally acquired skills are not unique to South Africa, the country is engaged in a transformation strategy of redress.

## **POTENTIAL RESEARCH ON OCCUPATIONAL IDENTITY**

The construction sector project-based organisation of work, with sub-contracting, specialist consulting, and the use of unskilled and migrant labour is well established and unlikely to revert to a traditional industrial era large permanent employment format. Nevertheless, there has been relatively little attention paid to the human resource implications on aspects such as development of occupational identity in multiple transient work relationships. Identity is shown to develop in social interaction, but it is not clear the effect upon craft identity, or professional practitioner identity of such transient relationships. Nor is it clear to what extent unskilled labour, or semi-skilled persons may adopt multiple identity formats, and the potential for multi-skilling.

The concentration of research on project improvement has centred upon technical and contractual aspects, but less upon the human resource management impact of the organisation of work, and the effects of transient relationships. Internationally migration continues to impact the construction sector as large contracts continue to attract migrant workers. As Huot and Rudman (2010) point out, migration adds an additional element to identity, in that the migrant is required to re-establish identity in a new *place* (2010: 71). From a HRM perspective, the question asked is: how does the utilisation of short-term contract labour impact the quality of project performance? How effectively does a team comprising multiple occupational identities collaborate - and to what extent have the participants been trained to recognise and acknowledge multiple perspectives? Finally, occupational identity may be developed and persist independent of a formal employment relationship. Such identity may also continue to develop during a multiplicity of circumstances, which may be employment - permanent, or short term project-based, unpaid personal service, or independent self-contracting. The appropriateness of occupational terminology lies in the inclusion of being occupied with work - as opposed to being employed, and the potential to track the acquisition of skills through a range of transient relationships.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The questions posed in the introduction of this paper were: has the SA construction sector supported implementation of skills development and acquisition of formal qualifications, thereby supporting development of occupational identity; and what further research on identity may enhance the construction sector performance in this regard? The conclusion reached is firstly, that there has been very limited participation by the SA construction sector in the implementation of skills development and the acquisition of formal qualifications and it has therefore underachieved in its potential to enhance the development of occupational identity. Large companies have participated to the extent that they receive contributions to train staff suitable to their own needs, and the small and micro contractors have largely been excluded - at least from the formal qualifications. Secondly, there has been limited research on identity, and future research should focus on semi-skilled and unskilled labour-specifically occupational identity and its relationship with the implementation of skills development. Such research should be context-specific as the relevance of models created in situations of permanent employment to an industry and sector characterised by transient relationships is uncertain. Potentially fruitful

questions for research are: Have apprenticeship curricula changed to encourage a craft identity applicable to both formal employment, projects, and entrepreneurship? Do professional curricula incorporate management of diverse project participants? Do management practices encourage and utilise the contributions of unskilled and semi-skilled participants, who are not formally qualified, but do possess considerable work experience?

While the focus of this paper has been on the SA experience, patterns of inter-continental migration, for example from Africa and the Middle Eastern countries into Europe, create a renewed relevance to how identity is assigned. Media reporting-without information on the individual histories, skills and knowledge-assign a common identity as migrant. As the construction sector will continue to attract such migrant work-seekers, the SA experience may be instructive, not only in avoiding the dehumanisation of common attributed labels, but also indicate how the sector may benefit from the knowledge and experience of all participants, thereby contributing to more productive projects.

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