

Claude-Hélène Mayer\*

## Managing Conflicts through Strength of Identity\*\*

Identity, in management sciences, comprises a newly popular research topic. This article assesses identity aspects based on intra- and inter-personal constructs, as well as conflict and the management thereof in a selected international automotive organization in South Africa. It introduces the recent theoretical research and presents selected qualitative research findings from a case study. The aim of this article, therefore, is to investigate managerial identity aspects, as well as their strengthening and weakening impacts with regard to conflict and its management.

According to the research findings, managers construct identity and conflict which are simultaneously connected to strengthening and weakening internal and external impacts. These impacts influence the way in which managers resolve organizational conflicts and contribute, either positively or negatively, to their management.

Multiple managerial identity aspects provide creativity spaces and flexibility in managing conflicts, whilst complex conflict and challenges in conflict management are connected to weakening identity aspects.

**Key words:** automotive industry, case study, conflict, identity, identity conflict, South Africa

---

\* Prof. Dr. Claude-Hélène Mayer,  
Rhodes University, 6140 Grahamstown, South Africa,  
Professor of Intercultural Business Communication, Department of Economics University of Applied Studies (HAW), Berliner Tor 5, D – 20099 Hamburg, Germany.  
E-mail: Claude-Helene.Mayer@haw-hamburg.de.

\*\* Article received: March 15, 2008  
Revised version accepted after double blind review: September 2, 2009.

## Introduction

Global trends, international co-operation and intra-national changes result in South African managers' exposure to a high level of diversity derived from multiplicities in cultural origins, racial constructs and differences in identity construct. These major impacts result in managers working in the new South Africa experiencing identity-related conflict.

Identity is at present a popular research topic that has gained interest in management sciences and organizational studies (Albert et al. 2000; Albert et al. 2000a; Gioia et al. 2002; Hatch/Schulz 2002; Pratt/Rafaeli 1997; Whetten/Godfrey 1998). It is viewed as an overall topic in management and organizational studies. Identity includes according to Layes (2003: 17) the interests, roles, attitudes and value orientations of a person, which need to be integrated and which change in their degree of importance, depending on the context and the situation. These facets are driven by identity motives which "create a tall order" (Ashforth 2001: 56-57) and which are largely complementary, enacting the identity may address multiple motives simultaneously.

Identity is defined as a psycho-social construct, and is bound to both internal and external impacts: inner processes, such as self-reflection, as well as inter-personal communication and social interaction (Lindgren/Wählén 2001: 357) influence the (re-)construction of managerial identities. Managerial identity is defined as the way managers "construct versions of their selves" (Clarke/Brown/Hope Hailey 2009: 323) within their work context and the organisational setting. Managerial identities are therefore influenced by the interplay between organizational discourses and organisational identity and the individual manager (Sveningsson/Alvesson, 2003). Organizational identity is commonly viewed as the form by which organizational members define themselves as a social group in relation to the external environment, and how they understand themselves to be different from their competitors (Dutton/Dukerich/Harquail, 1994). Even though the managerial and the organisational identity include individual and social constructs, the organisational identity punctuates the social identity aspects within the organisation, while the managerial identity emphasizes the individual, intra-personal construct. It is assumed that an organization's members shape and are shaped by this organizational identity and that managerial identities interlink managers across different managerial levels in the organisation (Humphreys/Brown 2002).

Organisational identity concepts gain interest through the growing complexity of organisation patterns and fragmentation and increase the importance of inter-related managerial identity constructs which might lead to a sense of individual coherence, organizational belonging and organizational identity, as assumed by different authors (e.g. Alvesson 2000; Dutton et al. 1994). The coherence of the individual is thereby defined as "the integrity of the individual's experience of personality" (Bütz 1997: 104) which becomes mainly important in the changing and complex organizational discourses and which contributes to the creation of identity.

Keupp (1988: 425) argues that the increasing multiplicity of organizational patterns results in the individual identity being viewed as a "patchwork identity". This "patchwork identity" forms a depending equivalent to the social and organizational

multiplicity and does not necessarily contribute to the development of a high degree of individual coherence. It can either lead to the creation of synergies and “Kreativitätsspielräume” (creativity spaces) (Keupp 1994, 1997), and can therefore be experienced as an option to define oneself differently in various situations and contexts, or to the creation of conflict and tension (Rahim 2002: 207). In the latter case, the patchwork identity can lead to identity diffusion (Keupp 1997) due to consistent cognitive and emotional dissonance.

This article focuses on managerial identity - and internal and external impacts influencing it - experienced in conflict in a selected international organization in the South African automotive industry. Managerial identity in conflict is assessed empirically to both improve the understanding of conflict and identity and their inter-relationship in the selected context, as well as to reduce conflict potentials.

This article contributes toward increasing the understanding of identity in experienced conflict situation and the influence of strengthening and weakening identity aspects in the described situations. This article further

- introduces the latest theoretical research on identity, conflict and the management thereof in an organizational context; and
- presents selected qualitative research findings from a case study conducted in the international South African automotive industry.

The objective of this research is to investigate managerial perspectives on managerial identity in conflict with regard to both strengthening and weakening influences as defined from the emic perspective of the managers themselves. External and internal impacts contributing to strengthening and weakening identity aspects in conflict, as well as the management thereof, are evaluated. To achieve the stated objective, the following research questions are posed:

- How is identity experienced by managers in conflicts within their work context?
- Which impacts influence managerial identity within these conflicts?
- How do identity, external and internal impacts influence conflict management?

As indicated, the relationship between identity, conflict and its management in the work context is highly complex and requires further attention. It is argued in this article that an in-depth understanding of identity can serve improving the understanding and managing of conflict within the work context. It can also lead to developing identity-based managerial conflict management skills and tools within organizations. Therefore, this discourse imparts new stimuli for the scientific debate, as well as for managers, practitioners and consultants active in this field.

After presenting the relevant background theories, the article continues to outline the methodology and context of the research presented. It introduces and examines selected findings and draws a conclusion to finally provide practical implications.

### **Managerial identities in organisations**

During recent years, post-modern constructivist theories have been introduced to the identity debate (Bekker et al. 2000; Caws 1994; Cobb 2003; Kriesberg 2003) and identity concepts have been redefined (Sökefeld 2001). Contemporary management scien-

tists (Sennett 1998; Sveningsson/Alvesson 2003; Watson 1994, 2008) further promote the constructivist viewpoint of identity creation as an interrelated process of internal and external forces.

Fundamental thoughts on post-modern identity are based on the notion of the “Pluralisierung des Selbst” (pluralisation of the self) and of emerging forms of “patchwork identities” and, consequently, on the assumption of a “healthy” form of “multiple identity” (Keupp 1988, 1994, 1997; Kraus 1996). The “multiple identity” consists of partial identities which can be contradictory and that mirror the social and organizational fragments of the 21 century. These identity parts are integrated by the individual and therefore form a kind of multiple and multi-layered identity. Moreover, the assumption of multi-layered identity constructs has gained weight in management studies (Albert et al. 2000a; Ashforth/Mael 1989; Pratt/Rafaeli 1997) and identity has, subsequently, become a well-explored and prominent domain (Albert et al. 2000a; Albert/Whetten 1985; Gioia et al. 2002; Hatch/Schulz 2002; Rothman 1997; Whetten/Godfrey 1998).

The managerial identity is viewed as a construct that emerges through individual, intra-personal and collective, inter-personal processes whereby individual, relational and collective elements of self and others are addressed (Fortlouis Wood 2007). Thereby, the identification of the individual within its group or organization is of psychological value (Booyesen 2007: 25) and can serve as a source of self-esteem (Hogg/Terry 2000).

Managerial identities are influenced by the organizational identity which vice versa impact on these identities. Managerial identities can be constructed from a variety of evolving and changing intra-personal aspects, including inner processes and self-ascriptions, such as being pedantic, self-convinced, and ambitious. Conversely, these aspects can derive from social identities and group memberships, defined by, for example, culture, race, gender, nationality and profession. However, these identities can not simply be reduced to certain stable institutionalised intra- and inter-personal aspects, but are rather a dynamic and flexible process of (re-) construction of self-ascriptions and social identities relating to the organizational identity. The organizational identity is both essential to organizational success (Collins/Porras 1996) and enhancing pro-activity (Gioia/Thomas 1996: 396). According to Coupland and Brown (2004), organizational identities are constructed through processes of description, questioning, contestation and defense and may, therefore, be regarded as an ongoing argument between the insiders and outsiders of an organization. These identity constructions are connected to conflicts experienced.

## Managerial Conflict

Scientific research on conflict and conflict management has developed worldwide (Coleman 2003; Schmidt/Trittmann 2002) and has further attracted management scientists' interest in analysing organizational and managerial conflict scenarios (Francis 2003; Pondy 1967; Rahim 2001, 2002).

Conflict research has been embedded in constructivist theories which view reality as a construct created by the mutual interrelationships between the individual and the environment (Aggestan 1999; Applefield et al. 2000; Demmers 2006; Lederach 2000;

Wallenstein/Sollenberg 1995). Conflict experiences are therefore embedded in historic, socio-cultural, political and economic contexts and inter-personal interactions (Coy/Woehrle 2000; Kriesberg 2003, 2003a). According to Kriesberg (2003a: 2) conflict "...encompasses a wide range of interaction sequences: a social conflict arises when two or more persons or groups manifest the belief that they have incompatible objectives". Conflict, being a construct, can, thus, include "a feeling, a disagreement, a real or perceived incompatibility of interests, inconsistent worldviews, or a set of behaviours" (Mayer 2000: 3) and is therefore "a psycho-social process" (Northrup, 1989: 54). This interplay of intra- and interpersonal conflict has been explored by many psychologists who assume that the human mind consists of "different parts in which the psyche, the value system and the behaviour is created" (Folger et al. 2001: 45). According to Rahim (2002: 207), "an interactive process does not preclude the possibility of intra-individual conflict, for it is known that a person often interacts with self". It is apparent, therefore, that conflict relates to aspects of identity or even forms part of identity and this, in turn, can lead to "identity crisis" (Maringer/Steinweg 1997; Mayer 2005). Conflict is then viewed as being shaped by individual and by cultural meanings (Augsburger 1992; Avruch 1998; Lederach 2000). These meanings are constructed by "perceptions, interpretations, expressions and intentions" (Lederach 1996: 9) that can lead to conflict (De Dreu et al.: 1999). Therefore, "conflict situations are those unique episodes when we explicitly recognize the existence of multiple realities and negotiate the creation of a common meaning" (Lederach 1988: 39). In effect, individuals in conflict situations experience the relativity of realities and identity aspects, while simultaneously negotiating and creating their shared meaning. Conflict and conflict management processes can, however, result in strong intra- and interpersonal distress; distraction from work; difficulties in decision-making and interpersonal contact; and a negative affect on effectiveness, productivity and creativity (Cowan 1995: 24).

This study explores narrated conflicts and identity and their inter-relationship in the selected, described setting.

### **The relationship of identity and conflict**

According to Lederach (2003) and Seymour (2003), the relevance of identity still appears to be underestimated when addressing conflict issues, even though conflict is connected to identity (Lederach 2005; Mayer 2005). These authors stress the high relevance of identity in constructing, deconstructing and managing conflict. Identity issues have become increasingly important due to progressing global trends (Burton 1990). Furthermore, an increase in diversity and fragmentation within the organisations can result in a "patchwork identity" (Keupp 1994, 1997). This increase complexity in organisational and managerial identity can lead to conflicts (Williams/O'Reilly 1998) as a result of "internal disagreements or rivalry, the distribution of the organization's limited resources among competing priorities and components" (Constantino/Sickles Merchant, 1996: 17).

Managers and organizations need to prepare for cutting across diverse contexts and identities and meeting the challenges of managing dynamic identity constructs in conflict, even should such identity-related conflict be "deep-rooted" (Burton 1990: 214) due to its strong intra-personal dimension.

Oliver and Roos (2003) view identity as a major tool for managing critical incidents in organizations. Identity constructs and the way in which individuals make sense of their identities of self and others can, however, build barriers to organizational change processes (McInnes et al. 2006) and to the way how they perceive and manage conflicts. Simultaneously, identity is a major force for activating, prioritising and deploying core capabilities and resources in the organization (Glynn 2000: 295) and to open “creativity spaces” (Keupp 1994, 1997) in individuals.

### **Managing conflict and identities**

A wide range of conflict management theories and practical tools have been developed toward managing conflict (Miall et al. 2000). Conflict management is the art of appropriate intervention toward settling conflict (Nye 2005). This “appropriateness” needs to be viewed in a constructivist light, meaning that its definition needs to be differentiated according to the individual or group defining it, as for example, the observer or the observed. In this sense, rather than advocating methods for removing conflict, conflict management generally “addresses the more realistic question of managing conflict, namely, how to deal with it in a constructive way; how to bring opposing sides together in a cooperative process; and how to design a practical, achievable and cooperative system for the constructive management of difference” (Bloomfield/Reilly 1998: 18). Consequently, conflict management assists in designing effective strategies toward both minimising the dysfunctions and enhancing the constructive functions of conflict, thereby increasing learning and effectiveness (Rahim 2002: 208).

Conflict, as well as its management, is bound to both external and internal realities (Gaziano et al. 1996). How a person manages conflict is related to his/her inner values, feelings, resources and prioritising identity aspects. Constructively managed conflict simultaneously (re-)contributes positively to job satisfaction, well-being (De Dreu et al. 2004: 15) and the experience of work-related stress (Friedman et al. 2000: 32).

The reflection of self and others can assist in managing conflict constructively. Such self-reflection is part of “identity work” (Watson 2008: 127). According to Pullen (2006: 25), identity work is “complex and unpredictable”. Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003: 1165), however, define identity work as being “engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructs that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness”. Identity work is the construction and negotiation of identity through different means, e.g. story-telling, narrating and self-reflection. This identity work is social- and discursive-determined, even though the focus rests on the individual and intra-personal processes. Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003: 1165) point out that individuals “strive to shape their personal identities in organizations and are being shaped by discursive forces” and develop their personal identities through identity work. Watson (2008: 128) emphasises that, whilst identity work requires the internal process, it would gain more power if external identity aspects could be incorporated “alongside with shaping of the ‘internal’ aspects of personal identity”. Satir et al. (2007) refer to identity work, which incorporates the confrontation and integration of internal and external identity aspects, as “parts party”.

It is assumed in this article that identity work in managers is multi-faceted and that it occurs through self-reflection, narration, the experience of difference and sameness, as well as the inner construct of social and cultural belonging. Identity work automatically happens in conflictual situations when managers clarify their interest, roles, feelings and needs and reflect on their own standing in the conflict. Certain conflict management approaches attempt to professionalise identity work in conflict management processes toward transforming identities and empowering all (internal and external) parties involved (Mayer 2008, 2008a), thereby leading to constructive conflict management.

## **Research Methodology**

Given the qualitative nature of this research, the phenomenological and interpretative paradigms were considered the most relevant approaches (Collis/Hussey 2003) thereto. Within these paradigms, the theoretical and methodological approaches used are found on both the epistemological tradition of constructivism (Berger/Luckmann 2000) and interpretative hermeneutics (Gadamer 1990; Habermas 1999). Various theoretical stances reflect a post-modern epistemology and can be grouped under terms such as constructivism or social constructivism which share the notion of multiple realities. Here, constructivism is used as an umbrella term for both constructivism and social constructivism (McLeod 1996) and is generally defined as postulating the objective world as a construct of social interaction or, alternatively, as a process of the observed and the observer, the last giving meaning to what is observed (Jonassen 1991). The observer interprets what he/she observes in the face-to-face interaction and in the narrations of the interviewee and then creates meaning by referring to the statements regarding conflict and identity and their interrelationship that have been given by the interviewee.

## ***Research strategy***

While quantitative research is often based on analytical empiricism with a strong emphasis on objectivity, qualitative research focuses on gaining a deeper understanding of the research issue (Cheldelin et al. 2003), deep data and “thick descriptions” (Geertz 1987). Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003: 1164) assert that few studies address “the understanding of specific processes and situations of identity construct in and around work and organizations”. Processes of identity (re-)formation are governed by one or more of the overlapping and inter-relating ways of constructing and exploring identity: central life interest, coherence, distinctiveness, direction, positive value and self-awareness which occur in specific life situations.

A single-case explanatory study approach was used to gain an understanding identity in experienced conflicts and assess their inter-relationship in the selected organization. Identity as a construct was not pre-defined by the researcher. The construct of identity was defined by the manager himself relating his/her definition of identity, identity crisis to the described and experienced conflict situation. The analysis of the inter-relationship of conflict and identity could therefore only be conducted by analysis the narrations of the interviewed managers. This was achieved through the use and analysis of in-depth interviews. The interviews were guided by using predetermined re-

search questions, as stated previously, which focused on the subjective experiences of managers. Useful explanations were developed and interpretations of the described subject were given according to four levels of text reconstruction (Ricoeur 1979; Wolff 2000: 87). The results can not be generalized; however, it provides an in-depth insight into the described contexts and might be replicated in other organizations in South Africa.

### ***Research setting***

Through identifying an organization which fulfills the defined quality criteria, such as: global and regional business involvement and standing, as discussed previously; diversity, due to the different plants and offices in various regions in South Africa; diversity-related and conflict-handling policies are in place and well managed; international management profile; and permissible access to the organization the Human Resource Department of the organisation was contacted by telephone calls and emails. In the following personal contact was established through face-to-face meetings and discussions about the research projects with the Human Resource Department. Interviewees were invited to information sessions on the research project and contact with managers was established.

The organization identified and used for this case study operates in 120 countries world-wide and belongs to one of Europe's leading German engineering groups. As a technical leader in the automotive industry it is ranked among the top three suppliers in each of its world-wide markets. The organization employs 58 000 people world-wide in its five core areas of activity (Organizational 2006). One of its largest sales regions is Southern Africa (Organizational 2006: 65) where the organization consists of a head office, Parts Division and Bus and Coach Manufacturing plant in Gauteng, as well as a Chassis Assembly Plant in Kwa-Zulu Natal (Organizational 2006a). Central to this research were the key issues of guiding organizational principles and policies. The organization has adopted guiding principles pertaining to its customers, investors, employees and the society within which it operates (Organizational 2006a: 16). These guiding principles are objectives to the corporate culture of the organization. The relevant diversity-related and conflict-handling policies, such as the Employment Equity, Affirmative Action and Conflict Management policies of the organization are, beside others, based on these principles and are in place and well managed (Organizational 2002, 2002a: 1).

Choosing this organization as a case study is beneficially with regard to gaining a deeper insight into an international context within the South African society. Managers in this organisation are aware of cultural and diverse influences in the organizational context and are used to differences in identity constructions across cultures. This sample is used to international and cross-cultural work experiences and is therefore expected to answer the questions on conflict and identities. At the same time, it could be viewed as disadvantageous that this organization can only give insights into an international organizational context within South Africa which can not be generalised referring to the entire society.



### *Sampling*

Altogether 45 out of 80 managers were interviewed at the selected organization's head office and three of its branches. The sample comprised of managers from South Africa, Germany, the Netherlands, England and Zimbabwe. In total, 45 (37 male and eight female managers) in-depth interviews were analysed. In terms of nationality, 37 managers were South African (SA); three were German; four managers each hailed from the Netherlands, Zimbabwe and England; and one manager neglected to record nationality. Of the 45 managers, 31 worked at the head office (Gauteng), three worked at branch I (Gauteng), four worked at branch II (Gauteng), six worked at branch III (Kwa-Zulu Natal) and one manager neglected to record a place of work. As far as diversity is concerned, national belonging, gender, mother tongue and cultural belonging were considered. However, all 45 interviewees participated voluntarily in the interviews. Diversity aspects, such as gender, national and cultural belonging as well as mother tongue were considered with regard to the interpretation of data. Even though interviewees were asked how they define themselves with regard to group memberships, 38 interviewees described themselves as White, one as Coloured, two as Black and four as Indian.

### *Data collection methods*

Data was gathered by means of in-depth individual interviews, in accordance with the principles of case study research (Babbie/Mouton 2006: 291), from a sample of 45 managers selected from within the organization. The interview guideline was developed by a German-South African research team and was discussed with the Human Resource Management Office. One Human Resource Manager proposed to implement one question with regard to outside and inside intervention in the organization. The sample size, as well as the managers, was identified by the Human Resource Department at the selected organization. The interviews were conducted by a German female researcher.

An open-ended questionnaire was constructed as the main measuring instrument for this research. The interviews took place in a meeting room within the organization and took a minimum of 90 minutes, depending on the time and engagement of the interviewee. The interviews were conducted in English. Since the interviewer, being a German native speaker had lived in English-speaking countries and particularly in South Africa for several years, English as the language of communication was unproblematic. All interviewees were able to express themselves fluently in English, also with regard to description of themselves, their identity and experienced conflicts. Interpretation of the data was always discussed with other researchers of different cultural South African groups to ensure a constructivist approach of data analysis. The managers' in-depth-interviews were recorded in full to ensure precise transcription. The transcripts were viewed as selective constructions that reproduced aspects of the conversation and which were transcribed, according to Steinke (2000: 327), in a "manageable" way which is "simple to write, easy to read, easy to learn and to interpret". The transcription procedure focused mainly on the verbal aspects of the communication in the interest of analysis and evaluation controlled by factual words. Analytical data

evaluation was included (as described in Data Analysis, Level 4), subsequent to the texts being transcribed.

Criteria of quality qualitative data research were defined and employed, such as confirmability, credibility, transferability and trustworthiness for this organizational case study. Relevant strategies of qualitative data collection, analysis and interpretation were used. Johnson (1997) supports the approach that constructivism may facilitate the aim of qualitative research – which is fundamental to this research – to create a deeper understanding of the research objective with regard to changing multiple-reality constructions (Hips, 1993). Organisational documents and secondary literature were analysed in parallel to the primary sources to guarantee triangulation of the data. Research findings were reported back to the organization.

### *Data analysis*

Data analysis was conducted according to the five-step process of Terre Blanche, Durrheim and Kelly (2006: 322-326): Step 1: Familiarisation and immersion, Step 2: Inducing themes, Step 3: Coding, Step 4: Elaboration and Step 5: Interpretation and checking, to ensure a transparent process of data analysis and reconstruction. After the researcher has familiarised herself with the collected data themes were induced. These themes were defined according to the research questions, as, for example, conflict, identity, and conflict management. Key words within these themes were analysed and elaborated. Key words are defined as words that occupy key positions in text through the import of their content, their significance in the text structure and conception or repetition or other emphasis. This culminates in the construction of categories; hence, content analysis serves as a technique of research that leads to conclusions which can be generalised for this context (Kromrey 1998: 298). The data were interpreted and checked again to ensure a transparent process. Data analysis was conducted by the researcher and a South African colleague to ensure that cultural, contextual and language issues were addressed. The researcher interpreted the categorised text through content analysis (Mayring 2003), based on a systematic approach to accidental perceptions.

With regard to data analysis and data collection it is obvious that the observer and the observed might have different perceptions and interpretations of the data, as show according to four levels of text reconstruction (Ricoeur 1979; Wolff 2000: 87) as follows:

- Level 1: The manager experiences identity aspects in a conflict situation.
- Level 2: He narrates the conflict and identity aspects during the interview and already interprets the experienced situation.
- Level 3: The researcher transcribes the interview and categorised the transcribed text through content and key word analyses and interprets the data.
- Level 4: Results are constructed by describing and analysing the data.

Content analysis comprises a subjective process between the text and the person coding the text: It is assumed that the researcher interprets the data in a different way than the narrator does and that differences in the interpretation of data exist. However, it is mainly important that the criteria of qualitative data research were addressed

with regard to transparency of data collection and analysis, “inter-subjective validation” (Ronan/Latham 1974), such as adhering to particular rules and regulations and/or verifying that the same (or similar) findings have been attained by different researchers and confirmability: “Verifying the reliability of content analysis is primarily done by inter-individual and intra-individual verification” (Yin 2002: 45), as in this study.

## Research findings

The research findings selected for presentation in this article focus on the identity aspects experienced in conflict and its management. They are classified as either strengthening or weakening. This classification is based on the statements of the interviewees who described, interpreted and judged what they experienced. The strengthening and weakening identity aspects were influenced by external and internal impacts, as described by the managers during their respective interviews, and are reconstructed by the researcher in this article on the basis of the emic perspective of the manager.

## Identity aspects in conflicts

Based on the main findings from this case study, it can be concluded that managers from diverse backgrounds experienced work-related conflict and defined such conflict as being strongly related to their identity. The aspects described were ascribed to strengthening, rather than weakening identity aspects. Table 1 presents the major identity aspects extracted from the data material with regard to the research question: How is identity experienced by managers in conflicts within their work context?

Table 1 summarises the major identity aspects identified by the managers (P1-45)<sup>1</sup> as contributing mainly to their identities in the experienced conflict. The content and key word analyses of the identity aspects in the conflict narrations proved that positively and negatively valued identity aspects could be found throughout. Table 1 further demonstrates that aspects such as ‘ambitious’, ‘strong leadership’, ‘truth orientation’, ‘being stable’ or ‘optimistic’ were considered as contributing positively to the identity construct and are, therefore, interpreted as strengthening identity aspects.<sup>2</sup> Key words such as ‘intimidated’, ‘lost courage’ and ‘victimised’ led to negatively experienced identity aspects and are, thus, indicated as weakening identity aspects.<sup>3</sup> Narrated identity aspects that combine positive and negative connoted statements, such as ‘cannot refuse’, ‘being partially frustrated’, ‘doubts of future’ and ‘self-motivating’ are defined as neutral.<sup>4</sup> These types of identity aspects combine strengthening and weakening aspects and indicate a middle position, or a position not explicitly associated with either strengthening or weakening aspects.

<sup>1</sup> The interviews which did not contain relevant statements on identity aspects are not included in Table 1 (P16, P17, P22, P26, P29, P30, P33 and P41).

<sup>2</sup> Positively connoted identity aspects are indicated in Table 1 with +.

<sup>3</sup> Negatively connoted identity aspects are indicated in Table 1 with -.

<sup>4</sup> Aspects seen as combining negative and positive connotations regarding their identity aspects are defined as neutral and are indicated in Table 1 with +/-.

**Table 1: Identity aspects experienced in conflict situations**

| P <sup>5</sup> | Aspects that contribute to identity constructions | Identity |
|----------------|---|----------|
| 1              | Ambitious, supportive family                      | +        |
| 2              | Limited due to company philosophy                 | -        |
| 3              | Strong-minded, likes transparency                 | +        |
| 4              | Strong leadership, conservative values            | +        |
| 5              | Sympathetic                                       | +        |
| 6              | Personally hurt through bullying                  | -        |
| 7              | Intimidated, lost courage                         | -        |
| 8              | Needing feedback, optimistic                      | +        |
| 9              | Truth-oriented, direct approach                   | +        |
| 10             | Pedantic, but fair                                | +        |
| 11             | Communicative and permissive personality          | +        |
| 12             | Self-convinced                                    | +        |
| 13             | Social networking                                 | +        |
| 14             | Sensitive, truth-oriented, facing intrigue        | +/-      |
| 15             | Multiple identity, strong coping strategies       | +        |
| 18             | Victimised, losing trust                          | -        |
| 19             | Strict, power, controlling                        | +        |
| 20             | Truth-oriented, avoiding conflict                 | +        |
| 21             | Friendly, network by dealing with people          | +        |
| 23             | Short tolerance, high control level               | +        |
| 24             | Conscious Black, fighting for rights              | +        |
| 25             | Optimistic for education, but ostracised          | -        |
| 27             | Defensive, takes conflict personally              | -        |
| 28             | Conscious of effective body language              | +        |
| 31             | Feels limited, disappointed                       | -        |
| 32             | Optimist, works on his competence to be clear     | +        |
| 34             | Identity crisis, disoriented, irritated           | -        |
| 35             | Feels sandwiched, deeply frustrated               | -        |
| 36             | Feels hurt in his dignity and put down            | -        |
| 37             | Benevolent, cannot refuse                         | +/-      |
| 38             | Integrity injured                                 | -        |
| 39             | Integrity injured, no freedom of mind             | -        |
| 40             | Straight, but partially frustrated                | +/-      |
| 42             | Stable, optimistic, outgoing nature               | +        |
| 43             | Self-motivating, doubts for future                | +/-      |
| 44             | Family-oriented, strong belief in meaning of life | +        |
| 45             | Privacy of person not respected, confrontational  | +/-      |

It is evident from the findings that 37 of the 45 managers referred to identity aspects in their conflict narrations without being directly asked to refer to their identity and its

<sup>5</sup> P means personal interview, for example P1 means personal interview number 1.

inter-relationship to conflict. Altogether 20 of the afore-mentioned 37 interviewees' statements on managers' identities are assumed to have impacted positively on conflict and conflictual experiences and, therefore, to have strengthened their identities. The following excerpt<sup>6</sup> from a conflict described by a manager provides an insight into the conflict narrations and the ascription of strengthening identity aspects:

P44, an Indian female manager, narrated a conflict which she titled "Ways to do your job". She related how she experienced significant miscommunication with a White female colleague in the head office in Johannesburg, whilst she was working in a Branch in Kwa-Zulu Natal. She narrates the following situation:

"I usually tend to send my parts up to Isando and ahm...the lady on the other side disagreed with the way I presented my stuff, because she said that she couldn't understand it...but...ahm...I think the problem was...I understood the way I did my work and she...thought it wasn't the way it should have been done. (...) The information that I supplied wasn't incorrect...and I believe that you can complain about something if it's incorrect (laughing) and that's what I tried to say to her. It's not incorrect and ahm...she was quite rude to me...which...I still was able to be calm...which I think is because of the way we were brought up and the way we...work...ahm...we can write about situations, you understand, when people are rude to you...it boils down to that they can not be as tolerant as you are. And...ah...what I did was...she was saying that I must "shut up and listen"...so...(...).I attached all my reports and I told her that I didn't appreciate what she had done...and she ja...did apologise, because she didn't see it the way I saw it. So, I was able to actually resolve it...but...there was something...the affect...that affected me."

The manager felt strong, self-reliant and supported by her family and social network which gave her strengths to deal with conflict and stay calm. The aspect of the part of her identity construct family as well as social network and social support gave the interviewee strength to deal with the conflict with her colleague. She interpreted the situation of the colleague in Johannesburg as if this person was not as tolerant, as flexible and open as she was. By doing this, she punctuated her strong values of tolerance, flexibility and openmindedness. Even if her colleague attacked her verbally, P44 stayed calm and polite, as she says, due to her family up-bringing and her personal "ability" to "ride above it". For her, this kind of behaviour reflects her professionalism, even in manifest conflicts. Her professional conflict management behaviour is deeply rooted in the way how she was brought up as a family member and a member of a social network. Therefore, different parts of her identity contribute positively to her managerial identity. At the same time, she highlights that this professional attitude is not imperative to her identity. Rather it is part of an identity part which draws together familial, social, professional and educational (trained) parts of her identity which are emphasized in this situation due to situation and context: By referring to the point how "easy it is" to scream and react upset the interviewee emphasizes that education (training) is needed to react calm and professional in work place conflicts. She experiences herself as self-confident and well-equipped to manage conflict professionally due to her background and social relationships that strengthen her identity in general. However, the interviewee highlights that she felt emotionally affected by the con-

<sup>6</sup> The excerpts P44 and P18 were chosen through randomizing.

flictual situation. In this part of the text she does not refer to the point why she felt affected, but reading between the lines of the entire interview text, the reader can see that P44 interprets the conflict as one which is understood as being based on racial discrimination, not on the task described in this excerpt. This interpretation of conflict causes is common in the South African Post-Apartheid context and can particularly be found in conflicts between members of different racial groups (for further information race-related conflict in the described contexts see Mayer 2005, 2008a). The emotional affectedness can therefore be viewed as being based on her subconscious feeling that she was exposed to latent racial discrimination underlying the manifest conflict. In this case, her racial respectively cultural part of her multiple identity causes emotional affectedness as described and makes her even feel more proud of her “professional way of managing conflict”.

This excerpt and its interpretation shows how many parts of the interviewee’s identity are involved in perceiving and managing as well as narrating the conflict situation and provide an insight into the complexity of the conflict-identity interrelationship.

The findings further demonstrate that 12 of the 37 identity statements led to the assumption that the identity aspects involved tended to weaken the identity of the managers in the narrated conflict. The following excerpt from a conflict described by a manager provides an insight into the conflict narrations and the ascription of weakening identity aspects:

P18, an Indian male manager, started his career in the organization three years previously, in a newly-created position. He was the only Indian manager amongst White male managers and emphasized several times that he felt racially discriminated. He describes his conflict as follows:

“When you come into a new company, you want to redefine the level of commitment and the level of your team habit and try and achieve the goals and objectives and I am in this position and (...) and I came in and I have a very high knowledge of things and of what is going on because I have done this in the past and so... I have my... and I say this to you now, I have had my own conflict of... and you meet the people and there is just that they fear... that... at times there are things that I know and then they experience me as being to superior and to knowledgeable and so now... now I started to hold back, because, because I feel like now... I am victimised... and... ah... ah... because of that now I feel very sad about it, because now I am in a state now were... in which I feel like I am not wanted, you know, with all this knowledge and the skills that I have... I wanted to put this in the company.. You know, I was somebody, I really drew myself, you know, success is me. So, I found it very, very sad and... ah... to that extent that I go, I mean, perhaps to another company.”

This manager feels that, due to his strong knowledge and his attitude towards success, his colleagues fear him and interpret his behaviour as he was a superior to them. Therefore, he now feels victimised by his colleagues due to his position as a newcomer, as a knowledgeable person and as a successful business person. He feels criticized due to his inner attitude to “make a difference” and implement change in the organization. Also, this interviewee describes his feelings of sadness, because he did not feel acknowledged and accepted by his colleagues, even though he wanted to put his energy and effort into the company. This interviewee suffers from the experienced

discrepancy between his self-image and the experienced other-image which the colleagues. At the end of the interview, this manager highlights that he interprets the situation as a racial discrimination. By trying to cope with the conflictual situation between him and his colleagues, the interviewee – being of Indian origin – states finally: “White managers in this organization do not accept me due to my background. If I was White, there would have never been a problem coming up with new ideas.” (P18). As in the first interview excerpt, the racial or cultural part of this manager’s identity plays a major role in perceiving and interpreting the behaviour and attitude of his colleagues. Realizing the conflict as being a racial conflict this interviewee loses confidence and describes explicitly in his interview narration how he lost confidence and commitment regarding his job. He even felt a strong “identity crisis” which impacted strongly on his cultural identity, his self-esteem and his attitudes: he lost confidence in himself, in his ways of doing things and “turned introverted”. He did not feel that he experienced any backing neither at work nor at home, particularly since he felt that he – being a man in a male-dominated organization – needed to be strong and able to cope with the situation himself. He even felt more shaken when he experienced that he could not cope with the situation on his own and then decided to seek professional consultancy to reconstruct his personal aims and self-images.

Five of the 37 managers’ statements on identity are assumed to have had a neutral impact on their identity construction, according to the interview narrations, the self-evaluation of the interviewees and the researcher’s interpretation of the interview texts. This indicates that positively and negatively judged statements with regard to the interrelation of identity and conflict are balanced. Further in-depth content analysis of the interview texts and the data in Table 1 confirmed that managers experienced the previously-mentioned identity aspects as “backed up” by specific external and internal impacts which influenced the managers’ strengthening or weakening identity aspects in conflicts, as discussed in the following.

### **External and internal impacts influencing identities**

Further impacts can be evaluated by exploring those external (inter-personal) and internal (intra-personal) impacts rendering an influence on identity constructs in conflict. The following research questions will be answered, namely (1) which impacts influence managerial identity within the described conflicts; and (2) how do identity, external and internal impacts influence conflict management?

#### ***External and internal impacts strengthening identity aspects***

Managerial identity is according to the interviewees influenced by internal and external impacts. These impacts contribute either positively or negatively to the strengthening and/ or weakening of managerial identities. The managers highlighted the following as positive external aspects of identity which can strengthen identity parts: (1) family support; (2) social networking; and (3) a positive attitude towards the corporate organizational identity.

Managers who experienced these positive external aspects felt their identity aspects were strengthened and supported during conflict, as described in the example P44 in which the interviewee relates her conflict management success to the way she

was brought up and educated by her parents. Not only her up-bringing influenced her identity and her ways of dealing constructively with conflict, but also her present strong family support and network which gives her strength to cope with conflictual situations. These external impacts are experienced as “back-ups” which reinforce the individual identity concept within the experienced conflict and which, therefore, strengthened the individual’s position in the conflict: “My family always supports me with regard to my work. Also...if there is conflict” (P44). Positive relationships in families and social networks, as well as the reflection of individual identity aspects in the organizational identity concept, led to a strengthened identity in managers which also supported to stay “professional” and “keep the face of all people involved” (P44). Besides the family relationship, also friends are important for managers to behave as a “strong manager”: “I can always talk to my friends when I have to sort things out or when I have problems at work. They always listen and give advice. It is important to have a social network that is there for you” (P1). Finally, several managers mention that the attitudes towards the organizational culture are highly important to be resolve conflicts professionally: “As long as my way of doing things fits to the company I feel okay and can handle conflict easily.” (P4).

At the same time, managers described the following internal impacts as positively influencing their identity aspects in conflict situations: (1) self-motivation; (2) strong-mindedness; (3) strong leadership ability; (4) sympathy; (5) optimism; (6) truth orientation; (7) direct and communicative approach to conflict; (8) control; (9) individual coping strategies; and (10) self-consciousness with regard to own identity construct.

Internal impacts which positively influence a person’s individual identity, rather than the external aspects, were more frequently represented in the statements of managers who had experienced work-related conflict. This leads to the assumption that positively-associated internal impact in work-related conflict supports both the individual identity aspects and managerial ability to cope successfully and effectively with such conflict. One manager highlights that “I am a very strong-minded person with strong leadership skills, therefore I can cope with conflict and stress at work.” Another manager points out that “I am a very optimistic person and this helps to overcome difficulties and conflicts.” Several managers state that “being truth-oriented” helps in managing conflicts: “You have to always stick to the truth. Then, you won’t have problems and people take you seriously.” The aspect of being truthful is related to the way individuals talk to each other: “It is important to be straight forward. I am straight forward and very direct. That helps to solve conflicts. Then people know...and they do know that I only say the truth...and that I only want to hear it. And this is what I expect from them. Otherwise we have a conflict.”

As shown in the example of P44, managers often highlight both, the external and the internal impacts that support them to cope with conflict: “both, my family background and social network support me”. At the same time she felt “strong-minded and confident” in her high work qualities and competencies: “I am very qualified and I know what I am doing I have got a lot of competencies that I have gained during my life. But naturally, I am an optimistic person. I am self-confident about myself and that is why I am very open and direct when I talk to people.” The way how managers perceive themselves referring to their social embeddedness and their intra-personal



strength impacts highly on how they perceive conflict and how they react to conflictual situations.

### *External and internal impacts weakening identity aspects*

Managers experienced the following external impacts as rendering a negative and weakening effect on their identities: (1) philosophy of company or organizational identity which was not considered sound; (2) e-mail culture facilitated intrigues and bullying; (3) intimidation and ostracising by colleagues; (4) race-related treatment; (5) inadequate managerial behaviour; and (6) personal privacy not respected.

These external impacts indicate that managers of this sample experienced communication as weakening when related to intrigues, bullying, intimidation, ostracising and inadequate managerial behaviour, as, for example, experienced by P18. Managers felt weakened when their personal privacy was not respected by colleagues and superiors: “I feel very intimidated by my male colleagues and I lost a lot of courage, because...this Board here...they just support male managers...it is still male dominated here and people don’t treat you equally...as...being a woman.” Managers further found their identity aspects weakened in conflict situations influenced by external impacts, such as the philosophy of the organization which were considered unsound. Inter-personal and race-related treatment also weakened identity aspects. One Black manager mentions: “You know, this company is not yet ripe to deal with diversity. And this is why I won’t stay long in this company. I feel deeply hurt, am frustrated and...feel hurt in my dignity as a person” (P36).

Apart from the external impacts, managers experienced the following internal aspects as relating negatively to their identity: (1) loss of face; (2) lack of courage; (3) lack of trust; (4) defensive or volatile approach; (5) taking conflict personally; and (6) injured integrity. These impacts demonstrate that managers felt weakened in those conflicting situations in which they experienced a loss of face and integrity or a lack of courage and trust. They further felt weakened through being personally hurt and injured. Managers reconstructed their identities as weakened when they only experienced a defensive and volatile approach to managing conflict. The following excerpt shows how both external and internal impacts weaken the identity in conflict situations of an Indian manager (P18):

“...there was an incident...just...recently where...about the stock availability with our dealer and one of the dealers really misinterpreted what I had said. And...ahm...he sent an email to...ahm...to...ahm...our boss to say that the information that they had given was wrong and that’s...they demanded...ahm...they basically were saying that...we were working...ahm...for, for other purposes than for the customers...and...ahm...I was very upset about that. Now, ahm...my immediate manager asked me just for feedback on that. (...) we don’t have communication face-to-face. It is handled via email. (...) Ahm...I really believe that the email scenario is taking over...and that people are using it as a...ah...gate...or a way of expressing, it is maybe “over expressing” things, (...) you know, my biggest problem that I take things personally. (...) What am I doing wrong? (...) It’s not a business thing. It’s personal and about personalities, it’s the way how the person is dealing and reacting in the job.

This manager felt really upset by a customer complaining about him at his superior via email. Due to the organizational principles the “customer” needs to be cared for and

the customer-orientation needs to be guided by honest, direct and friendly communication. This manager explains that he “takes things personally” which he at the same time judges as a fault, as being an unprofessional attitude. Being confronted with a social, inter-personal work conflict, this manager first questions himself and his own actions and tries to analyse the situation. The image of the manager’s identity that the customer and the superior reflect and portray in feedback via email is not in harmony with the self-image of his work-related identity parts which the manager would like to present at work. Finally, he comes to the conclusion that the managing conflicts is all about personal attitudes and how a person reacts in the job. He views conflict (management) as an individual challenge – for which he does not feel prepared - and does not experience any support, neither in the workplace nor at home. Therefore, he felt sad and unhappy and experienced a crisis of his identity due to the fact that he felt strong disharmony between him and his managerial and the organisational identity and values and by experiencing these differences he did not see the overlapping parts of his “internal and external realities” (Gaziano et al. 1996). As described above, these experiences led to dissatisfaction in the job, decreased well-being (De Dreu et al. 2004: 15) and work-related stress (Friedman et al., 2000: 32) which impacted on the manager’s creativity and productiveness in the organisation.

Table 2 provides a summary of external and internal aspects on strengthening and weakening identity aspects.

**Table 2: External and internal influences on identity aspects**

|                                       | <b>External impacts</b>   | <b>Internal impacts</b>  |
|---------------------------------------|---|--|
| <b>Strengthening identity aspects</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family support;</li> <li>• social network; and</li> <li>• a positive attitude towards the corporate organisational identity.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-motivation;</li> <li>• strong-mindedness;</li> <li>• strong leadership ability;</li> <li>• sympathy;</li> <li>• optimism;</li> <li>• truth orientation;</li> <li>• direct and communicative approach to conflict;</li> <li>• control;</li> <li>• individual coping strategies; and</li> <li>• self-consciousness with regard to own identity construct.</li> </ul> |
| <b>Weakening identity aspects</b>     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Philosophy of company, which was not considered sound;</li> <li>• e-mail culture facilitated intrigues and bullying;</li> <li>• intimidation and ostracising by colleagues;</li> <li>• race-related treatment;</li> <li>• inadequate managerial behaviour; and</li> <li>• personal privacy not respected.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Loss of face;</li> <li>• lack of courage;</li> <li>• lack of trust;</li> <li>• defensive or volatile approach;</li> <li>• taking conflict personally; and</li> <li>• injured integrity.</li> </ul>  |

Conflict constructs the identity aspects of managers and is, in turn, reconstructed by them with reference to their identity aspects and the different impacts thereon. Generally, conflict and the management thereof are perceived as a challenge in the selected

organization, both due to the organization's impact on managers' status and their identity constructs, as well as the organization's hierarchical structures and value concepts. Particularly conflicts that are based on communication and treatment, fight for competition and specific positions in the organisation, and race-related behaviour are highly interlinked with identity aspects.

Referring to the third research question, the research findings demonstrate different managerial approaches to conflict management, such as: (1) communication (face-to-face); (2) internal intervention (grievance, hearing, complaint); (3) other resolution measures (knock out, role-play); (4) negotiation (advice and consultation); (5) avoidance (conflict prevention); (6) apology (forgiveness); (7) transfer (resign, dismissal); (8) mediation (third party intervention); and (9) external intervention (lawyer, trial).

The majority of managers highlight that communication is crucial in conflict management. Communication includes in their opinion talking, round-table talks, room meetings, smooth and face-to-face communication: "If people would communicate face-to-face in this organisation, 90 per cent of the conflicts were resolved successfully" (P18). In parallel to face-to-face communication, internal intervention is used by the managers to solve conflicts successfully: "I was handing in a grievance and went for a hearing. I believe that...sometimes you need assistance to finalise conflicts...so...that it does not eat you up." (P31). In the opinion of P4 team-building exercises or role plays could help to resolve conflicts. Managers further considered negotiation (negotiation strategies, lateral thinking, advice, compromise and consultation) as a constructive way of conflict resolution. Most of the managers highlighted that they did not like conflicts and always tried to avoid it, when possible. Conflict avoidance included, for example, stepping back, withdrawal and using preventive measures. Only a small number of managers opted for apology and forgiveness to cope successfully with occurring conflict. Even fewer managers proposed transfer, resignation or dismissal as an adequate conflict management strategy. P7 states: "My only way to deal with this conflict is to leave the organization". Also P18 describes this kind of conflict management scenario: "Time will show if I fit into this organisation. If I find out that I do not fit, I will change the department or leave." The clusters of mediation (including win-win-situation, intercultural mediation and diversity management) and external intervention (court procedures, lawyer or trial), were least often mentioned as adequate for managing conflict. Most of the managers did see conflict management through third party intervention as not desirable. Generally, they highlighted that conflict management competencies were part of their managerial identity. One manager says (P9): "Dealing with conflicts...being a manager...I am also a mediator. I mediate between my subordinates, try to find out what the problem is and try to help them, treat them fair, with respect and guide them towards a win-win solution."

Comments on conflict management were attached to identity. Conclusively, managers perceiving strengthening identity aspects related to a strong and positive identity concept found it easier to manage the described conflict situations, compared to those managers with weakening identity aspects. Strengthening identity aspects (empowered through positive and empowering external and internal impacts) are associated with conflict management practices aimed at: (1) direct, open, face-to-face communication; (2) negotiation, mediation and win-win solutions; (3) apology and listening to parties;

and (4) integration and co-operation<sup>6</sup>. The findings demonstrate that conflict linked to weakened identity aspects and negative external and internal impacts are associated with conflict management through: (1) internal intervention; (2) transfer; and (3) external intervention<sup>7</sup>.

Based on the above, it may be concluded that managers with weakened identities experiencing negative internal and external impacts prefer indirect contact and formal support structures for resolving conflict. Managers with weakened identities refrain from communicating directly, third-party-intervention or win-win-solutions.

## Discussion

As stated by Kriesberg (2003, 2003a) and Lederach (2005), conflict is strongly inter-linked with identity and constructed through identity-related conflict situations (Lederach 2000) and conflict narrations (Cobb 2003), as the interviews proof. The data gathered in this research exhibits similar interlinkages. The research findings indicate that managers construct strengthening and weakening identity aspects in a kind of “patchwork identity” (Keupp 1988). They refer to different identity aspects which are prioritised in the narrated conflict and which are intra- or inter-personally constructed. This “patchwork identity” consists of several aspects which managers define as being part of their managerial respectively organisational identity: They see themselves, for example, as representatives of members of a particular racial group, as gender-bound, as family members and as individuals with specific characteristics, such as being a fair or benevolent person or being intimidated, strong-minded or ambitious. Highly interesting in this study is, that particularly racial/ cultural identity parts are activated in inter-personal work conflicts between managers in the organisation. However, managers view themselves as part of the (diverse) organisational identity. Experienced differences between the managerial and the organisational identity can lead to conflicts and identity crisis. At the same time, managers refer to external and internal impacts in conflicts which can contribute to conflict and identity construction.

Multiple identity aspects in managers appear to provide “creativity spaces” (Keupp 1988), as well as flexibility in conflict and the management thereof, provided these multiple aspects are positively connoted and identity aspects are strengthened. Managers highlighted that they draw creativity and positive energy from external impacts, such as their family and their social network or their positive individual attitudes, to manage inter-personal conflicts in the organization. The “external back-up” as part of their identities supports them to perceive and manage conflicts professionally. By developing their identity towards openness, fairness and truth-oriented, managers try to address conflict on a non-personal level. Moreover, they try to address the needs and the underlying interests and give explanations with regards to their own thoughts and feelings to solve conflicts. By trying to bring identity aspects into the open, managers try to open creativity spaces and connect to the other conflict parties.

Conversely, weakened identity aspects lead to more complex conflict (Coy/Woehrle 2000; Kriesberg 2003), irritation and insecurity with regard to multiple identity aspects and challenges in its management. As soon as managers experienced negative external impacts (such as inter-personal bullying) or internal impacts (such as lack of intra-personal courage or trust), which seems to be strongly connected to low self-

esteem, managers seemed to lose creativity and flexibility in managing conflicts constructively, directly and by themselves.

Generally, most of the managers feel that identity statements impact on conflicts in a strengthening way. Some managers assume that weakening identity aspects are (re-)constructed in the conflict narrated, while only a few single managers see the impact of identities in a neutral way.

The positive internal impacts on identity, rather than external aspects, were more frequently represented in managers' statements. This led to the conclusion that a positive intra-personal attitude in managerial conflict – based on a positive self-image (strong-mindedness, sympathy and optimism) and clear guidelines (truth-orientation, controlling and coping strategies) – supports managerial ability for managing conflict independently and constructively.

Managers with strengthened identity aspects generally found it easier to manage the described conflicts, compared to those managers experiencing weakening identity aspects. At the same time, findings indicate that conflict linked to negative identity aspects reveal conflict management strategies not directed at constructive and creative inter-personal conflict management and win-win-solutions. Conversely, strengthening identity aspects strived for win-win-solutions and constructive practices, such as mediation, integration, negotiation, co-operation and apology.

These findings demonstrate the importance of strengthened identity aspects – which are constructed through self and others - supporting constructive conflict management practices in managers in the selected organization. Managers highlighted that a positive attitude towards the corporate organizational identity contributes positively to managing conflict and identity and that this can become a major tool both in organizational conflict management (Oliver and Roos 2003) and in developing core capabilities and resources in the organization. Conversely, an organizational identity that is not considered sound contributes to developing barriers and conflict within the organization, as highlighted in recent research (McInnes et al. 2006).

The results of this case study support the above mentioned theories with regard to the South African international organizational context as shown in this discussion chapter. How the results can be used efficiently will be addressed in the following.

#### Limitations of the case study

With regard to the research design and methodology, the study is limited to primary and secondary source analyses and triangulation of theories, methods and data. Referring to the sample and the qualitative single case study approach, the results of the study are not generalizable. This study does not provide data that can be generalised for international organisations operating in South Africa. However, the results provide insights and a deeper understanding of the exemplified issues in the described and presented setting. Therefore, they can lead to the following recommendations for organizations investing in South Africa, as well as for further research addressing the issues of conflict and identities in organizations in the described context.

## Recommendations

With regard to the results presented, the following recommendations can be made to managers in the selected organization. These may also be implemented by other organizations working in comparable contexts.

The organization should source professional conflict managers and consultants to promote constructive conflict management practices which at the same time address the development of managerial identities towards coherent multiple identities. External and internal impacts on managers should be used as strengthening resources for developing managerial identities.

Managerial identities should be developed through self-awareness and self-reflection, as well as through constructive inter-personal communication and conflict management practices, both to develop strengthening external and internal identity aspects which can change perceptions and behaviour in managerial conflicts towards identity based-conflict management. This is particularly important since the diverse managerial workforce in South Africa needs new tools to cope with inter-racial relationships, not only focussing on racial identity parts, but rather highlight other identity aspects to create synergies and creativity spaces. Simultaneously, weakening internal and external identity aspects should be 'reframed' and transformed into constructive elements: Lack of trust or lack of understanding could then be reframed positively into the 'need to trust and understand'. This would be a first step to reframe managerial and organizational identity aspects. However, the work with identities and the reframing of weakening into strengthening aspects always needs to be defined from the viewpoint of the managers involved to reach the highest degree of constructive identity development and conflict management.

Referring to further research, it needs to be addressed which conflict types are inter-linked to which kind of identity aspects and how managers define the potential of developing managerial identities and constructive conflict management potentials within their organization. It would be important to explore which kind of identity work could support constructive conflict management in the South African context and how the inter-relationship of managerial and organizational identity can influence conflict management across managerial levels and cultural borders.

Finally, this research topic could be replicated in another South African organization or another international organization in South Africa to support the results gained or to revise them accordingly.

The constructive (re-)construction of managers' identities impacts strongly on successful individual and organizational (conflict) management. These processes are highly complex and need a contextual understanding from an emic perspective to create creativity spaces within a diverse organization and the individuals therein. These new spaces can impact positively on the organization and create synergies, the improvement of organizational strategies and integrity, as well as successful identity-based diversity and conflict management in managers.

## References

- Aggestan, K. (1999): *Reframing and resolving Conflict. Israeli-Palestinian negotiations 1988-1998*. Lund: Lund University Press.
- Albert, S./Ashforth, B./Dutton, J. (eds.): (2000): Organizational identity and identification. Charting new waters and building new bridges. In: *Academy of Management Review*, 25(1): 13-17.
- Albert, S./Ashforth, B./Dutton, J. (eds.): (2000a): Special topic forum on organizational identity and identification. In: *Academy of Management Review*, 25(1): 13-152.
- Albert, S./Whetten, D.A. (1985): Organizational identity. In: Cummings, L.L./Staw, M.M. (eds.): *Research in organizational behaviour*. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Alvesson, M. (2000): Social identity and the problem of loyalty in knowledge-intensive companies. In: *Journal of Management Studies*, 37(8): 1101-1123.
- Applefield, J.M./Huber, R./Moallem, M. (2000): Constructivism in theory and practice: Toward a better understanding. In: *The High School Journal*, 84(2): 35-53.
- Ashforth, B. (2001): *Role Transitions in Organizational Life*. Mahwah, NJ.: Erlbaum Associates, Inc. Publishers.
- Ashforth, B./Mael, F. (1989): Social identity theory and the organization. In: *Academy of Management Review*, 14: 20-39.
- Augsburger, D.W. (1992): *Conflict mediation across cultures*. Kentucky: John Knox Press.
- Avruch, K. (1998): *Culture and conflict resolution*. Washington D.C.: USIP Press.
- Babbie, E./Mouton, J. (2006): *The practice of social research*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bekker, S./Leildè, A./Cornelisen, S./Horstmeier, S. (2000): The emergence of new identities in the Western Cape. In: *Politikon*, 2(27): 221-237.
- Berger, P.L./Luckmann, T. (2000): *Die gesellschaftliche Konstruktion der Wirklichkeit. Eine Theorie der Wissenssoziologie* (17<sup>th</sup> ed.): Frankfurt: Fischer.
- Bloomfield, D./Reilly, B. (1998): The changing nature of conflict and conflict Management. In Harris, P./Reilly, B. (eds.): *Democracy and Deep-rooted conflict*. Stockholm: Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance.
- Booyesen, L. (2007): Societal power shifts and changing social identities in South Africa: Workplace implications. In: *Southern African Journal of Economic and Management Sciences*, 10(1): 1-20.
- Bütz, M.R. (1997): *Chaos and complexity: implications for psychological theory and practice*. Bristol, PA: Taylor & Francis.
- Burton, J.W. (1990): *Conflict: Human Needs Theory*. London: Macmillian.
- Caws, P. (1994): Identity: Cultural, transcultural, and multicultural. In: Goldberg, D.T. (Ed): *Multiculturalism. A Critical Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Cheldelin, S./Druckman, D./Fast, L. (2003): *Conflict: From analysis to intervention*. New York: Continuum.
- Clarke, C.A./Brown, A.D./Hope Hailey, V. (2009): Working identities? Antagonistic discursive resources and managerial identity. In: *Human Relations*, 62(3): 323-352.
- Cobb, S. (2003): *Narratives and stories, values and neutrality*. Institute of Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University.  
[http://www.beyondintractability.org/audio/sarah\\_cobb/?nid=2423](http://www.beyondintractability.org/audio/sarah_cobb/?nid=2423)  
 (accessed on 22 October 2007).
- Coleman, P.T. (2003): Characteristics of protracted, intractable conflict: Toward the development of a metaframework. In: *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 9(1): 1-37.
- Collins, J./Porras, J. (1996): *Built to last*. Chatham: Random House.
- Collis, J./Hussey, R. (2003): *Business Research: A practical guide for undergraduate and postgraduate students* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.): New York: Palgrave Macmillian.
- Constantino, C.A./Sickles Merchant, C. (1996): *Designing conflict management systems*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Coupland, C./Brown, A.D. (2004): Constructing organizational identities on the Web: A case study of Royal Dutch/Shell. In: *Journal of Management Studies*, 41(8): 1325-1347.

- Cowan, D. (1995): *Taking charge of organizational conflict: A guide to managing anger and confrontation*. Spring Valley: Inner Choice Publishing.
- Coy, P.G./Woehrl, L.M. (2000): *Social conflict and collective identities*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Crotty, M. (1998): *The foundations of social science research*. New South Wales: Allen & Unwin.
- De Dreu, C.K.W./Harinck, F./van Vianen, A.E.M. (1999): Conflict and performance in groups and organisations. In: Cooper, C.L./Robertson, I.T. (eds.): *International review of industrial and organisational psychology*, 14: 369–414.
- De Dreu, C.K.W./van Dierendonck, D./Dijkstra, M.T.M. (2004): Conflict at work and individual well-being. In: *International Journal of Conflict Management*, 15(1): 6-26.
- Demmers, J. (2006): Conflict research: Lancunas, mantras and pitfalls. In: *ISYP Journal on Science and World Affairs*, 2(2): 99-102.
- De Vos, A.S./Fouché, C.B. (1998): General introduction to research design, data collection methods and data analyses. In: de Vos, A.S. (Ed): *Research at grass roots: A primer for the caring profession*. Pretoria: JL van Schaik Publishers.
- Dutton J./Dukerich, J./Harquail, C. (1994): Organizational images and member identification. In: *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 39: 239-263.
- Folger, J.P./Scott Poole, M./Stutman, R.K. (eds.): (2001): *Working through conflict: Strategies for relationships, groups and organisations* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.): New York: Addison Wesley Longman.
- Fortlouis Wood, L. (2007): Social identity theory and the active self in a theoretical context: A proposed curriculum for undergraduate personality courses. In: Ross, A. (Ed): *Education in Society*. Ninth Conference of the Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe Thematic Network, London. [http://cice.londonmet.ac.uk/members/pdfs/2007\\_193.pdf](http://cice.londonmet.ac.uk/members/pdfs/2007_193.pdf). (accessed on 26 June 2008).
- Francis, D. (2003): People, peace and power: Conflict transformation in action. In: *Peace Review*, 15(2): 241-243.
- Friedman, R.A./Tidd, S.T./Currall, S.C./Tsai, J.C. (2000): What goes around comes around: The impact of personal conflict styles on work conflict and stress. In: *The International Journal of Conflict Management*, 11(1): 32-55.
- Gadamer, H.G. (1990): *Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* (6<sup>th</sup> ed.): Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck.
- Gaziano, W.G./Jensen-Campbell, L.A./Hair, E. (1996): Perceiving interpersonal conflict and reacting to it: The case of agreeableness. In: *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 70(4): 820-835.
- Geertz, C. (1987): *Dichte Beschreibung. Beiträge zum Verstehen kultureller Systeme*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
- Gioia, D./Schultz, M./Corley, K. (2002): On celebrating the organisation identity metaphor: A rejoinder to Cornelissen. In: *British Journal of Management*, 13: 269-275.
- Gioia, D.A./Thomas, J.B. (1996): Identity, image and issue interpretation: Sensemaking during strategic change in academia. In: *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 41: 370-403.
- Glynn, M. (2000): When cymbals become symbols: Conflict over organizational identity within a symphony orchestra. In: *Organization science*, 11(3): 285-298.
- Habermas, J. (1999): *Theorie des Kommunikativen Handelns* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.): Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
- Hatch, M./Schulz, M. (2002): The dynamics of organizational identity. In: *Human Relations*, 55(8): 989-1018.
- Hipps, J.A. (1993): Trustworthiness and authenticity: Alternate ways to judge authentic assessments. Annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Atlanta.
- Hogg, M. A./Terry, D. J. (2000): Social identity and self-categorization processes in organizational contexts. In: *Academy of Management Review*, 25(1): 121-140.
- Humphreys, M./Brown, A. (2002): Narratives of organizational identity and identification: A case study of hegemony and resistance. In: *Organization Studies*, 23: 421-427.
- Johnson, B.R. (1997): Examining the validity structure of qualitative research. In: *Education*, 118(3): 282-292.
- Jonassen, D.H. (1991): Evaluating constructivistic learning. In: *Educational Technology*, 28(11): 13-16.



- Keupp, H. (1988): Auf dem Weg zur Patchwork-Identität. *Verhaltenstherapie und Psychosoziale Praxis*. In: *Mitteilungen der dgvt*, 4(88): 425-438.
- Keupp, H. (1994): Ambivalenzen postmoderner Identität. In: Beck, U./Beck-Gersheim, E. (eds.): *Risikante Freiheiten. Individualisierung in modernen Gesellschaften*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
- Keupp, H. (1997): Von der (Un-)Möglichkeit erwachsen zu werden – Jugend zwischen Multioptionalität und Identitätsdiffusion. In: *Gemeindepsychologie-Rundbrief*, 1(97): 10-15.
- Kraus, W. (1996): *Das erzählte Selbst. Die narrative Konstruktion von Identität in der Spätmoderne*. Pfaffenweiler: Centaurius.
- Kriesberg, L. (2003): *Constructive conflict: From escalation to resolution* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.): New York: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Kriesberg, L. (2003a): Factors shaping the course of intractable conflict. In Burgess, G./Burgess, H. (eds.): *Beyond Intractability*. [http://www.beyondintractability.org/m/factors\\_shaping\\_intractable\\_conflict.jsp](http://www.beyondintractability.org/m/factors_shaping_intractable_conflict.jsp) (accessed on 22 October 2007).
- Kromrey, H. (1998): *Empirische Sozialforschung* (8<sup>th</sup> ed.): Opladen: Leske und Budrich.
- Layes, G. (2003): Interkulturelles Identitätsmanagement. In: Thomas, A./Kinast, E.-U./Schroll-Machl, S. (eds.): *Handbuch interkultureller Kommunikation und Kooperation. Band 1: Grundlagen und Praxisfelder*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht.
- Lederach, J.P. (1988): *Of nets, nails and problems: A folk vision of conflict in Central America*. Unpublished Doctoral thesis, University of Colorado, Colorado.
- Lederach, J.P. (1996): *Preparing for peace. Conflict transformation across cultures*. New York: Syracuse University Press.
- Lederach, J.P. (2000): The cultural dimension. In *mediation and facilitation training manual* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.): Akron: Mennonite Conciliation Service.
- Lederach, J.P. (2003): *The little book of conflict transformation*. Intercourse: Good Books.
- Lederach, J.P. (2005): All conflicts are identity conflict. In: Burgess, G./Burgess, H. (eds.): *Beyond Intractability*. [http://www.beyondintractability.org/user\\_guides/identity\\_conflict/?nid=5306](http://www.beyondintractability.org/user_guides/identity_conflict/?nid=5306) (accessed 06 November 2007).
- Lindgren, M./Wählin, N. (2001): Identity construction among boundary-crossing individuals. In: *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 17(3): 357-377.
- Maringer, E./Steinweg, R. (1997): *Konstruktive Haltungen und Verhaltensweisen in institutionalisierten Konflikten. Erfahrungen, Begriffe, Fähigkeiten*. Berlin: Berghof Forschungszentrum für konstruktive Konfliktbearbeitung.
- Mayer, B. (2000): *The dynamics of conflict management: A practitioner's guide*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Mayer, C.-H. (2005): *Artificial walls. South African narratives on conflict, difference and identity. An exploratory study in post-apartheid South Africa*. Stuttgart: Ibidem.
- Mayer, C.-H. (2008): Identity and health in transcultural mediation. The model of Culture-Synergetic Transcultural Mediation and its impacts. In: *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, in press.
- Mayer, C.-H. (2008a): *Managing conflict across cultures, values and identities. A case study in the South African automotive industry*. Unpublished PhD thesis, Rhodes University, South Africa.
- Mayring, P. (2003): *Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse* (8<sup>th</sup> ed.): Weinheim: Beltz Verlag.
- McInnes, P./Beech, N./de Caestecker, L./MacIntosh, R./Ross, M. (2006): Identity dynamics as a barrier to organizational change. In: *International Journal of Public Administration*, 29(12): 1109-1124.
- McLeod, J. (1996): The emerging narrative approach to counselling and psychotherapy. In: *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 24(2): 173-195.
- Miall, H., Ramsbotham, O./Woodhouse, T. (2000): *Contemporary conflict resolution*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Northrup, T.A. (1989): The dynamic of identity in personal and social conflict. In: Kriesberg, L./Northrup, T.A./Thorson, S.J. (eds.): *Timing the de-escalation of international conflict*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.
- Nye, J.S. (2005): *Understanding international conflict. An introduction to theory and history* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.): New York: Longman.

- Oliver, D./Roos, J. (2003): Dealing with the unexpected: Critical incidents in the LEGO Mindstorms team. In: *Human relations*, 56(9): 1055-1080.
- Organizational article (2002): Employment equity and affirmative action Policy. Internal article, PZ/HRP/Vm.
- Organizational article (2002a): Grievance procedure. Internal article, PZ/HRP/Vm.
- Organizational article (2006): Annual report. Organisation group 2005.  
<http://www.man.co.za> (accessed on 24 August 2006).
- Organizational article (2006a): Organisation truck and bus – Southern Africa. Company profile 2005.  
<http://www.man.co.za> (accessed on 24 August 2006).
- Pondy, L.R. (1967): Organizational conflict: Concepts and models. In: *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 12(2): 296-320.
- Pondy, L.R. (1992): Reflections on organizational conflict. In: *Journal of Organizational Behaviour*, 13(2): 257-261.
- Pratt, M./Rafaeli, A. (1997): Organizational dress as a symbol of multilayered social identities. In: *Academy of Management Journal*, 40(4): 862-898.
- Pullen, A. (2006): *Managing identity*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rahim, M.A. (2001): *Managing conflict in organizations* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.): Westport: Quorum Books.
- Rahim, M.A. (2002): Toward a theory of managing organizational conflict. In: *The International Journal of Conflict Management*, 13(3): 206-235.
- Ricoeur, P. (1979): Der Text als Modell: Hermeneutisches Verstehen. In: Buehl, W.L. (Ed): *Verstehende Soziologie. Grundzüge und Entwicklungstendenzen*. München: Nymphenburger Verlag.
- Ronan, W.W./Latham, G.P. (1974): The reliability and validity of the critical incident technique: a closer look. In: *Studies in Personal Psychology*, 6(1): 53-64.
- Rothman, J. (1997): *Resolving identity-based conflict: In nations, organizations and communities*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Satir, V./Banmen, J./Gerber, J. (2007): *Das Satir-Modell. Familientherapie und ihre Erweiterung*. Paderborn: Junfermann Verlag.
- Schmidt, H./Trittmann, U. (eds.) (2002): *Kultur und Konflikt – Dialog mit Johan Galtung*. Münster: Agenda-Verlag.
- Sennett, R. (1998): *The corrosion of character*. New York: Norton.
- Seymour, C. (2003): Social psychological dimensions of conflict. In: Burgess, G./Burgess, H. (eds.): *Beyond Intractability*. [http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/social\\_psychological](http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/social_psychological) (accessed on 22 October 2007).
- Sökefeld, M. (2001): Der Lehr- und Forschungsschwerpunkt. Ethnizität und interethnische Beziehungen am Hamburger Institut. In: *Ethnoscripts*, 3(1): 1-9.
- Steinke, I. (2000): Gütekriterien qualitativer Forschung. In: Flick, U./von Kardoff, E./Steinke, I. (eds.): *Qualitative Forschung. Ein Handbuch*. Hamburg: Rowohlt's Enzyklopaedie.
- Sveningsson, S. and Alvesson, M. (2003): Managing managerial identities: Organizational fragmentation, discourse and identity struggle. In: *Human Relations*, 56(10): 1163-1193.
- Wallensteen, D.P./Sollenberg, M. (1995): After the Cold War: Emerging patterns of armed conflict 1989-94. In: *Journal of Peace Research*, 32(3): 345-360.
- Watson, T.J. (1994): *In search of management*. London: Routledge.
- Watson, T.J. (2008): Managing identity: Identity work, personal predicaments and structural circumstances. In: *Organization*, 15(1): 121-143.
- Whetten, D./Godfrey, P. (eds.): (1998): *Identity in organizations*. London: Sage.
- Williams, K.Y./O'Reilly, C.A. (1998): Demography and diversity in organizations: A review of 40 years of research. In: Staw, B.M./Cummings, L.L. (eds.): *Research in organizational behaviour*. Greenwich: JAI Press.
- Wolff, S. (2000): Clifford Geertz. In: Flick, U./von Kardoff, E./Steinke, I. (eds.): *Qualitative Forschung. Ein Handbuch*. Hamburg: Rowohlt's Enzyklopädie.
- Yin, R.K. (2002): *Case study research: design and methods* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.): London: Sage.