

**Abstract:**

*Nongovernmental development organizations (NGDOs) face a tradeoff between prioritizing activities which further their social mission and those which generate revenue to pay salaries and bills. Since these pursuits often conflict, organizational leaders often experience what Albert and Whetten (1985) call a multiple-identity organization in which the group's socially oriented (i.e. normative) identity must be balanced with the utilitarian demands of operating an organization. This case study of RSEF, a small development NGDO in South Africa, draws on organizational identity theory to explore how macro changes in South Africa's NGDO funding structure threatened RSEF's traditional identity as a teacher support institute. Under these new pressures to compete for government service provision contracts, RSEF management's attention to cash flow actually suppressed the organization's development-oriented identity, leading staff to de-identify with the organization.*

*Based on six months of on-site observation and 27 semi-structured interviews with staff, this ethnographic study advances organizational identity theory by providing a narrative-driven, qualitative analysis of identity loss in the less-researched NGDO sector. This study suggests that managers may be able to preserve strong member identification with an organization even in the face of menacing changes to the external funding environment by deliberately preserving the staff's sense of voice and team cohesion.*

**Introduction**

Just as people carry with themselves a sense of what makes them distinctive and individualized compared to others around them, organizations, such as a business or churches, also display a set of characteristics that collectively make the group unique and enduring. Closely associated with this phenomenon of both people and organizations displaying an identity is the process of *identification* during which members of an organization compare what makes them distinctive and unique with the collective identity of the organization of which they are a member. When large overlap occurs between an individual's own identity and that of a given organization, a person is said to identify strongly with that organization. Political parties, for example, are driven by strong member *identification*: when citizens share the values, beliefs, and goals of the larger party organization, they are inclined to sacrifice time and energy on behalf of the collective mission of the party through phone banking, canvassing, and making financial donations. The notion of identity on an individual level was explained by the general social identity theory (SIT) developed by Turner (1982) and later applied to organizations by Albert and Whetten (1985).

Using terminology from organizational behavior scholars Albert and Whetten (1985), organizations such as political parties, churches, or community groups predominantly display what is termed a *normative* identity. Commitment in these organizations with strong normative identities (hereon simply *normative organizations*) is driven by their members' "internalization of organizational directives that are accepted as legitimate" (282). Members continue to participate in normative organizations because they individually care about the same issues, goals, and ideologies of the collective group. These organizations often espouse values of egalitarianism, community benefit, and social enrichment.

Members with a high commitment to a normative organization often signal their strong identification to the group publicly by wearing organizational logos or speaking with linguistic identity markers: *I am a libertarian* or *I am a Methodist*. Strong identification with a group often leads to positive behaviors on behalf of that group—increased task commitment

(Foreman & Whetten, 2002) and increased work performance (Van Knippenberg, 2000). For these reasons, leaders of groups of all kinds seek to elicit strong identification from their members so as to *unlock* many of these positive outcomes, thereby expanding the reach and aims of the organization and furthering its chances of survival into the future.

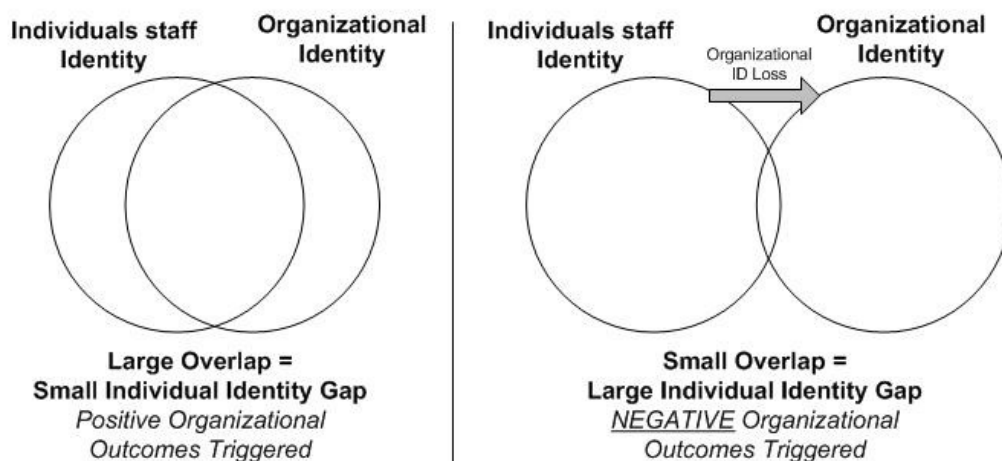
This paper presents a case study of RSEF, a South African organization of about 30 staff members, which has historically exhibited a forceful normative organizational identity focused on delivering on-site educational support for rural preschool teachers. I worked at RSEF as a full-time volunteer intern over the course of two semester-long visits to the organization between 2007 and 2008. During my time working with RSEF, I drew on the ethnographic field research methods of participant observation and one-on-one interviews to explore how and why member's organizational identification with RSEF changed through time.

To spearhead the exploration, I will share a vivid example of language revealing RSEF's normative identity which was most palpable during the years prior to South Africa's historic democratic transition from minority white rule to majority black rule in 1994. Mandisa, a middle-aged teacher trainer, recalled those pre-1994 days at RSEF:

*You [would] drive in different weather: hot or cold or windy or rainy because you've got this oomph—this passion—in you that you want to get to these people. You want to give to these people what you know and what they do not know so they are able to take this to other people... and empower them.*

Mandisa's vibrant wording oozes the normative identity pervasive at RSEF during the organization's early days. Indeed, her story was not unique among the staff; several other teacher trainers hired alongside Mandisa echoed the urgency and intensity of the organization's normative orientation. Her description of the staff's *oomph* to assist and train rural teachers despite trying conditions is precisely the outcome scholars associate with strong staff identification with a normative identity organization: the staff are willing to sacrifice their own comfort not for financial gain because of a desire to enact social change (Dutton and Dukerich, 1994). During the several field visits I made with Mandisa, I observed how her ability to validate—or to draw in language from identity theory, *prime*-- her identity as a social change agent seemed to be the key to her a success as an RSEF employee: she personally connects with RSEF clients and motivates them to change precisely because she cares so deeply about her clients and her work. She derives her sense of meaning and purpose—her identity—from the work she does as an RSEF employee. In other words, her identity gap is low—the distance between what is important to her and RSEF's collective values was near zero during these glowing days of the past (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: The Identity Gap**



*Caption: Image by the author, adapted from Foreman and Whetten (2002)*

## Utilitarian and Multiple Identities

Turning from Madisa's narrative for a moment, we find that normative organizations are not the only kinds of group structures which exhibit a sense of identity, however. In contrast to normative groups such as RSEF in the pre-1994 days, Albert and Whetten describe the phenomenon of a *utilitarian* identity as a collective sense of purpose and distinction primarily driven by economic production and market utility. The archetypal for-profit business garners member (e.g. employee) identification by speaking to the self-interest of its members—often the mutual interests of financial gain. Albert and Whetten (1985) note that utilitarian organizations tend to function more hierarchically which is "legitimized by the expectation that management will be competent and that the interests of management and of its employees will be similar" (282). In short, both utilitarian and normative organizations can elicit strong identification by their members when an individual's wants and desires coincide heavily with that of the larger organization—when the gap between the individual and the group is small. For normative organizations, the overlap can occur in varying realms: politics, religion, social mission. Alternatively, utilitarian organizations align with members on the more monochromatic realm of sharing desire for financial gain.

With a grasp of this second identity orientation in place, we can return to the RSEF case study which also reveals features of an emerging utilitarian organizational identity. The same teacher trainer I quoted above, Mandisa, now addresses her current relationship to RSEF but does so with a notably more somber tone. She had been working at RSEF for over a decade when we spoke and had first-hand experience with the changes RSEF underwent as a result of the massive social, political, and economic changes ushered in by the fall of the Apartheid government in 1994. While socially and politically the democratic transition was monumentally positive in many ways for the majority of South Africans (Meek and Meek, 2008), the changes in government structure instigated massive changes at RSEF, some of which I will argue led Mandisa to reveal the following bleak sentiments:

*People don't trust one another here... Some people are heard and some people are not heard... These are the things really, at the end of the day, I will say to myself 'why should I worry. Just do what they tell you to do.' ...I am working because I want to put food on the table. Each day I don't want to go without a meal at night, when I'm [home] from work.*

Mandisa no longer feels connected to RSEF in the way she had earlier years at RSEF. The organization which previously had garnered such strong identification by Mandisa and others seems to have morphed into a very different type of workplace. In light of the stark changes revealed by this quotation, this paper will attempt to trace the external structural factors and the internal management decisions that may have eroded the potent *oomph* that Mandisa so passionately recalled a few paragraphs above. I will argue that RSEF's normative identity had become subsumed by overwhelming utilitarian aims. In fact, Mandisa's language displays the signature features of a utilitarian organization described by Albert and Whetten (1985): most utilitarian organizations are or arranged hierarchically and focus heavily on financial gain. Mandisa's expression of a *wait until* told attitude suggests the hierarchical structure and her reference to working only to *put food on her table* points to the transition at RSEF from accomplishing normative goals to acquiring the money required to pay bills and distribute salaries.

To undertake this exploration of the upstream sources of identity loss and management's reactions to these changes, I will first continue our theoretical grounding by discussing multiple identity organizations. I will then make a case for why the NDGO sector's unique experiences with this tension warrants an in-depth exploration of its behavior. After a brief discussion of my ethnographic approach, I will then trace the structural shifts in development funding that occurred in the mid-1990s with particular emphasis placed on how these shifts were actually experienced by RSEF management and staff. During the latter half of the paper, I will draw on three case studies of staff who experienced de-identification with RSEF to raise

questions about how management and staff together might revive and preserve an organization with an energetic normative focus.

### **Multiple Identity Organizations**

Despite Mandisa's strong language and similar comments made by many other staff, during my on-site research in 2008 RSEF's normative identity had not withered completely. Indeed, RSEF was still undertaking projects to enrich the educational landscape in the province; staff still spoke with enthusiasm—albeit restrained—about RSEF's development-related projects. This incomplete transition from a normatively oriented RSEF to a utilitarian-minded organization reveals the last important theoretical component to our exploration of organizational identity—that of a dual-identity organization.

As individuals, we exhibit several different identities which become important—or in academic terms, *salient*—at varying times and in diverse settings. Driven by contextual factors, we may assume an identity as a democrat or a catholic, or a friend or as a, say, manager or teacher. In parallel, while some organizations may fit cleanly into either the normative or utilitarian identity compartments, Albert and Whetten (1985) first developed an academic taxonomy for investigating organizations which exhibit dual or even multiple identities. Within this more complex schema for thinking about identities in organizations, absolutely normative and absolutely utilitarian orientations represent opposite poles of an identity spectrum on which an organization may be placed on any point between. Drawing again on a comparison to social identity theory, just as certain conditions *prime* or make salient certain individual identities (e.g. one's political identity may be primed during election season), organizations may prime its normative (e.g. church or political party) orientation over its utilitarian (e.g. business) posture. Albert and Whetten suggest that in reality, most organizations experience a shift in identity focus through time, with each type of organization taking on characteristics of the other during as a response to various stimuli, both internal and external.

Normative and utilitarian identities, however, rarely peacefully coexist as salient modes of expression in an organization. An organization driven by its normative identity may, for example, devote resources furthering its social mission through advocacy or community building. Such aims work against the demands emerging from a utilitarian identity which would likely emphasize efficiency of operations over relationship building and community outreach. Since research (Foreman & Whetten, 2002; Van Knippenberg, 2000) suggests that strong identification with an organization is associated with greater member commitment and longevity, academics and management gurus have called for investigation into how organizational leaders can manage the tension between these two orientations and maintain strong member identification (Pratt and Foreman, 2002). The operational tension becomes how to structure the interplay between the two orientations since members who are strongly normatively-focused may very well be repelled by a potently utilitarian group. In response to this enduring tension, the core question of this paper emerges: First, To what degree does the normative and utilitarian tension create an either-or tradeoff for management? In other words, does attention to organizational preservation by seeking funding necessarily undermine the organizations normative drive? Second, can internal management strategies preserve strong organizational identification by offsetting or compensating for identity loss driven by external environmental changes?

### **Multiple Identities and the Third Sector**

Within the broad set of organizations that must cope with this tension between normative and utilitarian identities, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are a particularly revealing subtype. Known as third-sector organizations, NGOs like RSEF traditionally exhibit a potent normative identity performed by filling a particular community need or redressing a social ill left unaddressed by the two traditional sectors of government and business. RSEF is better known as a nongovernmental *development* organization (NGDOs), which is a subtype of NGOs whose missions are also normative in character and specifically targeted at addressing the weighty matters such of poverty alleviation, health promotion, and educational attainment

(among many others) in countries around the world. Given that the work of NGOs often targets particularly vulnerable and marginal populations, garnering strong staff identification with their employing NGO not only holds the potential to increase the overall work satisfaction of the organizational members (employees and volunteers) but also can lead to a multiplied positive effect on the lives of clients or population groups served by that organization (Van Knippenberg, 2000).

The stakes for eliciting strong identification at RSEF and in the broader NGO sector are high and the complexities of the normative/utilitarian tension are equally daunting. As a sector, development organizations exude a normative character: mentioning the notions of generating profit for shareholders, working for the sake of a salary, or organizing in a top-down fashion are tantamount to blasphemy in the halls of many NGO offices. Given a brawny organizational identity, many employees and volunteers with NGOs proudly assert their own individual *helping* or normative identities, often citing personal experience with poverty or social struggle as an impetus for continued membership and participation. Mandisa's original mention of *oomph* was one such declaration of identification. Indeed, the sector's notoriously low wages reflects the non-financial compensation generated by a *low identity gap* between what members believe is important and what the collective identity of the organization exhibits. In short, one is often willing to work hard for low pay when he or she *believes* in—or identifies with—the defining and enduring characteristics of an organization.

The drive of many NGO staff to enact social change unfolds alongside the financial reality that operating an organization—no matter how potently normative in character—requires money, thereby creating an impetus to prime the otherwise suppressed utilitarian organizational identity. This harsh reality of organizational life—that development programs cost money and full-time staff must be paid—exists in a dizzyingly complicated development funding context. The interplay between funder and NGO recipient is fraught with burdensome reporting requirements, oppressive decision making controls from foreign donors, and the inherent instability of short and medium-term grant agreements (Wallace 2006). In short, not only is the task of enacting meaningful social development (thereby priming an organization's normative identity) exceedingly challenging, but the act of securing funding for these projects is almost equally as burdensome, pitting an NGO's normative and utilitarian identities on a near-constant collision course.

In the pages to follow, I will start by discussing my research methods and will make a case for exploring organizational identity through narrative-based, qualitative methods. I will then return to the RSEF case study by detailing the historical development of its normative/utilitarian tension in relation to the 1994 democratic transition in South Africa. Following the longitudinal portrait of RSEF's identity, I will then devote the remaining half of the paper to the impacts of RSEF's normative identity suppression on the professional and personal lives of its staff. I will conclude by extracting from the ethnographic data questions about how NGO leaders might more aptly navigate the often tumultuous relationship between an organization's competing senses of identity, improving the work lives of staff and, ultimately, the degree of impact on client groups across the Eastern Cape province and beyond.

### **A narrative approach to organizational identity research**

My ethnographic approach to research at RSEF informed the types of data I collected and how I combed that data for trends and insights. As such, field notes from 240 hours of on-site participant observation formed the backbone of my qualitative data set. I heeded the conventional wisdom in the field of ethnography to not unduly narrow one's line of inquiry to the exclusion of valuable contextual understanding. I kept my research questions deliberately broad during much of my time at RSEF. During my 27 formal interviews with staff from all levels of the organization, for example, I used an open interview format, often asking about the interviewees' perceptions of RSEF as an organization generally and their personal

experiences working there day-to-day. I consistently asked staff about what first drew them to the organization, how the organization has since changed, and why they continue to work at RSEF. Additionally, as my observations began to focus more on management techniques for addressing organizational identity tensions, when leadership decisions were mentioned, I would often follow-up with questions about how a given decision impacted the interviewee's work life and how her or she felt about the decision personally.

Upon returning from the field, I transcribed 230 pages of dialog from the 30 hours of interview tape (about 70% transcription). Next, I used an open (non-categorized) coding scheme during a first read through the transcripts and the 236 pages of field notes. During this open coding, I labeled any comment, description, reaction, or emotion that even remotely related to the broad subjects of identity, management, work motivation, work commitment, or persistence. I then holistically reviewed the codes from the initial read to derive formal categories for use during a second round of focused coding. During the second read, I copied relevant lines of text from the notes and transcripts into one or more of 158 focused coding categories, of which about two dozen received a bulk of the data clips. Next, I read the data by category to sharpen my lines of inquiry into identity the reactions of RSEF's leadership to the broad shifts in organizational character at issue in this paper.

My approach to exploring identities departs from the methods used by most organizational theorists who have by and large attempt to capture the nuance of identification in organizational settings through quantitative surveys. Regression analysis, such as those done by Foreman and Whetten (2002) can indeed shed light on certain patterns of the identification process. Their surveys of participants in agriculture cooperatives, for example, suggested that as the individual-organization identity gap widens, members of these agriculture groups expressed less emotional attachment to the organization but were not more likely to exit the cooperation agreement.

In contrast to the quantitative norm of the organizational behavior field, this paper will use the narrative voice of individual staff members as an access point to identification in order to capture the narrative voice and rich context that necessarily embeds an individual's notion of self and identity. In doing so, I follow the lead of anthropologist Carolyn Nordstrom (1997) who, through her groundbreaking work on reality and creativity in warzones, passionately demonstrates how "people define themselves in narration" (p. 24). Despite the richness of a story retold in the voice of, say, a passionate employee whose relationship to RSEF turned sour, Nordstrom also cautions against treating any narrative as a complete picture of an experience. She observes that "disputed, even embattled realities and identities are the meat of experience, the condition facing humankind. It is narrative that flows through the cracks and bridges the disjunctions to give meaning, but the narrator judges what 'whole' the fragments should produce, what 'reality' flows through ruptures" (Nordstrom, 1997, p. 22).

Nordstrom names outright the agency of the narrator to shape the experience expressed. The next layer of complexity embedded in her assertion is that the third party transmitting the already fractured narrative also judges what slices of the perceived whole emerge into a final essay. In this spirit of respect for both the limitations of narrative as a vehicle of self expression and the challenges of a third party capturing and transmitting those details, I will explore the connections between organizational context and work identities by quoting extensively from the employees who spoke with me at length about their work at RSEF. In choosing quotations to discuss in this paper, I have tried to make the excerpts faithful to the broader sentiment and tone expressed throughout the interview from which the quotation was taken. Also following Nordstrom's lead, I acknowledge the blind spots inherent in my understanding RSEF's changes and identities born out of both my level of access to decision makers and the particular dynamics of the individual relationships I forged with staff in the organization.

As an assistant to a second level manager, for example, I was grateful to be afforded access to strategic planning meetings attended by management staff. My notes from these higher-level gatherings added valuable dimensions to my understanding of the decisions which my non-management colleagues often criticized. And yet, since the particular axes of trust and rapport I developed with individual staff served as the vehicle through which I gathered data, I also acknowledge that my presence at management meetings colored the details non-management staff felt comfortable sharing. In fine, the following data provide a sliver of insight into a complex web of individual personality, pasts and desires and their interaction with a multifaceted and mixed institution. The observations I make and the questions I ask hopefully have provocative and even normative value but are necessarily limited by the particulars of my relationship, rapport, and dynamic with the source of data in this study—the staff at RSEF.

### **Sources and Impacts of the Normative/Utilitarian Identity Challenges at RSEF**

This section will trace the shifts driven by the 1994 democratic transition in South Africa that radically shifted RSEF's external funding context and its web of organizational affiliations. Through the voice of former RSEF employees and its current management, I will discuss how both of these shifts are partly responsible for precipitating the loss of staff identification that I encountered at the time of my arrival at RSEF in 2008. Following this section, I will introduce individual staff members and examine the impacts of RSEF's radical identity transformation on their work and personal lives.

To zero in on the factors driving identity shift, let's return to Mandisa's memorable *oomph* she described in the opening section. Her words opened a window into the potency of RSEF's normative identity during the pre-apartheid transition years—and, indeed, her energetic descriptions were not unique. More than a dozen other staff I interviewed used similar language to describe the overwhelming sense of forward energy and social mission that pervaded the staff during the organizations early years. For example, I shared a lengthy discussion with, Regine, a former manager who worked at RSEF during those notable, pre-1994 years. A white South African now in her late 50's, she still radiated the passion and drive for rural education support that she felt at RSEF during those formative years:

*[In those days RSEF] was young and going really big...The funding came in and we developed all those things that I knew those rural schools needed...[The teachers] wanted to do good and they literally had nothing. Nothing...The rural areas hadn't been attended to. [We had a staff member who] would leave RSEF Monday morning and a fortnight [two weeks] later on Sunday night she'd come back. They just did it. Who knows where they slept? In huts!...we were being trained and facilitated to distraction: USAID [United States Agency for International Development] and the Swiss government, all wanted to do evaluation. I soaked it all up: we had people training us!*

Regine's choice of details elucidates the salient aspects of RSEF's normative identity during these vibrant years: the staff *wanted to do good* and were *soaking up* training by international donors as a result. Mandisa's and Regine's comments reveal how the organization did not *centralize* concerns of financial solvency or economic austerity—tell-tale markers of a utilitarian orientation. Instead, this was a time in which their respective individual identities as change agents and *movers and shakers* in the tumultuous South African society were primed by the work they were doing through RSEF. Using identity language, we can say that during these years, the identity gaps experienced by the staff were very small because the collective normative identity of their employer, RSEF, and their individual identities of the staff were heavily interwoven (see figure 1). Strong identification with the organization occurred as a result, and positive organizational citizenship behaviors abounded such as the willingness of the staff to sacrifice of lodging convenience (*sleeping in huts*) and normal working hours (going to the field for two weeks at a time) because they individually cared about their mission of rural development.

Dutton and Dukerich (1994) describe how this level of identity alignment is actually self-enhancing since, for Regine's staff, "exertion on behalf of the organization [was] also exertion on behalf of the self" (p.256). The greater effort staff put in at work, the greater their own sense of self-development, prompting further organizational participation.

And yet, as referenced in the introduction, NGDO's like RSEF—even during periods of energetic staff engagement—face a tension between their ideological work and the demands of organizational financing, invoking the central questions of how to manage multiple identity organizations. Regine's comments above and the remarks that follow by a former RSEF employee reveal one facet of this interplay between RSEF's normative and utilitarian identities:

*That was apartheid. Millions of forums and meetings about policy and people would come to RSEF and do conscientizing work and mobilization and socialist things and that was the job and that's where the money came from. Nothing from government, RSEF was anti-government.*

RSEF's navigated the normative/utilitarian tension during these days by positioning themselves as an ally with other national and international organizations in the battle against the oppressive Apartheid government. International donors eagerly supported South Africa's grassroots, democratic change movement by funding and logistically enabling projects like RSEF's rural teacher support efforts. Prior to the 1994 transition, RSEF leadership did not face grim tradeoffs between priming their community training identity or prioritizing financial stability because the external funding environment aligned to support and, indeed, encourage precisely the activities that strengthened RSEF's normative self. During those *golden years* as one staff called them, the normative/utilitarian tension was largely dormant.

Yet once the Apartheid government fell from power and a new, internationally legitimized government took power, the overseas development funding became increasingly channeled through those new state structures. Regine, in her characteristically colorful language, describes these stark changes:

*The honeymoon was over, too, and the reality for NGOs was that ...you were definitely downsized because the government was moving forward; it was a new dispensation. Your place in that dispensation would take longer to work out because the government had to take all their [money] and focus on what was going on [in society].*

In the new, post-1994 dispensation, the government was *no longer the enemy* in the sense that RSEF wasn't directly working to counteract racist government funding schemes for rural schools as they were prior to the democratic transition (Meek & Meek, 2008). As such RSEF-government relations morphed in terms equally as jarring as the social revolution itself. As Regine described above, the government's new-found prominence in all areas related to social development which were previously an area largely driven by NGDO's like RSEF ushered in a range of new shifts in the NGDO sector, not all of which were immediately positive. Paul Cromhout, PhD, an expert in South African and Civil Society structures and the current Managing Director of a prominent regional NGO offered me a colorful metaphor to characterize the new relationship between civil society organizations like RSEF and the South African government:

*The whole process in South Africa has become a kind of a service delivery, contract work for NGOs which... many officials in the department sees, to quote Cecil John Rhodes, as that between the horse and the rider. And that's going to take a long time to change some people's mind in that: We being the horse and them being the rider.*



To gain insight into how this new NGDO-government relationship affected RSEF specifically, we turn to Kopano, a senior project administrator at RSEF who was responsible for the overwhelming task of ensuring the day-to-day implementation of the organization's government contracts. Kopano, a short, rotund man in his mid forties, is a man of stunning managerial competence blended with an almost academic posture of insight and reflection about the macro trends within the development sector. I had the great privilege of driving with Kopano to RSEF project sites during which time he would graciously allow me to set my recorder on the dashboard of the car and mine his brain for comments, reactions, and ideas for hours.

During one long car ride, I asked Kopano about the 1994 government transition and its affect on RSEF's work. He confirmed my working understanding about the new channeling of development funding through the government and also added an appraisal about how that change affects the overall quality of RSEF's projects:

*When the foreign funding was taking away from NGOs... and given to government, that created tensions! ...The money comes from European Union to the [South African] government and then from the government to NGOs. The government is the middle-man. Can we see that in that process service is compromised, all right? Service is compromised! What actually goes or what actually benefits that man on the ground is now compromised and reduced.*

He then explains his grim assessment of the consequences of the transition for the quality of RSEF's project work. He contextualizes the operations of the new African National Congress (ANC) government by describing a *middle-man* who struggles to effectively administer its new, massive stream of international development money and the weakened service quality that results:

*The government has got many challenges. If you look at the government, it is an institution that is supposed to take services [to] the people. That is the point, right? And to do that, it needs a machinery to take those services. Obviously, in this case, machinery is human resources and that means that humans are capacitated to take those services to the people because ultimately the government has got a responsibility to better the lives of the people. Now the constraint that it faces is that it hasn't got the capacity to do it, to deliver the services that it has promised. Now one of the possible ways in which it can deliver is to use service providers like RSEF for instance.*

The impact of these changes in external funding structures on RSEF's internal identity are now becoming clearer: prior to the 1994 transition, the organization's funding allowed management to pursue the goals imbedded in its normative identity with almost laser-like focus and purpose. International agencies provided financial support as *donors* to RSEF, whose managers themselves then decided how to spend the grant money to support rural education. Drawing on Dr. Cromhout's analogy, RSEF was the rider during those early years, and the staff was battling the negligent and often hostile Apartheid government.

By 2008, NGDO funding streams had shifted so heavily toward government service provision contracts that RSEF could no longer secure funding for its signature rural education projects—the very projects that had aligned so well with the individual identities of RSEF staff. These external structure changes, therefore, precipitated the emergence of the normative/utilitarian tension I have suggested is endemic to many organizations in the NGDO sector. In RSEF's case, the tension meant management now faced the grisly tradeoff: 1) sacrifice its autonomy over project design by becoming a service provider for the feeble provincial government or 2) decline to be a government service provider by continuing its own development agenda and face bankruptcy due to lack of consistent funding. The former option carries grave implications for maintaining the organization's

vibrant normative identity as a hub for rural education support. The second option of continuing its long-standing support program would surely prime the organization's normative identity but would do so by risking the organization's very existence.

### **Collective Identity and Mission Drift**

At the time of my arrival at RSEF in 2008, organizational leadership had addressed the tradeoff laid out above by prioritizing the first option; RSEF was ensuring financial solvency by bidding for and securing a panoply of government project contracts. In identity terms, we will see that this strategic decision led incrementally to RSEF assuming priming a more utilitarian posture: staff spoke of the government contracts as a vehicle to paying bills and salaries and very rarely did staff extol the contracts as a vibrant method for enacting social change in the Eastern Cape—the endeavor many staff were so invested in during the pre-1994 years.

In this section, we turn to one of RSEF's senior managers, Joann, who played a central role in securing and implementing these government contracts. While I did not occupy a specific hierarchical position at RSEF, I worked closest with Joann as she assessed bids for which RSEF could apply, crafted project applications for bidding panels, and evaluated projects RSEF carried out. Not only did Joann and I forge a durable friendship during my research period, but the many hours we spent discussing specifics of individual projects involved numerous informal conversations about the implications of RSEF's tactical strategy to maintain organizational revenue in the *new South Africa*. Joann's candor about the practical challenges of project administration as well as her broader insight into the impact of RSEF's strategy on the organizational culture and identity were tremendously valuable to me in honing my research questions and interpreting my experiences from working with other staff in the organization.

To grasp the impact of RSEF's new strategic priorities brought on by macro shifts in the external funding environment, we must explore what day-to-day project management and implementation looked and felt like at RSEF. After this discussion of the new nature of project work at RSEF, we will explore its impact on identity and its implications for management.

To provide as rich a picture as possible, I will draw on both formal interviews and informal conversations that occurred as I worked alongside staff on government projects. By way of background, during my second visit in the fall of 2008, RSEF's two major projects were both contracted with departments in the Provincial government. RSEF was more traditionally geared to carry out its first project: the so-called *training of trainers* workshop set in which RSEF was contracted to facilitate multi-day workshops for teachers and administrators who themselves were going to train their school staff about integrating HIV/AIDS content into South African classrooms. I'll refer to this project as simply the HIV/AIDS Infusion project. The second major ongoing project required sending the RSEF's four full-time training staff to train and support small community-based organizations (CBOs) working broadly in the field of health throughout the Eastern Cape. Both projects generated tens of thousands of dollars in revenue for RSEF and were implemented over the course of months (the HIV/AIDS Infusion) and years (the CBO project).

RSEF's work on these two massive projects was by no means certain or, as we will see shortly, carefully planned in advance of their inception. This is due to the nature of the project bidding and implementation in Eastern Cape, South Africa. Joann, once again, was integrally involved in navigating this bureaucratic process. As a skilled writer and project planner, Joann spent substantial amounts of time responding to requests for project bids put out by various provincial government agencies. Unlike the pre-1994 days in which RSEF's work focused exclusively on teacher support in rural areas, Joann responded to bids for an almost dizzyingly broad spectrum of project types ranging from training firefighters and police on community engagement to teaching high school music courses. The HIV/AIDS infusion and the CBO project were carried out simply because they were two winning bids out of dozens of bid applications RSEF had submitted during the months prior to my arrival. The fact that RSEF

won these two bids and was implementing the projects concurrently was, as described by Joann below, the result of the chance and variation inherent in the selection process by government bid committees.

The first and most immediate tension that arose in this process is the fact that the government bidding process was both fickle and poorly managed. The government agencies would, for example, rarely hold to their stated timeline for selecting and notifying winning bidders, making staff scheduling and training extremely challenging. Joann expands on these frustrations below:

*That is the problem is that we-...need to have a system in place rather like a doctor, we have an appointment book and you know that you're book is filled up for the next months or two months ...I don't think we have that at RSEF. We just tender[bid] for whatever and say to ourselves 'If we get this, we'll find the staff somewhere.' And it all comes together in a big crunch and that...to say the least [laughs] I've been very tense for the last several weeks for the fear that certain things are going to come.*

In the same interview, Joann goes on to describe the risks that are taken by responding to bids in such a piecemeal way:

*We've also tendered for other things that affect me directly. Fortunately they've haven't come up...we don't know if we'll get them. But if we do, it is going to put us under really a lot of pressure. So my own personal feeling is that there are not enough skills to do the kind of work that we'd like to do.*

And, indeed, for many weeks of my 3.5 months of field research, the training/project team operated in a state of impending chaos. Since RSEF had taken on so many projects thinking that the training staff's time could be scheduled carefully to allot time across different projects strategically, very little wiggle room had been allowed for the inevitable schedule changes, government slowdowns, and unforeseen implementation setbacks.

In October of 2008, just such an unforeseen coalition of unfortunate events occurred. RSEF's client in the HIV/AIDS Infusion project, the Provincial Department of Education, insisted that RSEF re-attempt to administer a massive three-day workshop in a far away province that was cancelled at the last minute by the client themselves. Even though the training team had moved on from the HIV/AIDS project to give much-needed time to the CBO project, management was making last-minute task reassignments of staff. I was nearby Joann who was discussing task assignments with the projects team direct supervisor, Thandeka:

*Joann started by asking, in a somewhat surprised tone, "you're going to the HIV/AIDS training?" Thandeka, clearly exasperated with the entire process of having to administer more training, replied, "Yes, Joann, I don't know why!" Joann seemed to be on Thandeka's side in that she didn't think that Thandeka should need to be a part of that training because she is a manager with a lot to do. Thus, Joann commented to Thandeka that "You can't go; you've got to work on the arts and culture thing." Thandeka replied, "I know, Joann—I guess I might have to do quality assurance or something. I told [the senior manager over project administration] that I would go to this AIDS thing during the day and work on the arts and culture thing after hours."*

The comments during this informal conversation in a hallway aptly reveal the atmosphere that pervaded the project team. Management had taken on so many different, un-integrated projects that one even became the "the arts and culture thing." In the midst of an overwhelming number of discreet, disjointed tasks, the arts and culture project had lost its character as an opportunity to forge new curriculum to promote creative achievement in South African schools—thereby priming the organization's normative identity as a social change agent---and instead became just another thing to do.

Reflecting on this environment of pursuing disparate projects that often do not mesh with one another in sensible ways, Joann remarked: “So I think RSEF has evolved from as I say passion-filled organization to really a business.” In stunningly clear language, Joann articulated what Albert and Whetten (1985) suggests often occurs to many normatively focused organizations: they eventually adopt a more utilitarian character in response to shifts in its external environment. In the language of this case study, the *oomph* Mandisa and Regine so passionately conveyed during interviews and had largely faded from focus and the thrust of much of RSEF’s work had become securing project contracts—no matter how unrelated or poorly timed—to pay bills and cover costs. RSEF’s normative identity had been almost entirely subsumed by its utilitarian imperatives.

Other senior managers at RSEF also verbalized the loss of the organization’s historic normative focus. Kopano, the senior manager who provided insight into the changes in funding availability following the 1994 transition, also echoed Joann’s analysis. During a car ride in the rural Eastern Cape to visit a workshop site, I asked Kopano about the fundamental strategic tension that RSEF’s new external context seemed to create: the conflict that arises when sustaining the organization financially does not necessarily further any particular normative objective. In response, he relayed the content of a discussion about this very question that took place during an upper-management meeting:

*We [asked]: Are we development driven or are we self-sustaining driven? And the overwhelming response was that we are self-sustaining driven because we need money to sustain the organization and to sustain the people inside the organization, then development comes in later. See what I mean? And if we analyze that, it is not a conscious decision that has been taken that we must be self sustaining, but it is something that you look at and say ‘Hey, if we are to [choose between another project] or [to] focus on development, we [choose to] sustain ourselves.’ ...If you look at all the projects we have now and compare them, the [CBO project] really doesn’t fit.*

Kopano’s account of the management meetings sheds a piercing light on the forces shaping the interplay between RSEF’s normative and utilitarian identities, two of which deserve special treatment here since they will undergird the core questions we explore in the staff case studies discussed next. First, Kopano’s description suggests top management perceived two mutually exclusive strategic paths for the organization: being *development-driven* (normative) or *self-sustaining driven* (utilitarian). Given this tradeoff, both Kopano and Joan confirm that leadership—themselves included—chose to prioritize satisfying the organization’s utilitarian demands rather than of RSEF’s normative roots. In identity language, RSEF’s priming its *utilitarian* identity had become the focus of management’s strategic priorities, not strengthening the normative aspects of their work. In other words, a means-end *inversion* had occurred. This occurrence, while unfortunate in the eyes of the staff, force one to question the degree to which these two strategic paths are, indeed, zero-sum in nature: *in the new funding context of South African civil society, must pursuit of financial solvency necessarily occur at the expensive of a group’s normative desires?*

Kopano’s quotation also elucidates the haphazard approach management had been taking with respect to project acquisition and identity maintenance. Just as Joann detailed how the bid submission and scheduling process felt desperate and unplanned, even on a broader strategic level, management was not acting to intentionally dilute RSEF’s normative identity. Rather, my data suggest that the erosion of RSEF’s normative identity was the result of hundreds of smaller decisions made by management over the course of years—each seemingly a sensible response to the external constraints and internal funding needs apprehended at any given moment. Given management’s non-deliberate approach to the mission-money tradeoff, *how much devolution of RSEF’s identity could have been prevented by a more intentional internal approach to internal decision making*

*and management technique? What opportunities for priming the staff's normative identities may have been unexplored due to seemingly money dominated focal point of RSEF's management?*

## **Sources and impacts of the Identity Gap**

Each of the next three staff vignettes will attempt to explore answers to these two core questions raised at the end of the last section: 1) to what degree is the normative/utilitarian tradeoff mutually exclusive and 2) can management's internal decision making counteract the external forces suppressing RSEF's normative identity? Since both the rationale of management and the impact of their decisions heavily impact identification processes, each section features a staff member from each of the three "rungs" of RSEF's organizational hierarchy. In an attempt to balance the voices of demographic groups, the racial background of this set of staff spans three major South African demographic subgroups: white South Africans of British descent, coloureds (mixed race), and Xhosa (indigenous African). Finally, I have included contextual and biographical details alongside interview quotations to illustrate the intensely personal and heterogeneous nature of the identification process.

### *De-identification driven by out-group comparison*

We first return to Kopano, a member of upper management responsible for making many of the project bidding and implementation decisions discussed in previous sections. As manager accustomed to navigating a clear hierarchical line of command in a workplace, I never heard Kopano express the level of concern with his relationship to RSEF as he chose to do when the two of us were cruising through the South African *veld* in our little rented Peugeot. His reflection on identification with RSEF demonstrates how the process involves an "evaluative component, the intent of which is to help group members reduce dissonance between perceptions regarding 'who I am' and 'who we are'" (Foreman and Whetten, 2002, p.619). As an active local politician and passionate debater of substantive social quandaries, Kopano describes the dissonance he feels between his own desire for this kind of engagement and its troubling absence at RSEF:

*And my passion also is [to ask] how do I make the organization engage with education related issues? And the country? Because as [it] is now we have been in service for 20-odd years, other than training and facilitating, do we engage in debates? We don't! Why? For instance, that with me, that would be one of the things that I would ask [staff] to do: engage in national issues regarding education...That is a marketing strategy ...And also once you do that, even this element of having your staff not good readers, you're actually making them to read—to read issues that affect them, issues that affect the community they work with. Or issues that affect their children. Or affect the children they're supposed to have an impact on. They [would] read broadly about that because it is an internal thing ...Instead of having staff meetings discussing... vacation and all that, you'll ask each person for a paragraph or a one page thing on this particular thing. You present something on education.*

Kopano spoke with a frustrated yet yearning tone for when he asked and honestly answered the central identity driven question: *Who we are?* (Foreman and Whetten, 2002). The source of Kopano's identity gap was rooted in the reality that RSEF staff did not read about issues nor did they collectively express a desire to debate and engage with the issues so important to Kopano. In short, RSEF failed to prime Kopano's identity as a political and strategic thinker, causing dissonance. Foreman and Whetten (2002) suggest that as the dissonance increases, an individual engages in *congruence enhancing* behaviors to reduce the gap between their sense of self and that of the collective organization. In Kopano's case, one such behavior involved a comparison to what is

described in the literature as a *relevant out-group*, in this case another South African NGDO:

*I keep on saying to my management that there's an organization which they call ISS. Institute of Social Security. Now that organization, you'll time and again read about in newspapers and hear about it on the TV whenever there is a security related issue. Whether it is national, that organization will come out and present something. They're there. So what stops us from doing that?*

To Kopano, ISS is more closely aligned to his own individual self-concept as a debater, thinker, and social activist. As such, the widening identity gap he experiences at RSEF is accentuated by his out-group appraisal that surfaces weakness in his primary group affiliation. Ashforth and Mael's (1989) application of social identity theory to organizations suggests that when individuals sense a large identity gap, he undertakes what the authors refer to as *congruence enhancing techniques* to reduce the dissonance between what he believes is central and enduring about himself and the collective identity of the social group in question—in Kopano's case, RSEF.

Kopano's request to his management to foster more debate and dialog is one such congruence enhancing strategy that underscores the centrality of the second question introduced at the beginning of this section: could management act more intentionally to craft an organizational culture that engender greater identification by intellectually inclined staff like Kopano? Since his out-group reference organization, ISS, confronts similar funding constraints and has still managed to position itself in a position of widespread influence, could RSEF realign its organizational routines to adopt some of ISS's strengths? Kopano's quotation above reveals that he has, indeed, suggested such an approach to management and has yet to sense his ideas gaining traction. His narrative and those of the two staff members discussed below suggest that perhaps the perceived indifference of senior management to feedback from staff may itself be a core driver of a member's own identity gap.

### *De-identification driven by organizational hypocrisy*

We continue this exploration of how staff experience a weakening of congruence between their own values and those of RSEF by turning next to a first-line manager named Nicole, RSEF's Community Library manager. A white South African of Zimbabwean descent in her late 40's, Nicole describes her identity gap through expression of what I term *organizational hypocrisy*, or a dissonance between the language used within RSEF to describe its values and the behavior Nicole sees the organization actually carry out. Her experience of an identity gap is intensely personal and is rooted in her self-concept rooted in activism aimed at enacting greater social, animal, and environmental justice. Her strong personality required an kind of acclimatization period; while anybody could quickly appreciate her inherent regard for concern for children and animals alike, she also asserted her liberal positions at times that frustrated many staff who did not appreciate Nicole's oft-dissenting voice.

Nicole opened her work life when she joined RSEF after years at a desk job deep in the bowels of a major international car manufacturer. Her self-declared traumatizing experience working in a high-pressure corporate bureaucracy lead her to quickly detail the obvious advantages of the NGDO sector: the ostensible goal of the organization was not to "make some white German man very, very wealthy." Nicole's identity as a social activist, however, does not exempt organizations such as RSEF with a decidedly normative mission from her perceptive and, at times, incisive critiques. In the following substantial excerpt from an interview I conducted at her home, she articulates repeated acts of hypocrisy with respect to RSEF's project focus which, in her view, *should* be focused on much more pressing matters of social concern than its current portfolio addresses:

*We're not a health organization but we're heavily involved in HIV AIDS work. We permeate all our stuff, but we don't care at all about any other health issues. Any of the stuff that kind of makes that stuff happen, any of the issues around HIV/AIDS, we're not concerned with at all. [The HIV/AIDS project] is kind of like a pet thing that has been reeled into RSEF because [two members of the executive board] want it there and so it's in--and no one else can say anything about it and it's not really our core work--it's not really addressed properly. And we do other things like the [high school end-of-day] music project [...] when I feel there are more pressing concerns. One of the hugest problems in this county is violence—I don't know if you've picked that up? [sarcastically]*

*And I personally believe that's something that RSEF should be addressing in every aspect of their work because that causes all the problems that we deal with and we're just dealing with the skin rash and we're not dealing with the disease as it were. Not saying that violence on its own is the disease. So I feel that RSEF is a scratchy surface organization.*

*We've been in business for 20 years and we've solved no problems. Nothing. We haven't solved a thing. We are still doing the same work that we were doing in 1995 and 1985 or 1987. So that's stupid [laughs] you know because we're a welfare organization. I think we should move more towards being a rights organization--and do some real work. [Laughs]*

Note the bold linguistic signals that Nicole uses to highlight the individual-organizational identity gap she experiences: “RSEF as a scratchy surface organization” and the need for RSEF to “do some real work.” In contrast, the very core of her individual identity and approach to life is weighty and serious—the opposite of the scratchy surface organization she sees in RSEF. Further, her use of sarcasm to draw attention to the disparity between the issues that she sees RSEF addressing and those that she feels are actually the most pertinent—violence—is yet another indication of the intensity with which she experiences the identity gap. To her, the consistent lack of other staff’s willingness to even entertain her discussions is profoundly and personally aggravating and dark humor is a way of exhibiting and, perhaps, coping with those ongoing frustrations.

Her comments above also illustrate that the ideological divide between her own convictions and the organization extend to the identity gap she experiences was exacerbated by her often (uncomfortable) position within the RSEF management structure, as evidenced by the following comments about the opacity of the upper managers in dictating organizational priorities:

*[The] discussion comes up every year: Who are we and what are we doing? Although the discussion comes up, and there's lots of lots of opposition to who we are and what we're doing, it doesn't change. It is guided very much by the CEO and the CEO decides who we are and what we're doing.*

As the manager of the RSEF Community Library, she oversaw a small team of librarians and volunteers who staffed the actual reading and book lending space. Because of her leadership role and title, she is officially part of the RSEF leadership team tasked with tackling the very questions she feels are most pertinent: Who is RSEF and what should it do? And yet, despite her official title, she feels experiences upper management as opaque and impenetrable:

*I don't feel that I have any voice at all. I think you have to be a director to have a voice. Or you have to bring money in to have a voice.... I occupy a position [as a manger] at RSEF that shouldn't really be there... There should be people guiding projects and people working on projects and that's all there should be. There shouldn't*

*be like a triumvirate like that sort of Roman... [laughs]...That's quite detrimental to the way people think about their job and what motivates them.*

In Nicole's characteristically discerning voice, she describes one central feature of the normative identity orientation described by Albert and Whetten (1985): normative organizations tend to favor flat organizational structures and relatively egalitarian inter-staff relationships. Therefore, when we apply the identity lens to Nicole's comments about leadership, the critique of management's actions first expressed indirectly in Kopano's story reveals itself once again: Nicole's identity places value in existing in *flatter* organizational structures that employ guides—not managers—and people working with those guides. Her use of normative language—“*there shouldn't be a triumvirate*”—reveal the sizable gap between her ideal organizational form and the one seen in practice. In sum, Nicole's experience aligns with Grandy's (2008) finding that organizational members construct and prime their individual identities by navigating the micro and macro features of the group. Due to RSEF's limited alignment with her activist-related aims, Nicole frequently felt isolated and distant from her place of work.

### *De-identification driven by unresponsive management*

The final staff member we turn to for insight into the source and impact of an individual staff member's identity gap is Charlene, a 40-something coloured woman who, on most days, exuded an unforgettably effervescent personality. While RSEF staff often painted a dreary picture of management-staff relations and tiresome work schedules, the day-to-day feel of the office was often joyful and, at times, downright hilarious—and Charlene could often be found at the center of these vivacious scenes. Her story illuminates the heterogeneity of a single individual's experience at RSEF; Charlene expressed deep concerns with her relationship to the organization while still engaging in playful, life-giving interactions with her peers and management at RSEF.

For example, I had the good fortune of working at a desk positioned along the path to the only restroom in the front office, affording me a chance to exchange brief conversations—or pulse checks—with nearly every staff several times a day. Charlene would literally dance her way to the restroom, calling me a new variation on the elaborate nick-name she fabricated me during my first visit: “Eric Kaperick Calipstick Sterik.” She would rattle it off her tongue with her characteristically guttural coloured accent, prompting laughs and giggles by me and nearby staff.

Charlene had worked for RSEF for more than a decade when I started my research and, like Mandisa, had worked for the organization prior to and through the 1994 transition and subsequent de-prioritization of RSEF's lower-elementary support programs. Regine, the former manager mentioned in our discussion of RSEF's early years, even specifically mentioned Charlene as the staff member who would drive deep into the rural areas and *sleep in huts* while facilitating training sessions. She exuded passion for teaching kids and fostering creativity in adults. During one of our interviews, she described how she relished the chance to train the teachers out in the rural areas. With her memorable vitality (so often garnished with storytelling complete with different voices and full-body gestures), she recounted how she would admonish the teachers in the rural areas step down to the level of their students, literally:

*'You must come down to their level, Madam! Take off your high heels and lay flat on the floor with them.' I love it...When you like doing something, I think that is when you are very creative, you know? Creative juices are flowing—when you like what you're doing.*

On the one hand, RSEF was a logical professional transition following her many years of exhausting classroom teaching. In fact, she joined RSEF to transfer her passions and first-



hand knowledge of teaching to less experienced adult educators—and she shined while doing so. Her potent identity as a teacher was well-aligned to RSEF’s collective organizational identity which privileged gritty fieldwork out with the teachers themselves. During these years, we might say Charlene’s identity gap was near zero: her individual passions and values aligned closely with the collective normative identity of the organization.

Similar to Mandisa and Nicole as Charlene continued her story, a much more ambivalent relationship to RSEF’s collective identity emerged. The RSEF that had previously been the vehicle for her to pursue her deep-seated need to teach and create was no longer a place of *excellence* and *family*—two very potent elements of her identity. Instead, she described an RSEF that had not only lost its emphasis on high-quality programming but was failing to validate its employees’ individual worth on even the most basic levels:

*[My former manager] said: ‘Let me acknowledge this person’ and she put this little note...on my table...It made an impact on me, and I can’t forget it, you know? It’s so beautiful, those little notes, that I kept them. To me it was better than a paycheck. [My daughter], Amber, was joking: She said to me, I’m going to put these notes in your grave [Lots of laughing]! And it’s no more there. It’s now all about money. There is no more...saying thank you in that special way, you know, that made you—that motivated you—to go that extra mile... At the end of the day, if we can get the money. If we can get the money, you see? Yeah. They sign [the contracts] and get the check in the bank. You see, it’s knock and drop. Knock and drop.*

By this point in her interview, her bubbly self had visibly turned sour. She not only felt underappreciated by management but the organization the management was leading was equally distasteful to Charlene who saw the same pattern Kopano elucidated: work was taken on for its utilitarian value, not its normative, or community oriented benefits. Charlene also made a revealing statement concerning RSEF’s alignment to its own codified mission statement, dovetailing with Nicole’s concern about organizational hypocrisy:

*We say we are a “world class” organization. World class? The vision statement says we are a world class organization. There’s a lot of gaps. Lot of mistakes.*

Her comment spotlights a fundamental element of the identification process: the need to work for an organization that *feels* consistent with what the organization states are its values and qualities. To Charlene, the hypocrisy of purporting excellence and then failing to maintain internal systems that meet such a standard leads to a substantial de-identification with the organization, making her likelihood of “going that extra mile” for the RSEF of the post-1994 transition extremely small.

Finally, Charlene’s interviews yielded one more critical insight into the question of what intentional management actions could be taken to help staff cope with the structural changes to the work at RSEF. To Charlene, RSEF management pursues an approach that to non upper-management staff feels opaque and one-sided. Charlene explained with her characteristically vivid imagery:

*Now we don’t really have meetings. Once a month we’ll have information sharing. That’s not a meeting...The bird—come little birdie, open your mouth—it’s like that...The top dogs get up and say this and this and this and share this and then it’s finished and go home. It’s information sharing because you can’t say anything. We need to have—there must be space for us to say what we want to say. Or what is a meeting? Maybe we need to revise what is a meeting actually. What does the term mean? What is the meaning of a meeting?*

Charlene felt silenced on many levels and the tendency for meetings to feel one-sided was just one such example of moments in her professional life that caused her to feel dissociated from the pervasive identity of the organization. Her sense of shared identity with the organization was no doubt all but nonexistent during *information sharing sessions*; her identity gap was widest when she felt the least like a valued individual and most like a *small bird* in an larger, mostly indifferent nest.

## Discussion

Charlene's story of commitment and withdraw at RSEF appears archetypal among the staff with whom I spoke: she and others recognized that changes in RSEF's funding structure impact how day-to-day work *feels*. To these staff members, RSEF's disproportionate emphasis on funding feels like a betrayal of the organization's normatively driven work. Charlene's comments in particular also highlight micro-level decisions by managers about how to communicate with staff members individually and collectively exacerbate the threats to RSEF's identity posed by macro shifts in external funding patterns. This observation that even in the face of structural pressures on identity, management's reactions to those pressures on the day-to-day level suggests that ripe opportunities exist for counteracting these otherwise vexing structural challenges.

As a launching point to a discussion about the implications of these findings for organizational life and NGDO management in general, I will return to Joann, a senior manager at RSEF. I first introduced Joann as the writer of government project proposals who was also deeply concerned with the piecemeal way in which RSEF managed its work portfolio. By the time she and I started building a close professional relationship, Joann had grown increasingly skeptical that her professional future could continue and thrive inside RSEF's walls. Joann expressed a deep-seated disappointment that even after more than a decade of personal investment in RSEF, she does not feel that spark—that passion—for which she and so many other RSEF staff seemed to long:

*What I think might be missing from RSEF as an organization is that for me I don't have a sense of a passionate team that determined to get something or do something to help. I don't get that feeling. I get it from some people at RSEF sometimes... but I think the management at RSEF is ...quite detached, you know...I would enjoy working for—in an organization where everyone is equally passionate and committed...I don't get a sense of a single goal.*

*I guess we all spend our lives looking for some kind of meaning, in a minor kind of way perhaps. And my meaning is no longer with whatever RSEF's objectives are. I found also that I've been bruised too much by working at RSEF. I don't mean technical things-- about working long hours—but always having that kind of hope that this is what the organization is and then feeling that sense of disappointment because it can never be like that.*

Joann's comments reveal a crucial link between her longing to identify with a well-functioning normative organization and the need to experience an even more elusive but equally critical element of her work life: the need for meaning. Joann suggests that notion of *finding meaning* is perhaps a non-academic way of describing a state of intense transcendence or satisfaction that for many staff at RSEF, may be deeply impacted by the intensity of organizational identification they experience at work. For staff like Kopano, Mandisa, Nicole, and certainly Joann, their pursuit of *meaning* in life may very well hinge on participating in precisely the kind of coordinated actions NGDO's such as RSEF purport to facilitate and coordinate. As a result, for these staff members, the identity gaps we've explored are felt poignantly. In other words, their altruistic selves aren't sufficiently primed by working alone; the organization—the team—is crucial. The staff's stories emphatically connect meaning making and organizational work.

For insight into final layer of insight into how our lives in organizations are affected by the notion of identification and our search for *meaning*, I will turn to comments made by Joann's sister, Claudia, a former RSEF employee and extraordinarily broad, interdisciplinary thinker. She welcomed me into her home to discuss these somewhat elusive, but vitally important links between our own sense of meaning and fulfillment and our day-to-day work in organizations. While somewhat prone to using grandiose generalizations to convey her points, Claudia's comments draw out themes that touch on so many of the stores we've explored:

*Bureaucracy seems to have overtaken us all in the cosmic sense, in the global sense: accountability, this famous monitoring and evaluation process, and financial reports. As a result of that, it is very easy for people to lose sight of what the hell they're doing in this world. So you lose it...I think in organizations what human beings—will find [is] a big struggle to make meaning of why they're there. And meaning often is: I must put it in these 300 forms and write a report of what I haven't done and why I haven't done it and [file] the registers of the 83 workshops that I have done. But it doesn't matter what came out of that for human beings—the registers are what count.*

Claudia's example of the *registers of the 83 workshops* overtaking the human value of the actual training sessions is a reference to the tumultuous rollout of the HIV/AIDS Infusion project described in previous section. By critiquing the actual structure of the tasks RSEF was paid complete by the government, Claudia's comments nudge our inquiry away from attacks or critiques against particular staff members or management and toward the larger themes of how we as humans relate to one another within organizations that must sometimes undertake work tasks that are likely not intrinsically meaningful for many people. Claudia suggests that, left unchecked, organizations—even social service NGOs like RSEF—may be submerging our identity as human beings in the technocratic routines that constitute the bulk of many staff members' organizational lives.

We have explored how a social service organization once configured to capture so much energy and enthusiasm of the staff now fails to garner similar levels of commitment and gusto. We explored how the structural changes in country wide development funding predisposed management to lose sight of preserving a strong normative identity which, as we have seen, is a powerful vehicle for capturing and channeling the staff's enthusiasm and gusto for social change. The personal stories through which we undertook this analysis were intensely personal. Indeed, a preliminary read of them may even suggest a grim prognosis for RSEF's future as a vibrant, normative NDGO. And yet, even given the cutting critiques by Linda, Nicole, Charlene, and others, a reader could mistakenly interpret the arch of these narratives as an indictment of RSEF's upper management. This was not the intent expressed by the staff.

Instead, the critical insight is that embedded in the identity based language about RSEF *becoming just a business* and *being self-sustaining driven* are very local, immediate critiques of the day-to-day work environment and management tactics that could very well be addressed without a massive shift in external constraints:

- Linda, Charlene, and Nicole all expressed the need to have a *voice* among those who make decisions in the organization.
- Kopano and Barbra expressed the desire to be part of an organization that engages in an informed dialog about the issues affecting South African society.
- Nicole longs to work for an institution that eschews hypocrisy by aligning its actions with its rhetoric of social change.

- Joann longs for a place in which a passionate team shares work equally and managers responsibly wield their institutional authority.

The implications of these stories easily stated but challenging to implement: tapping into our potential as engaged, committed people requires more than a paycheck. Passion embodied in Linda's *oomph* is unleashed when we feel like the organization we work for validates who we are as people and, in a sense, allows us to be as fully human as possible.

The staff's stories also address the question concerning the mutual exclusivity of pursuing normative versus utilitarian goals. Structural challenges in the form of poorly managed government funding contracts preclude a return to the style of project autonomy in the pre-1994 years. Additionally, the narratives we've examined confirm that the process of aligning staff identities with those of their host organization involves undertaking compelling social change projects as well as crafting a vibrant work time with responsive management (or, as Nicole suggested, very little management at all). And yet, perhaps the axes of opportunity for organizations like RSEF to reignite staff identification involves shifting the ratio of importance between these two areas of identity congruence. Adjusting the macro forces at work *outside* RSEF's doors is relatively difficult compared to fine tuning the norms of communication and decision making within the organization. Certainly, organizational culture shifts present their own challenges, but the dividends of energy expended on addressing the kinds of staff concerns detailed in the list above are likely to significantly diminish the size of many staff members' identity gaps and release energy to, say, creatively adapting to the more fixed external funding constraints.

For organizations like RSEF, the stakes of effectively addressing the process of identification are immense. Many social service NGOs, schools, and governments are engaged in work that, for many clients, is urgent. The stories of this one particular NGO, RSEF, suggest that organizations which cultivate a collective identity that aligns with the individual values and drives of its staff not only may experience dividends in the form of increased work quality but they can become a kind of home to their employees where those critical elements of themselves can shine.

## **Acknowledgements**

The author would like to thank Dr. Christopher Meek for his insight into the South African NPO context and the qualitative research process. Dr. Warner Woodworth provided much-needed reflective listening and questioning during the research analysis process. The International Field Study Program at Brigham Young University also provided extensive logistical and research support. Finally, the author appreciates the unprecedented access afforded to the researchers by the RSEF management and staff alike. Thank you to the Office of Research and Creative Activities at Brigham Young University which provided financial support for this study.

## Works Cited

- Albert, Stuart and David A. Whetten. (1985). Organizational identity. In L. L. Cummings and Barry M. Staw (eds.), *Research in Organizational Behavior, Vol 7* (263-295). Philadelphia: Elsevier Science & Technology Books.
- Ashforth, Blake E., and Scott A. Johnson. (2001). Which Hat to Wear? The Relative Salience of Multiple Identities in Organizational Contexts. In Michael A. Hogg, and Deborah J. Terry (Eds.). *Social Identity Processes in Organizational Contexts* (31-48). Philadelphia: Psychology Press.
- Brickson, Shelley. (2000). The Impact of Identity Orientation on Individual and Organizational Outcomes. *Academy of Management Review, 25*, 82-101.
- Dutton, Jane E., and Janet M. Dukerich. (1994). Organizational Images and Member Identification. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 39*, 239-263.
- Foreman, Peter, and David A. Whetten. (2002). Members' Identification with Multiple Identity Organizations. *Organization Science, 13*, 618-635.
- Glynn, Mary Ann. (2000). When Cymbals Become Symbols: Conflict over Organizational Identity Within a Symphony Orchestra. *Organization Science, 11*, 285-298.
- Grandy, Gina. (2008.) Managing Spoiled Identities: Dirty Workers' struggle for a favourable sense of self. *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal, 3*,
- Habib, Adam and Rupert Taylor. (1999). South Africa: Anti-Apartheid NGOs in Transition. *International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations, 10*, 73-82.
- Meek, Christopher and Joshua Y. Meek. (2008). The History and Devolution of Education in South Africa. In D. B. Holsinger and W. J. Jacob (Eds.), *Inequality in Education: Comparative and International Perspective* (506-537). Hong Kong: Comparative Education Research Center.
- Norstrom, Carolyn. (1997). *A different kind of war story*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Pratt, Michael G. and Peter O. Foreman. (2000). Classifying Managerial Responses to Multiple Organizational Identities. *The Academy of Management Review, 25*, 18-42.
- Turner, J. C. (1982). Towards a cognitive redefinition of the social group. In H. Tajfel (Ed.), *Social identity and Intergroup relations* (15-40). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Van Knippenberg, Dan. (2000). Work Motivation and Performance: A social Identity Perspective. *Applied Psychology: An International Review, 49*, 357-371.
- Wallace, Lisa. (2006). *The Aid Chain: Coercion and Commitment in Development NGOs*. Kampala: Fountain Publishers.