



## Identity construction through role and network position<sup>☆</sup>



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### ABSTRACT

Identity construction is a critical managerial issue facing small organizations as it indicates their attractiveness within the exchange process. This paper investigates the identity construction of actors within the Western Australian Junior Mining Network through interviews with a diverse range of actors. Our first research aim is to investigate whether actors draw on similar schema configurations during their identity construction. Following these results we then consider how role and network position are used during their identity construction discourse. Data was analyzed using both lexical and thematic techniques. Results indicate that the actors' specific organizational interest dominated their schema configurations and that they drew on the concepts of role and network position during their identity construction discourse. Participants' identity construction also worked across individual, organizational and network levels.

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### 1. Introduction

Network interactions are influenced by perceptions of organizational identity (Huemer, 2004), making identity construction a critical managerial focus. For small companies, identity captures their perceived attractiveness and facilitates access to resources necessary for survival and growth (Anderson, Håkansson, & Johanson, 1994). This research explores actor identity construction in small scale (junior) mining networks during their interaction processes when developing mining projects. Identity construction is aimed at portraying “who are we” and “what we are doing” (role) to other network actors (Huemer, 2013, p. 1113). To take a truly network perspective however, requires the inclusion of “who are we doing it with” (network position). This research explores the use of both role and network position during identity construction processes while integrating individual, organizational and network perspectives.

How network actors make sense of the network is an important component of identity construction and impacts behavior during network interactions. So our first research question is: *Do actors working together on joint activities have common network schema on which identity construction is based?* Previous literature considering this topic is contradictory. For example Munksgaard and Medlin (2014) and Medlin and Törnroos (2014) indicate that as interaction builds over time, collective

interests and commonalities emerge in sense-making activities. Leek and Mason (2010) and Coville and Pye (2010) indicate that the network pictures developed by actors working closely together, even within the same organization, differ. While Corsaro and Snehota (2011) indicate that both alignment and misalignment between customers and suppliers can occur and there is no pattern in how these states swap over time. Thus, the same network actors can be aligned or have similar perceptions of network schema and as actor perceptions change in reaction to network dynamics their network schema can become misaligned. This research contributes to these contradictory results by comparing the network schema of actors playing different roles and finding that few commonalities in network schema exist.

The initial finding indicates that the network schema drawn upon during identity construction differs according to organizational role. Therefore, we then investigate: *How do participants draw on “what we do” and “who we do it with” during their identity construction discourse?* Although Huemer (2013) indicates that identity construction incorporates “what we do”, no research has considered “who they do it with” or network position. Participants drew on both role and position during their identity construction discourse at individual, organizational and collective levels.

Our research focus is exploring the interplay between role and position during identity construction processes and their impacts at different levels. Given the lack of previous research on role we conducted our analysis in two steps. First, we investigated whether there are different actor perceptions to the network based on participant categories, which are closely linked to functional network “roles”. The second step targeted the research focus by investigating role, position and identity construction.

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## 2. Key concepts

This paper differs from previous perspectives as we consider how role, network position and identity construction processes influence each other. We conceptualize role according to actor behavior within activities. We focus on three different roles: the *brokerage company* who raises capital for investment for the *junior miner* who develops mining projects and the *service company* who provides advice to network actors.

The concept of network position is often considered from a structural perspective by considering who actors are connected to. Yet, Johanson and Mattsson (1992) describe network position as an actor's interpretation of position as it relates to identity construction. We further this notion, building on Mattsson (1985) who defines aspects of network position through organizational identity, to consider how network position and identity construction processes influence each other.

Identity construction is the process used by actors to portray “who we are” and “what we do” (Huemmer, 2013). Yet as role and network position cannot be separated (Anderson, Havila, Andersen, & Halinen, 1998) this research takes a triadic approach by considering how identity construction and the interplay between role and network position influence each other. We now describe the three key concepts individually.

### 2.1. Role

The concept of role has been neglected within the IMP literature except for a few notable papers (e.g. Abrahamsen, Henneberg, & Naudé, 2012; Anderson et al., 1998). In most instances role has been considered to influence perspectives of network change/dynamics (Abrahamsen et al., 2012; Anderson et al., 1998); strategic processes (Nyström, Ramström, & Törnroos, 2014) and typologies of behavior (Heikkinen, Mainela, Still, & Tähtinen, 2007; Nyström, Leminen, Westerlund, & Kortelainen, 2014).

We consider role as a cognitive function interpreted through changing actor behaviors and perceived as relative behaviors compared to other network actors (Anderson et al., 1998; Nyström, Leminen, et al., 2014). Anderson et al. (1998, p. 172) describe role as “a concept for describing what the actors intend, how they construct meaning in their situation and how they want to change it.” Some scholars go further by including reactions to others' behaviors within the role interpretation process (Heikkinen et al., 2007; Nyström, Leminen, et al., 2014). Considering role as a cognitive function incorporates role interpretations around how they want to change their future behaviors, which can differ from current organizational functions (i.e. buyer). Nyström, Leminen, et al. (2014) highlight how changing current role behaviors indicates future strategic directions. We argue that role interpretations incorporate future time through communicating possible future identities. Actor reaction to role interpretation incorporates the interaction processes between actors, shifting role to a network level notion. Therefore, interaction processes and their connections become important when considering role. Role as interaction processes aligns with notions of “role playing” (Lowe, Purchase, & Ellis, 2012) and “make-up” and “take-up” activities (Anderson et al., 1998). Given that role usually indicates how actors behave within interactions, it becomes a multi-dimensional notion based on the different roles actors play according to the context (Anderson et al., 1998) and also unique, as role interpretation by other actors is relative to their own behavior (Nyström, Ramström, et al., 2014).

Role is socially constructed in that actors' choose what they do and include behaviors around what they are expected to do (Anderson et al., 1998). Conforming to role expectations of other network actors has been described as role-taking (Nyström, Ramström, et al., 2014) or role-sending (Heikkinen et al., 2007). Meeting role expectations consolidates network beliefs and attitudes about what how that particular actor fits within the wider activity patterns of the network.

### 2.2. Network position

Network position from a structural perspective is described as “direct exchange relationships with some actors and connected exchange relationships with other actors” (Seyed-Mohamed & Bolte, 1992, p. 216). Therefore, network position is unique (Nyström, Leminen, et al., 2014), communicates how actors are related to each other, and is linked to network stability (Anderson et al., 1998).

Another perspective of network position is that it is socially constructed through the interpretations of other actors. Interpretations of network position vary according to how each connection is perceived. A cognitive interpretation of network position is required due to the asymmetry of perceptions. Cognitive interpretations include the relativity of network position between actors, how actors interpret themselves as connected to others and their interdependencies.

Actors are required to meet the expectations of their position, thus, incorporating cognitive aspects (Mattsson, 1985). Mattsson (1985) defines position relative to “the function performed by the organization”; “relation to the identity of the organizational units the firm is linked to” and the “relative importance of the firm” to others (1985, p. 270), thereby, linking network position to role, identity and power.

Each actor can have multiple unique positions, therefore, network position is a multi-dimensional concept (Abrahamsen et al., 2012; Mattsson, 1985). Multi-dimensionality has been related to the context in which an organization is embedded through participating in multiple networks (Mattsson, 1985) and different actor interpretations (Abrahamsen et al., 2012; Johanson & Mattsson, 1992).

### 2.3. Interplay of network position and role

The concepts of role and network position have been linked to such an extent that they could be considered as “inseparable” (Anderson et al., 1998, p. 171). Or that they define each other, in that the “position of a firm defines the roles that it has in relation to the other firms in the network” (Mattsson, 1985, p. 270).

An important aspect when considering the interplay between these concepts is whether network position precedes role or whether role precedes network position. An argument for network position preceding role is that position defines role, thus whatever position an actor undertakes (e.g. demand-related position/supply-related position) determines the role undertaken by the organization (Mattsson, 1985). Another argument is that a change in network position impacts network stability thus leading to a change in role (Anderson et al., 1998).

An argument for role preceding position is that differences between the role interpretation between connected actors leads to a change in position (Abrahamsen et al., 2012). An organization's “ability to change their position is dependent on a shared interpretation of roles between the actors” (Abrahamsen et al., 2012, p. 268).

Given that differing perspectives on the interplay between role and position exist within the literature, our research does not assume that one concept precedes the other, but rather considers them to work in conjunction with each other through continuous influence in both directions simultaneously, similar to the position of Nyström, Leminen, et al. (2014).

### 2.4. Identity construction

In exploring the implications of role and position from an organizational perspective, we turn our focus towards a central concept of fundamental importance to organizations, their identity. While our interests in relation to this study are the processes of organizational identity construction, we must first establish the perspective through which the identity concept is being explored.

Organizational identity has been described as the collectively held frame through which an organization's members make sense of the world and develop a shared understanding of ‘who we are’ (Weick,

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