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# *Identity Construction by Newly Appointed Academic Staff of a Ghanaian University*

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**Abstract**

*Several studies have been conducted on the identities of lecturers in universities across the world. However, in Ghana, little consideration has been given to the construction of identities by new lecturers in universities and other tertiary institutions. This study focuses on how new lecturers negotiate their identities in their university. Guided by identity construction theory, in-depth interviews were conducted with eight purposively selected new lecturers of the university. Data from the participants were thematically analyzed. The results revealed that the new lecturers constructed multiple identities in an attempt to gain recognition in their new work place. In the course of constructing their identities, the new lecturers employ several strategies in negotiating their ways around the new work place. They work under internal and external pressure to improve their qualifications, research and publications, as well as meet the expectations of senior colleagues and students. Findings from the study could be used to improve orientation programmes for new lecturers in the university as well as lecturers in other universities in the country.*

**Keywords:** identity construction, identity negotiation, professional identity, new lecturers

## Introduction

Scholars acknowledge that constructing an identity is paramount to the teaching profession (Rodgers & Scott, 2008), particularly, at the university level. Constructing a teacher identity is a dynamic and a collective process that develops as a result of the involvement in different disciplines and academic communities. A teacher identity is socially and broadly constructed through the development of iterative positioning, which comprises a process of self or subject constructions that ultimately impact the ways people understand the present and learn for the future (Harré, Moghaddam, Cairnie, Rothbart, & Sabat, 2009; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 2001; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Sutherland & Taylor, 2011). Teacher identity is not a static product but rather an on-going process of identification, which can be labelled as developmental (Baker & Lattuca, 2010) or an 'identity-trajectory' (McAlpine, Amundsen, & Turner, 2014). It is a continuous and secure personhood over time and a sense of an ongoing change.

Identity construction presents a way by which a newcomer becomes part of a community (Golde, 1998; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Sweitzer 2009). In a university community, the ultimate desire of every lecturer is to be accepted socially by their students and colleagues. Social acceptance does not happen by accident, lecturers have to present themselves in the best possible way. Social acceptance is a two-way process where a person actively discovers opportunities for diversity and negotiates their way by finding a balance between institutional and structural positioning in the community, as well as creating a personal space for autonomy in that changing environment (Clegg, 2008, McDaniels, 2010)

Research in the field of teacher identity has attracted increasing interest in the last decade (Clarke, 2008; Day et al., 2006; Richards, 2006; van Veen & Sleegers, 2005). While some researchers have approached the subject from the perspective of what constitutes both the visible and invisible domains of the work and lives of teachers, other researchers have focused on various forms of identity construction (Agboada & Ofori-Birikorang, 2018; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Hatoss, 2012; Ofori-Birikorang, 2014; Osartti & Riemer, 2012).

Besides, researchers (Alsup, 2006; Archer, 2008; Bullough, 2005; Clegg, 2008; Fitzmaurice, 2011; Skelton, 2012) have used identity to explore academic work conditions. The plethora of extant studies on the creation of academic identities have resulted in a wider and better understanding of how complex and diverse interpretations are accorded to identity construction. However, very few of the studies have focused on individuals that are comparatively new in the academic fraternity (Archer, 2008) such as newly-appointed lecturers. Furthermore, relatively, minimal works have been done on identity construction among newly-appointed academics in Africa and particularly Ghana. The researcher believes empirical data on identity construction of newly appointed lecturers would provide useful information that could be used to develop appropriate staff orientation and training activities. This paper is a modest contribution to fill the

paucity of literature on identity construction of newly appointed lecturers in a university in Ghana. It is anticipated that the findings of the study would yield vital information that could be used to improve programmes for the orientation of newly appointed lecturers in the University in particular, and other tertiary education institutions in the country. Newly appointed lecturers, in this context, refers to young academics that are in the first two years of appointment and serving a two-year probationary period before confirmation as fully-fledged lecturers of the University.

## Theoretical Framework

### Identity Construction Theory

Identity construction has generated into a powerful issue, despite its complex and varied meanings several scholars have assigned to it (Schwartz, 2001). Scholars have labeled identity construction as "presentation dynamic" with the relationship between the "actual self", that is, those attributes that an individual possesses, the "ideal self"- attributes an individual wishes to possess, and the "ought self"- attributes an individual believes he or she is expected to possess (Higgins, 1987; Sjibak, 2009). However, Robinson (1996), on the other hand, argued that the identity conveyed by a person must be consistent with the expectations of the audience identity as the "me" (Littlejohn & Foss and with the situation that frames the interaction between people.

Subsequently, there are two forms of the self-performance namely; an internal perception and an external social identity. Mead referred to the internal perception as the "I" and the external social, 2008: 156). In performing the "I", an individual must exhibit his/her normal self without any modification. This will invariably emphasize his/her philosophies, ideology, and perceptions without fear of criticism. The real identity is the natural and unrestrained self. In constructing the "me", the individual must live up to the expectations of the people in the society by constantly behaving and acting in a manner that is consistent with their position in that society.

Constructing a real identity requires less effort and it is easily sustained, unlike the ideal identity which is difficult to construct because it is subject to public expectations. The self then is defined through the social interaction with others (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). This is endorsed by Terry, Hogg and White (1999) who explained that self-identity is a collection of identities that reflect the roles that a person assumes in a social structure.

### Social Identity

The manner individuals construct their sense of identity is based on their membership within social groups. The formation of an identity occurs when an individual identifies with a particular group and builds a group membership (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Groups like families and social classes are important because they offer people a sense of social identity and a sense of belonging to a social work (Appiah-Kubi, 2018). This is in line with the assertion by Hecht and Choi (2012) that the degree to which people's identities are embedded in their relationships plays an important role for their well-being.

On the other hand, Bucholtz and Hall (2005) perceived identity as the social positioning of the self-relative to others. Thus, the concept of identity can be viewed as a relational and sociocultural phenomenon that occurs when people interact with one another. Bamberg, De Fina and Schiffrin (2011) also explain that identity emerges out of social interaction; it is the sole property of an individual and lives in the mind of the individual. Identity is not something that a person has but rather something that one does, or performs and recreates through concrete exchanges, discourses and interactions with others (Butler, 1990). However, the association with groups is dynamic, as the individual relates with other groups at the same time, as well as involved with several affiliations and associations (Lemke, 2008). Consequently, the individual's roles and behaviors relate to those different situations and interactions, and through these interactions, identity is continuously created, shaped, or transformed.

Pugh (2010) suggested that an individual's social position affords them the opportunity to create a befitting identity for themselves to suit people's perception. Hence, people will construct an identity that will meet and satisfy expectations as well as shape people's impression about them. Identity is how people portray themselves and how they relate with others in a social setting (Schau & Gilly, 2003).

Identity has three dimensions, namely: social identity, personal identity and role identity. Social identity is an individual's self-identification in relation to the social group that they belong to. An individual's relationship to a particular group is characterized as self-categorization. In this case, individuals may identify with different associations such as religious sects, political parties or social clubs. Personal identity is based on how an individual perceives him/herself to be: a person's distinct characteristic. This makes a person's identity quite personal and mostly internal. The third is the role identity, which comes about when an individual assumes a specific role in the society (Merolla et al, 2012 cited in Avorgah, 2013).

An individual is said to have a specific identity because society has collectively named that phenomenon. Identities are performed in relation to interactions and associations that people engage in the society (Sterts & Burke, 2000). Therefore, identity construction is self-assuming a role and incorporating the self-meaning and expectations which are associated with that role (Burke & Tully, 1977; Thoit, 1989 as cited in Sterts & Burke, 2000). Arguably, all newly appointed lecturers in the University construct their social identities.

### *Professional Identity*

For a lecturer to be successful at a university, s/he assesses her/his actions, conduct and future actions based on the responses s/he gets from others (Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934; 1936) that may be described as the construction of professional

identity. Professional identity according to Appiah-Kubi (2018), is one's professional self-concept or how one perceives him/herself within an occupational context and how it is communicated to others (Neary, 2014). Such social actors, as they may be called in most situations, identify or describe themselves using their professional affiliations. They present themselves in ways that depict how much they value their respective professions and as such have strong sense of attachment to them (Appiah-Kubi, 2018). Also, Appiah-Kubi added that, without even being asked, the social actors constantly make their professional background known. This study, therefore, sets out to address the following two questions:

- What kinds of identity do newly appointed lecturers at the University construct?
- How do newly appointed lecturers at the University negotiate their identities?

**Method**

The study is qualitative; this approach is specifically suitable for exploring the formation of professional identities in a whole new environment (Clandinin, 1995; Green & Myatt, 2011). The study was conducted in a University in Ghana, which for the sake of anonymity, has its name withheld. It is one of the universities in Southern Ghana which is involved in training of professional teachers among others. A sample of eight new lecturers was purposively selected from a target population of 54 newly appointed lecturers in the 2018/2019 academic year. The newly appointed lecturers who formed the sample for this study had previously worked in different institutions and capacities before they assumed their new positions. The institutions included: basic or senior high schools, a private university, and a financial institution. They cited job security, and better conditions of service as the main factors that motivated them to apply for consideration to work in the university as lecturers.

Although the researcher contacted 12 new lecturers, four of them could not make time to participate in the interviews. However, the eight participants provided substantial data that served the purpose for which the study was conducted. Indeed, the researcher achieved saturation point in data collection as she noted that no new data was emerging from the participants (Kumar, 2005) as the data collection moved from participant to participant. Besides, the adoption of purposive sampling was appropriate for this study because purposive sampling is used when the researcher sets out to find people who are willing and can provide useful information by virtue of their experience and knowledge about the phenomenon (Bernard, 2002). It is also in tandem with Creswell (2013) who posited that in adopting the purposive sampling strategy, the researcher's aim is to find participants who are ready to assist in gaining more insights into the phenomenon. The eight newly appointed lecturers comprised four females and four males, and worked in three departments within two faculties of the University.

The participants were interviewed to explore their experiences (Clandinin & Connolly, 2000) in their new work environment. The researcher wanted to gain rich and in-depth knowledge about how those newly appointed lecturers were constructing their identities. Prior to the interviews, all the participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity; they were told

that the information provided would be used for research purpose only. Consequently, during the transcription and analysis of data the researcher adopted pseudonyms to safeguard the anonymity of the participants. The interview guide was given to the participants in advance to peruse before they were interviewed. The key issues were: the new appointment, social and academic life; motivation, concerns and challenges. Again, the researcher sought permission from the participants to record the interviews via a mobile phone in order not to lose any aspect of the content and also facilitate transcription. The researcher later typed the recorded interviews of the eight participants and copies of the transcripts were given to the participants to read and confirm as the true reflection of their views. None of the participants raised any objection to the contents of the typed

transcriptions. The researcher analyzed the data thematically guided by the research questions and the theoretical framework.

## Findings and Discussion

After repeated reading of the transcriptions of the participants, the following interrelated themes were extracted: professional/academic, personal and social identities.

### Professional/academic identity

The professional identity, which is driven by academic activities, explains how a lecturer sees himself or herself in relation to his/her occupation and how that communicates to others (Neary, 2014). For the newly appointed lecturers, particularly those without terminal degrees, teaching is very important, but they were consistently haunted by the need to acquire a terminal degree, which is the accepted qualification for an academic staff of universities in Ghana and globally. Additionally, the new lecturers were faced by the slogan 'publish or perish'. Indeed, the participants were also constantly reminded about the obligation to research and produce quality publications in order to secure and maintain their employment in the University. The following statements encapsulate some sentiments from the newly appointed lecturers who participated in the study:

> *The work in itself comes with a lot of pressure, particularly, as I'm not also a PhD holder. And you know that for us to still work in this institution, we need a terminal degree so that is one pressure we are battling with then also with publications that is enhancing our research skills to come out with good publications. (Participant 7)*

*...my colleague talked about publication; she is even lucky to have one publication. When people talk about publish or perish it makes me sick the whole day. Our mentors make it so rosy but it ends there no one takes it up for you. So, it's a big challenge for us. (Participant 8)*

*We are supposed to be writing articles, but the pressure is quite stressful, managing home and my professional work I will not say I am the best teacher but I'm on top of it. But when it comes to writing and publishing, I'm still a baby not even a toddler. (Participant l)*

Comments such as *...for us to work in this institution we need a terminal degree... when people talk about publish or perish it makes me sick... we are supposed to be writing articles...* exemplify the interrelationship between the 'ideal self' and 'ought self', two of the three dimensions of identity postulated by Higgins (1987) and Sjibak (2009), whereby the newly appointed lecturers are constantly reminded by themselves and other senior members of the need to acquire a terminal degree as well as produce quality publications. These requirements are the attributes the newly appointed lecturers themselves not only believe they should possess but are also obliged to possess in order to remain relevant in the university. There are therefore, both internal and external incessant pressure on these newly appointed lecturers to live up to their own expectations and that of their senior colleagues in order to survive in the new work place (university).

Besides, the participants were confronted with new challenges, which included teaching large class sizes, integrating IT in teaching and learning, marking of students' assignments as well as serving as academic counselors:

*It is... but here we have to be attending meetings, lecture, act as counselors, prepare slides to teach a class of 400 students and mark their scripts. So, sitting down and writing becomes another issue (Participant l).*

Other participants remarked:

> *We spend hours on hours by our laptops reading through works of our students. The pressure of publish or perish is there so we have to cut down the number of hours we spend sleeping and write down something. If not, your job is on the line.*

> *The system will not allow you to do things that please you. The system has its own standards so we are living by those standards... those standards that are valuable I'm also likely to emulate and add them to what I already have. (Participant 4)*

This revelation was not surprising as Alexander (2011) has asserted that our identities come to the fore by the interactions we have within ourselves and other people. So, it is evident that these newly appointed lecturers were constantly constructing their professional identities to model their older and senior colleagues as they work together, interact and also go through mentorship. This process allows them to identify core values of academic venture that are critical to their professional life (Archer, 2008).

Furthermore, the participants constantly referenced the demands placed on them for working in their new environment. Essentially, the construction of the professional identity did not occur in isolation; as described in the ongoing discourse, the newly appointed lecturers' construction of their professional identities occurred concurrently with the construction of their personal and social identities as encapsulated in the following statements.

### *Personal identity*

As explained in the literature, personal identity is based on how each of the lecturers perceived *himself* or *herself* to be:

> *I am an extrovert. I like to interact with everybody, I don't shy away from people. I think of myself as the free going type (PI)*

*1 am an easygoing tutor, a great person who is always willing to learn new things. I pay attention to what my students say and I make things easy for my students in class. I allow my students to feel comfortable the same way that I do (P4)*

*I try to build a cordial relationship with all my students (Participant 3)*

*...1 try to be as professional as I'm supposed to be and then make sure I build a very nice human relationship that is what I'm doing. (Participant 6)*

The remarks from the four of the participants highlight the conscious efforts by the lecturers to maintain their unique characteristics (Schau & Gilly, 2003; Avorgah, 2013) in spite of the excessive pressure from others (relatives) as well as from their work place. The newly appointed lecturers seem to understand the value of their students and the need to establish healthy relationships with their students. This is understandable because one of the core values of the university is student centeredness. Students are the main customers of a university and must be valued. Besides, students' evaluation forms a critical component of staff appraisal in the university. Management of the university may not hesitate to terminate an academic staff's contract once their students complain about sub-standard performance.

### *Social identity (improved lifestyle and broader financial circumstances)*

As explained earlier, social identity comes to fore through interaction with members of a social group. It expresses a person's understanding of who they are in any given situation. Individual's status in the group is accentuated in order to augment self-image (Appiah-Kubi, 2018; Tajfe, 1979). Subsequently, people's social class, family, and profession that they are affiliated to become a source of pride and self-identity because belonging to these groups invoke a sense of gratification and well-being (Hecht & Choi, 2012). In Ghana, many people place high value on teaching in the university hence expectations become higher anytime the position is made known to friends and relations. The following statements encapsulate experiences of participants:

*Now I have money so there is pressure and it's natural. Previously, I was not living in a 3-bedroom apartment but now I have rented a 3 bedroom and it comes with a cost because now I can spend that much. (Participant 5)*

Other participants also maintained;

*Oh, that is very true, when I wanted to buy a car there was a certain car, I wanted to buy but my husband said I was above that car. As for pressure to live a certain lifestyle we are experiencing it. (Participant l)*

*.. as for me the desire to buy a car it is there. Sometimes you even want to go for the normal ones, I remember I wanted to buy a car and I was going in for a small car but the one I asked to do the search for me said no way. For a lecturer you need to go for something bigger. People's perception alone about the job is a pressure to you. (Participant 8)*

Comments from the transcriptions of the participants such as *but I have now moved into a 3-bedroom house.... but my husband said I was above that car. the one I asked to do the search said no way...* highlight the construction of social identity as a result of the role the person occupies in a social structure (Terry, Hogg & White (1999); as well as perceived social positioning of the self and other (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). These identities not only emerge out of social interactions but also, social identities are sole properties of individuals and live in their minds (Bamberg & De Fina, 2011). Furthermore, it is evident from the transcriptions the level of vulnerability and susceptibility of the new lecturers in the university environment, which could be described as 'unfamiliar' environment. Some comments such as *...people's perception alone about the job is a pressure...* in itself attests to the vulnerability and susceptibility (Ting-Toomey 2015) of the new lecturers in the study. Besides, the two forms of self-performance as articulated by Mead (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008) also came to the fore; participants (1 & 8) were prevailed upon by other people to change their minds about the type of cars they wanted to buy. That is, the internal

perception "I" was overpowered by the external social identity "me". The participants (new lecturers) had to live up to the expectation of the other people.

*Role Expectation*

Another theme that emanated from the data was new lecturers' ability to negotiate expectations in their new work environment. Finding their way as newly appointed lecturers was a huge task and major concern for all the participants. As stated earlier in the methodology, the eight participants had different levels of exposure and backgrounds. Faced with the realities of a tertiary academic environment, which is characterized by competing demands of lecturing, meetings as well as personal development (research and publication) combined to shape their identities as new lecturers. To some of the participants, they had to negotiate their identities by attending long meetings and revered the professors who attended such meetings. The following extracts from the interviews echo this assertion:

*As a new lecturer I had the phobia, when they are talking the (Profs and Docs) I don't even want to talk... in the very beginning I felt very intimidated as I thought my voice will not be heard. (Participant l)*

*It's not easy. Previously, (reference to former place of work) our major duty was teaching but here we have to be attending long meetings, lecturing, being an academic counselor, .... The family too is there, that's the biggest truth and I'm still trying to figure myself out. I'm still struggling not only teach but also to publish. (Participant 4)*

The various stages of settling in as lecturers in the university depict processes of learning to negotiate new rules and regulations as part of the adjustment into the academic setting (Archer, 2008; Green & Myatt, 2011). So for these new lecturers coming from diverse background, their ability to negotiate their identities through an array of complex system, talents, behavioral style, interests, perceptions and competencies are inherently huge challenges they had to navigate in their new job.

## Role modeling

Closely associated and connected to role expectation and rapport with students is the identity as role model. As explained earlier, Gauntlette (2002: 211) posited that a role model is "someone to look up to and base your character, values and aspirations on". Role models always inspire, teach by example and excite admiration and emulation. Consequently, the role model provokes in an individual the desire to become more like the model by setting their goals accordingly. From the participants' transcriptions, it became evident that when one becomes a lecturer, one is seen as a role model. All the participants averred that their occupation as lecturers made them role models to their students and the society as a whole, some participants shared their thoughts:

*As a new lecturer you know it's not like an office work. We are mentoring a lot of students so as a lecturer your dressing is important. There are certain clothes I have done away with them because I'm lecturing and I have to serve as a mentor to a lot of students most of them look up to us as their role model so we have to change a lot of our behaviors just to do that. (Participant 7)*

*Yes, I see a need to do things different because people are looking up to you. If you do the wrong things, some might think it's the right thing you are doing and they will imitate so as much as possible I have to be careful in everything I do. (Participant 4)*

Once again, the pressure to change one's lifestyle and live according to the expectation of other members of society comes to the fore. In effect, the new lecturers have to live exemplary lifestyle to commensurate their new role. What they used to do on an ordinary day had to be changed since their students and perhaps senior colleagues would be watching. In this circumstance, the participants have to change their physiognomy. For instance, their outward appearance and how they behave in public had to be modified to meet the expectations of others. This is in consonance with the assertion that an individual's appearance relates ultimately to the private and professional identities they want

to present and that to a degree, people control what they want others to see by making certain choices in life. However, some qualities of identities are solely determined for others (Orsatti & Reimer, 2015; Wood & Smith, 2005). Thus, the newly appointed lecturers are constantly thinking about how to conduct themselves as role models to their students.

*Conclusion*

This study set out to interrogate how newly appointed lecturers in a University in Ghana construct their identities. The study was anchored on two main objectives: to examine the kinds of identities new lecturers construct and also the strategies the new lecturers adopt in negotiating their identities in their new work environment. The study revealed that newly appointed lecturers construct multiple identities comprising professional/academic, social identities, and personal identities through their daily interactions and social exchanges. The success of the new lecturers in constructing this new 'self' seems to manifest through professional exchanges with themselves, more experienced/older colleagues, students and the institution as a whole. Again, the new lecturers negotiated their identities through carefully guided interactions with colleagues (teaching and non-teaching), students, role expectations and also as role models. Subsequently, this study has revealed that as the new lecturers continuously forge their individual identities, the institution and their experienced colleagues influence them in ways that enable them to become good academics relative to nurturing students, being research active and finding pleasure and gratification in their new profession.

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