

**MONASH UNIVERSITY  
FACULTY OF BUSINESS AND ECONOMICS**

**MOTIVES AND PERFORMANCE OF ACADEMICS**

**Loretta Inglis**

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**Abstract**

This paper examines the motives academics have for engaging in research activity and how motives affect research performance. A conceptual model is presented in order to clarify the processes that lead to the formation and maintenance of different types of motive. It is then argued that motivation derives from variations in orientations to work and these develop because of the influences of opportunity structures and reference groups. It is orientations to work which determine work behaviour.

Analysis of interview data, from sixteen academics working in a large university, reveals that differences in orientations to work are strongly related to experiences of different opportunity structures and reference groups. It also reveals that, for more than half of those interviewed, orientations remained stable once formed. Their orientations then led to different interpretations of their role and the performance expected of them, and thus to difference work behaviours.

# MOTIVES AND PERFORMANCE OF ACADEMICS

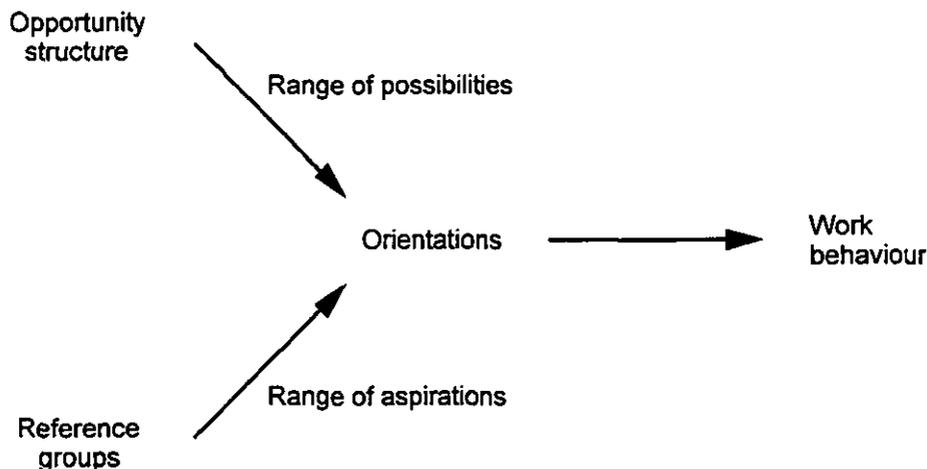
## INTRODUCTION

The concern of this paper is with the choices and decisions academics make about their role performance. Specifically, how do variations in academics' aspirations and conceptions of opportunities, constraints and institutional expectations influence the relative amount of time and effort they devote to research, teaching and other types of tasks? The paper also seeks to identify to what extent these factors are stable over an academic's career.

## A MODEL OF MOTIVES AND PERFORMANCE

To do this a model was developed from a reading of the literature on various topics relating to motives. While there is a wealth of psychological literature on the topic of motivation, the orientation to work theory was found to be more useful in explaining behaviour in such a specialised group as academics. Orientations to work, it is argued here, are formed because of the opportunities presented to individuals, and because of the reference groups used by individuals.

**Figure 1**  
**MODEL OF MOTIVES AND PERFORMANCE**



### Opportunity Structure

The model first proposes that individuals are products of their environment, or what is termed their 'opportunity structure' in the model. Their family, the culture and class in which they are brought up, their whole social setting will determine their attitudes and values. Their environment will also provide them with a range of possibilities in life, or opportunities, as well as constraints, which will lead to educational and work experiences.

The model proposes that individuals will develop orientations to work because of their early influences and the opportunities available to them and the constraints placed on them. Fox (1980) argues that there are more constraints on most individuals than opportunities, and there is, therefore, a strong pressure on all individuals, evident well before entering the workplace to be:

realistic in expectations concerning work, to adapt to the available opportunities (or, for the majority, to the lack of them) and to accommodate to the world as it is (1980:172).

As Brown (1992) expresses it, workers' orientations will develop because of what is culturally available. The range of possibilities open to an individual will be determined by their opportunity structure. The model suggests that the range of aspirations an individual is likely to have is also determined by their reference groups.

### **Reference Groups**

Reference groups are defined as ".....groups to which an individual relates himself or aspires to relate himself to as a part psychologically (Sherif, 1963:10), or, more simply, a group with whom an individual identifies and imitates in the desire to become one of that group. Reference group theory assumes that people make basic judgements and self-appraisals based on psychological identity, rather than on formal membership of groups. The importance of reference groups emanates from the fact that individuals refer to the attitudes and behaviour of such groups in determining their own attitudes and behaviour. Hartley (1968) saw reference groups as moulding the behaviour of individuals who will behave as they believe is expected of them by their reference groups. Reference groups play a large part, together with an individual's opportunity structure, in forming orientations to work.

### **Orientations to Work**

Orientations to work are defined as "a central organising principle which underlies people's attempt to make sense of their lives" (Blackburn & Mann, 1979:16). Both work and non work experiences influence an individual's orientations to work. These orientations are shaped because of events in people's lives that channel them in a certain direction and present them with different opportunities and constraints.

Goldthorpe, Lockwood, Bechofer and Platt (1968) first developed the idea of orientations to work. They contended that individuals are motivated by their orientations to work which are culturally determined. Their "Affluent Worker" study (1968) led them to conclude that workers' attitudes and behaviour were dependent on their orientations to work. These have their origins in the experiences and situations of individuals. Their wants and expectations are formed by social experiences, including family and education, as well as their experiences with work itself. Duffy argues that "orientations are derived from external economic, social and cultural influences and are not fundamental properties of man" (1988:311). Goldthorpe et al (1968) also identified three distinct orientations which, they assert, explain people's work behaviour. These are an instrumental orientation, a bureaucratic orientation and a solidaristic orientation. Instrumental orientation refers to the use of work as a means to achieve desirable outcomes, with pay being the most emphasised. Goldthorpe and his colleagues identify the other two orientations as "deviations" from the instrumental orientation. Bureaucratic orientation relates to gaining meaning from work in providing a service to an organisation, being committed to it, and receiving from it the opportunity for a career with income, status and security. A solidaristic orientation to work implies that work is of prime importance in providing social relationships and personal satisfaction from belonging to a group.

This paper argues that these orientations are formed from two major sources. The opportunity structure available to individuals will provide a range of possibilities and reference groups will provide a range of aspirations, both leading to the formation of orientations. Once developed, such orientations will direct individuals toward particular work situations and continue to strongly influence behaviour in that work situation.

### **Academics and Orientations**

Goldthorpe et al (1968) also touch on a different formulation which is most relevant in a discussion of academic's orientations. This is a professional orientation. It was Gouldner (1957, 1958) who developed this idea further. Such an orientation is said to comprise a system of values and patterns of behaviour that differ from those characterising other occupations (Goode, 1957). Academics have been described as having a professional orientation to work (Goldberg, 1976; Tuma & Grimes, 1981). What differentiates this from the other orientations identified is, Goode (1957) argues, an emphasis on the intrinsic value and importance of the work itself. However, the main distinguishing factor of those with a professional orientation is, as recognised by Gouldner (1957), the importance of reference groups to such workers. Gouldner (1957, 1958) argued that workers with a professional orientation would have two likely reference groups. He called these groups cosmopolitan, meaning the wider world beyond the workplace, and local, meaning the immediate workplace environment. Goldberg (1976) argues that what clearly identified a professional orientation to work, is the opportunity which exists to choose one or the other of these reference groups. This is a clear choice that academics can make.

While the model introduced above attempts to show simple influences on individual behaviour, within it there is a large degree of complexity. Individuals experience a variety of changing needs and expectations that are influenced by their biography, career, and their life-setting generally. They experience different opportunities that present to them over their lifetime and different constraints are placed in their way. This forms their opportunity structure. They are influenced by their different reference groups and these influences lead to the formation of their range of aspirations. These together, the model suggests, lead to the formation of their orientations. Orientations will lead to work behaviour.

This paper addresses the relationship between orientations and research performance from an individual academic perspective. What happens to an academic to cause them to have a particular orientation? Why do different people, in the same position, have very different motives. Once formed, are these orientations static or are they dynamic - likely to change with different circumstances over an individual's career.

### **METHOD**

In order to discover how orientations develop in academics, and why academics choose to be involved in research or not, in-depth interviews were conducted with 16 academics from a large, metropolitan university which had been formed by a merger between a traditional university and a college of advanced education. Eight interviewed were from the former university and eight from the former college. The academics were from two different faculties and different backgrounds, with eight being identified as active researchers, as evidenced by publication, and eight as having no involvement in research and no publications.

Two major issues were addressed in the interviews. Firstly, what happens to individual academics to cause them to have a particular orientation. Once these orientations are formed, do they remain stable, or are they dynamic and likely to change with different circumstances over an individual's career.

To do this three categories of motives are used. Waters' (1994) interpretation of Schutz's "because" and "in order to" motives is used to operationalise the concepts identified in the model. "Because" motives relate to past experiences and these are used to capture an individual's opportunity structure. "In order to" motives relate to expectations of future action and are used to capture an individual's orientations. Reference group motives are also important influences on the development of orientations and work behaviour and these are used as an indicator of the range of aspirations individuals may have.

The data gained from the interviews was organised into sixteen matrices. These were, firstly, time ordered over the careers of each individual. Then events over the lives of each individual were fitted into the themes of the study; that is how it was related to each individual's different type of motives - "because", "reference group" and "in order to motives". These matrices were used to extract information about why an individual chose a particular career path, and why they remained in that career.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The model outlined earlier suggests that work behaviour is a consequence of orientations to work. These are formed as a result of an individual's opportunity structure and reference groups. An individual's opportunity structure provides a range of possibilities, and reference groups provide a range of aspirations.

In the case of the group studied, academics, the model was useful in that it provided a system for explaining how they behaved in their career. To help identify clearly the motives, the discussion was divided into two areas: motives for becoming an academic and motives for remaining an academic.

### **Motives for becoming an academic**

The interviewees were asked about their career, post secondary school, to ascertain how and why they had gone on to become an academic. Their responses are further divided into those relevant to opportunity structure and reference groups.

#### **Opportunity structure**

For most of the academics interviewed, circumstances provided them with opportunities, or more often, constrained them, leaving them with only a few choices when it came to the initial choice of career path. For example, for four, their only opportunity to study at tertiary level was by taking a scholarship which led to a teaching careers. Once qualified they found other opportunities to go beyond primary or secondary teaching. This is a story repeated by others. Behind many of opportunities offered to those interviewed, was the fact that academics were in very short supply in most disciplines in the 1970s and the early 1980s. This shortage had continued into the late 1980s in some disciplines.

For many, becoming an academic was purely a matter of chance; being in the right place at the right time. For eleven out of sixteen interviewed there was no conscious decision to become an academic. Opportunities presented, as a result of their previous life experiences, and they took them. They were not driven by any desire to be an academic. Of the remaining five, two made the choice to become an academic when they realised that the path they had taken left them with few other choices. For most, however, it was a matter of opportunity presenting.

## **Reference Group Motives**

Reference groups appear to change over the life cycle of an individual. Primarily in early stages, family, friends and teachers are the strongest reference groups and the original choice of a career, was usually influenced by those. This was replaced by peers, new friends and university lecturers. Some of those influenced were clearly influenced by a desire to belong to a particular group (such as the educated) and others by a desire to avoid belonging to a particular group (such as the uneducated).

Of the sixteen, only two had embarked on their tertiary education with any aspirations to become an academic, and these were from elite schools, where they excelled, and were encouraged to aspire to an academic career. Both were also influenced at a young age by writers in their field of interest. They both developed a cosmopolitan reference group in aspiring to be like those writers, but for most of those interviewed reference groups were not a major factor in the original choice of academic career. The need for a job and the opportunities that arose were the major forces.

### **Motives to remain an academic**

Most of those interviewed had come to an academic position because their past experiences and their reference groups had directed them to it. Their opportunity structure was such that the chance presented itself and they took it, or circumstances limited their choice. Their decision to stay an academic over time was also heavily influenced by their past experiences. While many expressed doubts about why they had remained an academic, none expressed any real desire to do anything else. For most, their opportunity structure had been constrained to the point where they had no choice but to remain an academic. Added to this, their reference groups were based around their occupation.

### **Opportunity structure**

Five of the academics felt that their careers were constrained by circumstances outside their control. They expressed a view that they could not research because factors, about which they could do little, were stopping them. Their opportunity structure left them with little opportunity for other employment, but they did not feel they were meeting the demands made on them as an academic. They felt unable to change the situation themselves. The others were far more positive, though all expressed the view that they would remain in their present positions, because they had no opportunities outside.

### **Reference groups**

One distinguishing feature of academics is, like other professionals, the importance attached to reference group. The academics interviewed clearly expressed that either local or cosmopolitan reference groups were more important to them. In doing so, they discriminated most distinctly between those who considered research more important and those who considered teaching more important. For an academic, a cosmopolitan reference group was made up of others in their discipline wherever they may be, rather than their colleagues in their employing organisation. Those with a local orientation use their colleagues in their work place as their reference group.

While, for most interviewed, reference groups did not appear to be a major influence in their choice of an academic career, once in their positions reference groups became far more important. It was here that the cosmopolitan/local reference groups were clear. Those interviewed who were researchers, and wished to further their research career, referred often to academics in their field beyond their own department. Those who did not research all had local reference groups. They usually relied heavily on colleagues in their own

department, or sections of it. They identified very closely with the colleagues with whom they had daily contact and, emphatically, with the students.

Overall, those who were successful researchers clearly had cosmopolitan reference groups. Those who were not involved in research at all, had local reference groups.

## CONCLUSIONS

The evidence gathered in this research confirms that initial experiences led to orientations to work being formed. The opportunity structure and reference groups of those interviewed led to an academic career. Their experiences and influences also led them to develop a professional orientation to work.

An clear indicator of professional orientation was the importance each attached to reference groups. All the subjects interviewed were heavily influenced in their role as an academic by their occupational reference groups. For some, these reference groups were cosmopolitan, for others they were local. The research confirmed the link between the cosmopolitan reference group and a further orientation towards research, and the local reference group and a further orientation towards teaching.

The research presents quite strong evidence that different orientations result from the experience of different opportunity structures and reference groups. However, the evidence is mixed on whether orientations are static or dynamic. For some orientations were most definitely static while for others, orientations were flexible and dynamic and they would change their behaviour according to circumstances.

Overall the research showed that motives, as seen through orientations to work, are strong predictors of the work behaviour on individuals in an academic environment.

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