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## **Workers with intellectual disability connecting with social identity to enhance performance through work at three hotels in Australia**

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This study is about workers with intellectual disability (WWID) in the Australian workforce. Social structures may support WWID but little is known about these workers and the ways they develop social identity. Evans and Davis' (2005) theoretical framework of internal social structure is expanded to investigate the influences of organisations social structure and the performance of WWID. A qualitative case study approach was used to interview, focus group and observe 19 WWID, three human resource managers and three duty managers at three hotels in Australia. We build on Hutchinson et al's (2017) research that suggests middle managers are crucial for the success of inclusion and performance. The study suggests when managers have positive attitudes and implement inclusive HR interventions, WWID are more likely to connect with social identification and enhance their performance.

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## **Introduction**

This study focuses on workers with intellectual disability (WWID) in the Australian labour market as they are often underrepresented and misunderstood at the workplace (Salkever et al., 2007, Houtenville and Kalargyrou, 2012). In Australia, only 1 million of the 2.2 million working aged adults with disabilities are employed, representing 10 per cent of all Australian workers (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012). The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) (2008) explains intellectual disability as difficulty learning and making decisions, with individuals having difficulty adjusting to a change and interacting with unfamiliar people. Australian legislation ensures that no individual is discriminated against in the workplace (Davis et al., 2016), however there are no guidelines for employing a person with a disability. In the workplace, WWID are more likely to feel socially isolated due to their disability compared with other forms of disability (Cavanagh et al., 2017, Hernandez et al., 2000).

We build on the work of Hutchinson, Roberts and Daly (2017) who applied elements of social identity theory to investigate identity change of participants with a neurological impairment. Our study illuminates change through understandings of the internal social structure theoretical framework of Evans and Davis (2005) to better understand social identity and performance of WWID. The research question is as follows: How do managerial practices and approaches influence the social identification, inclusion and performance of WWID?

We utilise a qualitative research approach within three hotel case study sites consisting of interviews, focus groups and observations of employees from a range of employment levels, including HR managers; department managers; supervisors; colleagues and workers with intellectual disability (WWID). The results of the study will impact industry knowledge by identifying clear HR practices as informed by Evans and Davis (2005)

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to support managers to create a positive social culture to encourage social identification of WWID and therefore enhance performance.

### **WWID Social Identity and Performance**

Social identity is an individual's perception that they belong to certain groups that have a significance to them (Tajfel, 1982), such as a workplace team. Social identification is the process in which individuals identify with groups through intergroup differentiation and intragroup cohesion (Leach et al., 2008). Social identity theory enables us to understand these in and out group interactions and illuminates the processes for group inclusion (Abrams and Hogg, 2004). This is critical for minority groups, such as WWID, who are often perceived as 'out groups' within society (Chermak, 1990). Linking social identity theory and management implementation of inclusive HR practices may support the performance of WWID (Markel and Barclay, 2009, Graffam et al., 2002). For example, the use of teamwork may integrate WWID into the 'in group' (in this case the team), of the workplace as WWID, and colleagues are able to interact on a daily basis (Yonezawa, 2015, Ellström, 2001, Klimoski and Donahue, 1997). Being part of the 'in group' gives social confidence to employees, limiting isolation and increasing commitment to the 'in group' and organisation (Stets and Burke, 2000, Kidwell et al., 1997). WWID may have never been part of this 'in group' therefore experiencing this new social sensation within a work setting may greatly increase effective commitment and ultimately performance.

There is a positive correlation between performance and social identification which is created by increasing an individual's motivation (Van Knippenberg, 2000, Korte, 2009). If the identity of an employee is the social minority, this may have negative impact on their inclusion and performance within the team (Brown, 2000, Riordan, 2000).

### **Management practices and attitudes towards WWID**

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The attitudes of managers and supervisors have been found to be an essential element of WWID performance (Unger and Kregel, 2003, Schur et al., 2005, Kaye et al., 2011).

Management style and organisational climate can influence the steps taken to create social identification for WWID (Cubero, 2007, Riches and Green, 2003). WWID face many challenges when in employment, especially the attitudes of managers which can negatively affect their integration into an organisation (Paez and Arendt, 2014, Wilson-Kovacs et al., 2008). Competitive values may encourage negative employer attitudes towards WWID, for example, employers may outwardly show a positive view towards WWID however recruitment methods may still be discriminatory to keep up with competition (Burke et al., 2013, Schur et al., 2005, Schur et al., 2009). Hence, employer attitudes towards WWID need to change to be more inclusive and accepting (Rao et al., 2010, Unger and Kregel, 2003).

### **Theoretical framework**

The internal social structure framework proposed by Evans and Davis (2005) is utilised to highlight social climate and establish how managerial attitudes and behaviours influence the social identification, performance and inclusion of WWID. Social climate can be described as a shared set of standards, values and beliefs that employees express whilst interacting with each other in the workplace (Ashkanasy et al., 2000, Smith et al., 2005). In this paper, a social climate will encompass mutual principles comprising the values and beliefs expressed by employees within the workplace setting (Collins and Smith, 2006).

Evans and Davis (2005) suggest the internal social structure of an organisation is characterised by: the nature of stakeholders, in this case WWID, colleagues and managers; relationships incorporating bridging weak ties and norms of reciprocity; shared mental models; and behaviours associated with stakeholders' relationships in role-making and organisational citizenship behaviours. Utilising the internal social structure framework (Evans and Davis, 2005), this paper suggests that an organisations social structure can

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increase the social identification of minority groups through creating an inclusive social climate of trust, co-operation and a common language (Ashkanasy et al., 2000). An inclusive social climate that creates commonalities for all employees, along with inclusive managerial practices, allows minority groups, in this case WWID, to identify with workplace groups (Hofhuis et al., 2012). Social identification increases a sense of belonging, boosts motivation and ultimately performance. The framework highlights five concepts that need to be adopted by managers to enhance the social identification of WWID.

### ***Bridging weak ties***

The term 'bridging weak ties' denotes creating a connection between two relatively independent stakeholders. A 'strong' relationship tie between stakeholders can be considered as large overlapping networks whereas relationships with weak ties may occur when the stakeholders have independent social networks that do not overlap (Chandler et al., 2013). Being part of the 'in group' promotes social confidence for WWID, and increases self-worth and commitment to an 'in group' within an organisation (Stets and Burke, 2000). Linking social identity theory and HR practices to bridge these 'weak ties' may support the performance of WWID (Markel and Barclay, 2009, Graffam et al., 2002). For example, the use of teamwork may integrate WWID into the 'in group' of the workplace as WWID and colleagues are able to interact on a daily basis (Yonezawa, 2015).

### ***Generalised norms of reciprocity***

In a high performing organisational climate, the quality of social exchange is critical as it explains the interactions between stakeholders at work (Uhl-Bien et al., 2000). Many social exchanges are based on reciprocity (Rosenberg, 1965, Zou et al., 2015) whereby individuals generally return the benefits they receive, to match the goodwill and helpfulness toward the party with whom they have a social exchange relationship (Keilty and Connelly, 2001). Gouldner (2009) argues that reciprocity results from interdependent exchanges, where one

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party's action is contingent on the other party's behaviour. WWID benefiting from reciprocity through management and HR practices may experience an increase in trust, therefore showing as a positive effect on commitment and performance (Uhl-Bien et al., 2000).

### ***Shared mental models***

Shared mental models can be termed as similar and compatible attitudes and beliefs used to coordinate behaviour and workplace tasks (Cannon-Bowers & Salas, 2001). Shared mental models may be found in social identity 'in groups' due to similar cultural and attitudinal norms (Tajfel and Turner 1986). These shared mental models may be created by managers when utilising HR practices such as teamwork and 'buddy' systems to foster social identification for WWID (Meacham et al., 2016). Creating a shared perception of the organisation, in terms of practices, social identification may result in a strong organisational climate may increase the social identity of WWID thus increasing their performance (Alfes et al., 2013).

### ***Role making***

A workplace role is comprised of individual work responsibilities (Griffin et al., 2007, Katz and Kahn, 1978). Role making occurs when an individual negotiates the definition of their role with a supervisor or manager. However, employees may engage in role making to establish their defined role or place within the social climate of a team and an organisation (Bowen and Ostroff, 2004, Morrison, 1996, Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001). HR practices such as training and teamwork may motivate this active role making by empowering employees through increased levels of autonomy. For WWID it is essential managers and organisations establish WWID workplace role to initiate social inclusion.

### ***Organisational citizenship behaviour***

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Citizenship behaviours improve organisational effectiveness and enrich the social structure of an organisation (McAllister, 1995, Meneghel et al., 2016). Organisational citizenship behaviours are employee behaviours that positively contribute to the social and psychological context of the organisation and directly affect performance. Employees who engage in such behaviours may not always be the top performers but will often go above and beyond to individually perform a task or support the performance of other colleagues (Jiang and Liu, 2015). Examples of organisational citizenship behaviours include helping new employees integrate into the workplace social climate, supporting colleagues with reaching deadlines and volunteering to change shifts (Evans and Davis, 2005). HR strategies may encourage organisational citizenship behaviours through investments in training and development (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002).

### **Methodological Approach**

This research is based on a case study approach across three hotels in Australia. A case study approach is the most appropriate for this research as it focuses on the socially constructed nature of reality to understand social phenomena in context (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). This methodology is most suitable, as the critical paradigm sets out to understand the explicit the ways, subordination and exclusion are comprehended (Fraenkel and Wallen, 1993).

The three research sites are internationally branded hotel chains, two located in Australia. Across the three hotels, 19 WWID, 3 HR Managers and 3 Duty Managers participated in the study. Hotel 1 (H1) is rated 5-star deluxe hotel and employs 450 employees in total; 8 WWID. Hotel 2 (H2) is a 3-star hotel with 150 employees and employs 6 WWID. Hotel 3 (H3) is rated 5 star, has 300 employees and employs 5 WWID. Purposeful sampling was utilised in this study. These hotels were chosen through connections with the researchers, along with the knowledge that they employed WWID. Managers and colleagues were selected due to their proximal working relationships with WWID. The study involved



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observations and a series of one-hour semi structured interviews with WWID, HRM managers and Duty managers; and semi structured focus groups with colleagues and supervisors. The literature review and gaps noted in the literature informed the creation of the interview and focus group questions. Department managers and HR managers were interviewed to obtain a multi-level analysis within each organisation. After initial contact was made the purpose of the research was outlined and participants were assured that this was a voluntary exercise (Schensul, 1999).

The recordings of the interviews were transcribed and analysed using NVivo, following the steps of content analysis outlined by Weber (1985). The transcript of each interview was coded independently by two coders until saturation where no new themes emerged. Two coders were used to ensure the reliability of the coding framework. Where there was disagreement between the coders, a third rater was employed to finalize the coding. Pseudonyms have been provided to ensure anonymity of participants (refer to Table 1).

*Table 1. Participants*

<b>Managers/Employees</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>	<b>Pseudonyms</b>
<b><i>Hotel 1 (H1)</i></b>		
WWID	8	Bradley, Laura, June, Bob, Katy, Lottie Jane, Simon
HRM	1	Alison
Department Manager (DM)	1	Casey
Supervisor	6	Chris Edward, Leo, Sarah, Ruby, George
Colleague	8	Gemma, Ben, Andy, Trish, Doris Charlotte, Floss, Pat
<b><i>Hotel 2 (H2)</i></b>		
WWID	6	Steph, Peter, Helen, Graham, Brandon, Tara
HRM	1	Dan
Department Manager (DM)	1	Barbara
Supervisor	4	Belle, Ryan, Stewart, Frank

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Colleague	6	Andrew, David, Sandra, Adam, Grace, Tina
<b><i>Hotel 3 (H3)</i></b>		
WWID	5	Andrea, Deb, Percy, Anne, Holly
HRM	1	Julia
Department Manager (DM)	1	Anthony
Supervisor	6	Petra, Eamon, Alex, Christine, Tony, Rob
Colleague	10	Max, Henry, Cath, Laren, Rob, Kurt, Rebecca, Olivia, Michelle, Hal

## **Findings**

Findings are displayed in accordance with themes: bridging weak ties; generalised norms of reciprocity; shared mental models; role making and organisational citizenship behaviour.

### ***Bridging weak ties***

The research found evidence of initial ‘weak ties’ within H1 and H3 as participants had either no experience of working with WWID prior to their present occasion or WWID and colleagues had not found interests in common with each other prior to their employment:

*‘The stewarding trainer did my shifts with me but we didn’t get on so they moved me to the café.’* (Bradley, WWID – H1)

*‘I was scared I would get treated differently.’* (Andrea, WWID – H3)

These ‘weak ties’ may hinder the relationship between management and employees and impact on organisational performance. Indications of bridging these ‘weak ties’ were found within all levels of employment at each hotel.

*‘They play cricket with us, it means we can talk to them about similar things when we are at work. Getting on with them makes it easier to do our team jobs’* (Andy, Colleague – H1)

*‘I go to the cinema with my buddy and her family. She makes me feel comfortable at work so I can do my job’* (Helen, WWID – H2)

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The research indicates that the use of teamwork assisted in the integration of WWID into the 'in group' of the workplace as WWID and colleagues are able to interact on a daily basis:

*'Everyone gets on well and we all go out together. It makes me feel part of I and that I belong somewhere.'* (Laura, WWID – H1)

### ***Generalised norms of reciprocity***

The research found examples of reciprocity between colleagues and WWID within all three hotel sites.

*'It is very easy to ask for help or ask if anyone else needs it. I always help if my team needs me. It's something I like to do for them. It means we are closer as a team'*  
(Laura, WWID - H1)

*'We are all in the team so yes we help everyone.'* (Adam, Colleague – H2)

There were areas where reciprocity was lacking, especially between supervisor and WWID levels at H2.

*'The supervisor is better than the old one but he still doesn't tell us things or help when we ask.'* (Katy, WWID – H1)

*'Some supervisors are nice and some supervisors don't help at all'* (Brandon, WWID – H2)

### ***Shared mental models***

The research found that each site aimed to create a shared perception of the organisation in order to strengthen the inclusive organisational climate to foster employee performance.

*'Everyone in the department is very supportive of all workers with a disability. One of our mottos is to always help others, it's something the hotel is very proud of. We are a service industry so helping others is our speciality.'* (Anthony, DM – H3)

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These similar perceptions of the workplace and performance expectations were evident in examples of effective teamwork.

*'The department has a good feeling, everyone is supportive and helpful. Its like a family, that I fit in where most places I feel like I don't' – (Anne, WWID - H3)*

The success of this differed slightly between each hotel, however all were positive.

*'We have an employee of the month where colleagues vote for each other and they always get a mention' (Chris, Supervisor - H1)*

*'The majority of people have experienced the feeling of being left out at some point so they don't want anyone to feel the same.' (Alex, Supervisor - H3)*

### **Role making**

The role of WWID varied at the hotel sites, the majority worked back of house in housekeeping, with little interaction with guests. WWID were aware of their job tasks either at interview or on their first day.

*'I talked to the manager so I knew what the job was like and wanted to work there.'*  
(Simon, WWID - H1)

*'They (the supervisors) made sure I was happy doing the different tasks and I got to practice before they left me to do it myself.'* (Brandon, WWID – H2)

Management levels at each hotel site were active in tailoring WWID job tasks to the abilities of the WWID, ensuring increased productivity.

*'It's important to make sure they are comfortable with what they are doing, that makes them perform better.'* (Casey, DM – H1)

*'It would be unfair to employ someone with a disability just to reach our targets then get them to polish glasses.'* (Barbara, DM – H2)

### **Organisational citizenship behaviour**

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Each hotel site showed a commitment to creating positive citizenship behaviour that included WWID within the workplace climate.

*'It's important to normalise their interaction so they don't feel different or the staff don't treat them differently.'* (Casey, DM - H1)

*'I think the hotel does a good job, we are all proud to say we work with workers with disabilities, who are exceptional employees.'* (Edward, Supervisor – H3)

WWID at H1 and H3 were thankful of positive organisational citizenship behaviour, such as colleague and supervisor support for complete their job tasks.

*'He's [supervisor] always there to answer questions and help if I'm struggling.'*  
(Bradley, WWID – H1)

*'Everyone is supportive, even from other departments, you get to know a lot of people.'* (Deb, WWID –H3)

*'All the supervisors are helpful and I wouldn't hesitate getting help from them.'* (Jane, WWID – H1)

## ***Discussion***

Our study suggests that by creating a socially inclusive climate through the internal social structure, organisations can foster performance in social minority groups such as WWID.

This section will explore in detail the relationships between the concepts highlighted in this study.

### ***Social identity and performance***

Evans and Davis (2005) suggest the social structure of an organisation may effect employee and organisational performance by creating an inclusive social climate to foster innovation, colleague relationships and performance. For example, in H2 supervisors note a lack of performance from some WWID, however this could be due to the lack of support and

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motivation received by supervisors as indicated by WWID and colleagues. Inclusive HR policies such as teamwork can initiate a social climate of trust, co-operation and common language (Collins and Smith, 2006) which can induce perceptions of belongingness in WWID, increasing effective commitment to reinforce increased performance (Harmon et al., 2003, Wright and Snell, 1991, Barney, 1995). The findings suggest that managers are often 'identity conscious' as supervisors and colleagues demonstrated the need to support WWID further due to their disability (Kulkarni, 2016), we posit that this may assist WWID in their job roles, further supporting performance.

### ***Management support and performance***

Findings indicate that performance measures are the same for all employees but previous research has suggested that future performance expectations are lower for WWID than other employees, hampering the possible development of WWID (Ren, Paetzold, and Colella., 2008). Our findings also suggest that supervisors may give WWID easier performance targets, negating any true measures of performance (Colella, DeNisi, and Varma, 1997). Negative performance and suppression was evidenced at H2, which may result in decreased performance and increased turnover. Hogg (2001) and Abrams and Hogg (2004) advocate that social identity theory can be linked to leadership styles and management practices to increase employee belonging and empowerment to encourage organisational performance (Bernstein et al., 2015). In H1 and H3, our study found that WWID belong to supportive teams, which encourages their performance. The attitudes and behaviours of managers implementing team practices (Piening et al., 2014, Boxall and Purcell, 2008) work as mediating roles in building the belongingness, commitment and performance of WWID. However, this research brings into question the motivations of management to encourage employee performance. Colleagues at H2 indicated that management levels are more concerned about meeting targets and showcasing corporate social responsibility initiatives.

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The research highlights contradictions of HRM that presumes management is a social process and suggests organisations focus on employee performance for economic benefit rather than the welfare of employees, including WWID.

### **Theoretical contributions**

This paper contributes to literature through extending Evans and Davis' (2005) internal social structure framework to include minority groups, in this case WWID. We further contribute by suggesting that organisational social structures and inclusive managerial practices should be utilised in parallel with each other to create a socially inclusive climate for such minority groups. Through organisations social structures and inclusive managerial practices, WWID socially identify with the workplace climate, perceiving inclusion within the workplace (Spataro, 2005). WWID identification can then increase WWID belongingness and motivate them to perform, thus contributing to team and organisational performance (Santuzzi and Waltz, 2016).

Moreover, we agree with Hutchinson et al., (2017) that management views of disability are critical to workers experiences in perceiving inclusion within the workplace. We argue that managers are critical to WWID performance as they are often the conduit to workplace inclusion (Randel et al., 2016). Our study has demonstrated that supervisors are often crucial to WWID inclusion, rather than senior managers due to their close proximity to WWID. They take on a mediating role and often moderate WWID performance by being too kind, or sometimes too harsh, yet they are crucial for the success of WWID workplace inclusion, performance and consequent identity. The processes by which this happens are evidenced through inclusive social practices and interventions such as the buddy system (Meacham et al., 2017). A buddy system allows WWID to interact on a daily basis with a team member, allowing them to develop in their job role and to integrate into the organisation through the social ties previously made by their buddy. The use of team processes, such as

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daily meetings allows WWID to socialise with their wider team members and to integrate themselves into the group tasks for the day. Our results show that the internal social structure of an organisation can impact the social identification process for marginalised groups, in this case WWID. Creating a socially inclusive climate through Evans and Davis' (2005) internal social structure framework allows organisations to understand and influence the social identification process of WWID to foster inclusion and increase performance.

### **Practical Implications**

As identified in this study, managers and colleagues who are proactive in providing support for WWID, clearly enhance the inclusion of WWID, which may foster high performance. We acknowledge that conditions are not always in support of WWID and in particular negative attitudes of supervisors in this study were found to have an adverse affect on WWID inclusion. Focus should be placed on middle manager level to educate and improve approaches towards WWID, which will hopefully lead to improved inclusion and performance.

In view of increasing WWID performance, we suggest that immediate supervisors focus on understanding and acting on individual's performance needs. Tailored and continuous performance management practices should encourage opportunities for growth, thus inciting WWID performance. Performance management should be underpinned by building inclusive internal social structures between WWID, colleagues and their supervisor. We propose re-designing the performance management process, creating a continuous assessment and coaching style for WWID to fit individual WWID needs to foster high performance. WWID should be integrated into the social structures and teams of organisations to foster perceptions of inclusion and therefore performance. This can be achieved, as mentioned in the findings through buddy schemes, where WWID are assigned a 'buddy' from within their team to provide informal support and socialisation into the team.



### **Limitations and future research**

Further theoretical investigation is recommended into specific elements of the theoretical framework of Evans and Davies (2005). It is suggested that each theme (e.g. bridging weak ties/shared mental models) could be researched individually to identify the composition of each in relation to WWID inclusion and to identify whether one theme is more critical than others to WWID performance. Further research should also be completed on the direct supervisor-WWID relationship to determine supervisor effects on inclusion and performance levels. Therefore, based on our findings our paper calls for HR approaches to managing WWID underpinned by internal social structures and social inclusion.

Our findings on the importance of workplace inclusion for workers with disabilities support that view that traditional HRM practices that have been shown to influence performance, such as training and teamwork, should not solely be researched (Soltis et al., 2018). Inclusion and identity in the workplace can be a crucial factor in encouraging performance for minority groups, such as workers with disabilities. Therefore, we call for further research into the inclusion-performance relationship for diverse groups.

### **Conclusion**

Organisations need to be more aware of internal social structures as inclusive support mechanisms for WWID. This study has shown that organisations internal social structures can foster inclusion amongst WWID and further promote performance. We challenge organisations to identify these social structures and utilise them positively to support and include WWID. We propose that organizations develop key inclusion and performance strategies, such as teamwork and mentoring along with supervisor development programs to support inclusion of WWID. Additionally, the involvement of WWID in job centred

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decision-making will assist individual performance. By ensuring these social systems of inclusion are in place, WWID will perform, contributing fully to the organisation.

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