Identity Work:

Processes and Dynamics of Identity Formations

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Abstract

Our aim is to elucidate a position that takes identity to be dynamic and changeable over time and to propose a conceptualisation that provides a way of mapping alternative imperatives and opportunities for *identity work*. It is argued that dynamic identity is inherently complex, being constructed through interaction between the self and others. These interactive activities are conceptualised as 'identity work' (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). We regard an understanding of identity work to be significant both for the theorizing of identity and for those who work and manage in organisations, particularly where the organisational situation is itself dynamic.

Key words

Identity work, dynamics, change

People-Oriented Change and Identity

The pace and extent of change in public sector organisations are acknowledged to be fast and deep. These changes are driven by a number of intentions, not least the desire for enhanced service provision whilst simultaneously creating greater efficiencies. Although such changes can be affected through systems and process alterations, typically the major impacts are on (and achieved through) the employees (Michie and West, 2004). In a sense, this insight is nothing new and the connections between public sector service provision improvements, efficiency savings and the impact on people have been recognised for some time (Harrison et al, 1989; Pollitt, 1990; Legge, 1995). This is not only significant theoretically, but also in practice. For many staff working in the public sector new drives for efficiency, culture change and organisational development initiatives come on top of a long series of previous initiatives. The reaction of staff to change is therefore complex and context-laden.

Our purpose here is to explore an aspect of the complex context of public sector change: namely the impacts of change on identity and the reciprocal impacts of identities on change. We will argue that identity does not have to be conceptualised as those traits in the self or the organisation which remain intact over time (Ford and Ford, 1994), but that it can be understood as being dynamic and sometimes fragmentary. Such an understanding can be particularly productive when applied to change-ful situations, both in terms of theoretical development and in terms of practical implications. Our aim is to further the debate on the nature of identity dynamics and the processes, or 'identity work' (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003), through which people construct their identities and those of others.

Legge (1995) argued that in order for organisations to both constrain costs and enhance outcomes, change needs to positively impact on the commitment and flexible approach of staff. This view is borne out by the research on the efficaciousness of people-oriented change. Where this can be managed in such a way that commitment is enhanced then strongly positive impacts on organisational performance have been measured in both profit-making and non-profit making sectors (Huselid, 1995; Delaney and Huselid, 1996; Becker and Huselid, 1999). However, as Legge (1995) warned, and others have subsequently reported (Guest and Conway, 2000; Guest, 2004), such change can have a mixed impact on commitment and performance of individuals. For some, particularly those who are able to exercise choice in the nature and flexibility of their work (Aronsson and Goransson, 1999), positive correlations have been found. However, in other circumstances, the managerial attempts to make change can be regarded as rhetorical practices that are manipulative and derogatory (Carter and Jackson, 2004) and hence negative outcomes can ensue.

Whilst in the literature there is considerable debate concerning the impact of various HRM practices, training and culture management, relatively little attention is paid to the identity aspects of people-performance oriented change. This is not to say that it is ignored entirely. There are clear linkages to issues such as 'reduced status distinctions' (Pfeffer and Veiga, 1998) and the psychological contract (Guest and Conway, 2000) but linkages between these findings and conceptualisations of identity tend not to be overt. Michie and West (2004) trace the linkages between work context, people management practices, psychological consequences for employees, their subsequent behaviour and the organizational performance in the UK health service. They report findings of strong correlations between factors which

amongst others include inter-group relations and job roles and outcomes for employees, such as satisfaction and commitment levels. These outcomes are linked to organizational performance in terms of patient care. The factors such as inter-group relations and roles relate to identity issues, but, as with other literature in the field, identity issues are not the central to the analysis.

An example in which identity is treated as a central concept in the theorizing of individual-organizational performance outcomes is the work of Dick et al (2004). They found, in a large study of German banks, that there were linkages between the strength of identification with a group, the self-esteem derived from membership, and consequent higher job satisfaction and lower turnover. The argument is that where group membership adds to employees' social identity they are more likely to think and act on behalf of the group. The 'group' in this sense would include the organization. This research extends previous work on the association of individuals and organisations such as that of Fiol (2002).

Our interest, however, is in a dynamic form of identity under which concept the measurement of correlations between identification and satisfaction/performance is not a possibility. When identity is conceived as dynamic and fragmented (Thomas and Linstead, 2002) there is an increase in the complexity both of theorising identity impacts and of ascertaining lessons for practice. However, we will argue that such an approach is both necessary and beneficial. Within public sector organisations, identities can be constructed, and realised, through a variety of modes – the individual, the group, the profession, the interest group and the hierarchical group amongst others. The manner in which these identities are formed, and the way that different identities interact, can have a dramatic impact on the effectiveness of the

organisation, and on the lives of those who work in, and receive services from, public sector organisations.

In the next section of the paper we will elucidate the concept of identity dynamics which we regard as being most useful in this area of theorising. Following this, we will explore some of the theoretical constituents of identity work.

Identity Dynamics

Social and collective identities have been a focus of research in organisation studies for some time (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). Many studies of social identity have focused on stability (Gioia and Thomas, 1996), however, there is now an increasing interest is in the dynamics of identities as they impact on in-group members' interpretations of themselves, others and their social situation. We are concerned with such interpretations as they impact on actions which are perceived by others, and so constitute an input into the interpretative processes of those others. Theorising on identity dynamics has drawn upon interactionist theory (Hatch and Schultz, 2002; Mead, 1934), and social construction approaches (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 1999) in focusing on identity as emerging from interaction between individuals, their groups and their experience of the social world. Social identity is regarded as both a product, and a producer, of interaction and interpretation.

Interpretation and interaction are multi-layered because identification with social groups incorporates emotional and value dimensions as well as behavioural and cognitive aspects (Haslam et. al., 2003). A way in which people cope with this multi-

layered complexity is by telling themselves the 'story of themselves' which develops over time to absorb new events in life and sensemaking about the self. Czarniawska (1997), like Giddens (1991), argued that the production identity is an endeavour through which people develop coherent biographical narratives of the self or the collective. These narratives of identity may be fairly stable in some social situations (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002), but in change-oriented situations, for example where a new occupational identity is introduced, there is likely to be increased 'identity work' in which groups marshal and deploy discursive resources in order to make sense of their place in the social world and to achieve their ends (Widdicombe and Wooffitt, 1995). For example, under threat of imposed change, a group might use its technical or professional discourse to reinforce boundaries and maintain its position. We are particularly interested in how people occupy and develop their roles in their identity narratives. Previous studies (e.g. Turnbull, 2001; Collinson, 2003) have identified a variety of roles that people can create and adapt in particular situations. We are interested to discover not only what roles people develop, but also to better understand the interactive mechanisms through which this occurs and the impacts that they have.

Given that we are interested in identity *dynamics*, there is a link between the theories of identity and recent theories of change. Change programmes can have unintended consequences (Mueller et. al., 2004) and changes can, in effect, take on a life of their own (Chia, 1999). This may be especially the case where changes impact on the self and collective identities of the people involved. For example, although the introduction of lay-workers to supplement the activities of professionally qualified workers is often presented as a form of modernisation in which the strictures of hierarchy are reduced and a new flexible approach can be fostered

(Gaston and Alexander, 2001; Parker, et. al. 1998), it can actually involve an increased focus on the division of labour (Collinson, 2003). Any assumption that such changes can be managed relatively straightforwardly appears to be erroneous. Although management might institute policies and practices with a particular set of outcomes in mind, the way these are then enacted and made sense of can entail many other possible outcomes. In order to understand such dynamics it is necessary to go beyond measuring factors such as HRM practices and training. What is significant at the micro level is the sense that people make of such practices, and how they fit their perceptions into their ongoing narrative of self. For example, the same training event might be seen variously as enlightening, patronising, overdue or underdone depending on the perspective of the individual workers. Hence, generalising about the impact of the training event could misrepresent the experienced reality of different people. If change is to be managed effectively, an understanding of sensemaking at the micro level is necessary. Without it, there is a danger that managerial activities would be targeted at an average-generalisation which does not feel real to the people involved.

Although 'change' is perhaps one of the most widely researched topics in management and organisation research, Orlikowski (1996) argues that change itself has remained largely backstage in a subject dominated by questions of stability. Similarly, Tsoukas and Chia (2002) are critical of studies which focus on states of organisation, rather than the process that occur in between such states. Their work points towards a more changeful focus in research, where change is seen as the norm rather than the exception in organisational life. Indeed, repeated and stable patterns of behaviour are increasingly seen as 'accomplishments' (Feldman, 2000) which we strive to attain in order to buffer ourselves from the disorienting effects of

continual change. This perspective on organisational 'becoming' (where change is the norm and organisation is merely a point of perceived stability), casts new light on change situations.

Identity Work

Identity work is defined by Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) as the processes of "forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness" (2003:1165). There is an extent to which identity work can be conscious, and consciousness tends to be raised when there is a degree of self-doubt and self-openness which arise during encounters with others, perceptions of others, systems and objects.

Creed and Scully's (2000) study of workplace encounters provides an example of such conscious identity work. They build on Goffman's (1961, 1969) concept of social encounters in which people perform in such a way as to "announce and enact who they are" (2000: 391). This may include the use of visible 'identity triggers'. Visible triggers can include a range of possibilities. For example, Pratt and Rafaeli (1997) trace the importance of dress in a hospital setting: "Patients who wear pyjamas, and see hospital garb around them think of themselves as sick. If they and their caretakers wear street clothes, patients will start to think of themselves as moving out of the sick role, and into rehabilitation" (1997: 862). The speaker of this quotation is a senior nurse who goes on to say that this approach to rehabilitation is what makes them unique – hence making a strong identity claim. For other professional groups the wearing of "scrubs" is a significant identity claim of difference from patients, something that is particularly important because of the

intimacy of the encounters between patients and health professionals: "we deal with their bodily fluids, and get their slime all over us ..." (2000: 862). So, in these encounters the reinforcing or dissolving of identity categories can be strongly symbolised through dress. The physical realisation of identity is, perhaps more fundamentally, expressed through embodiment. Trethewey (1999) explored the bodily implications of being a professional, and in particular the way that women's bodies are constituted and disciplined. One aspect of this is that the modern professional female is "fit not fat" (1999: 430). The data indicated that fitness was equated with 'being in control' and exemplifying a healthy lifestyle, both of which were required of female professionals. This was reinforced through employment selection and subsequent socialisation within peer groups.

Identity work also occurs in less physical, but nonetheless observable ways. For example, Fineman (1997) shows how the espousal of particular moral positions by expressing particular arguments identified managers as appropriately or insufficiently 'green'. Coupland (2001) traces how new organisational members produce verbal accounts of events and themselves in such a way as to create a perception of similarity to other employees, or difference, or sometimes both similarity and uniqueness.

Alvesson (1994) has shown how people regulate their professional identities by having the right 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1979), that is, the ability to fit in with conventions and regulations through the display of verbal symbols. Habitus is regarded as the internal disposition which creates the basis for successful action within a culture. Acquired over time, the quality of habitus takes on the appearance of naturalness, instinct or habit. For example, successful advertising agents were

able to display verbal symbols which made credible to potential clients the idea that they had some special 'instincts' which enabled them to communicate more effectively with consumers than 'amateurs' could. Similarly, Watson (2003) shows how strategic managers utilise discursive resources to maintain divisions between self and other, and Thomas and Linstead (2002) explore the discursive activities of middle managers as they seek to identify themselves with a position and status.

Such activities can be constituted in encounters in which people are not consciously engaged in identity work. For example, Creed and Scully (2000) explore interactions in which heterosexual people make casual mention of their husband, wife, boyfriend, girlfriend or partner in the workplace as part of a taken-for-granted way of being. In their study this was contrasted to the experience of gay and lesbian people who experienced stigma because of their sexuality. The heterosexuals in such encounters may not have been intentionally stigmatising the gay and lesbian people, but there was an identity outcome of the encounter nonetheless. More purposeful identity work can occur in what Creed and Scully call 'educative encounters' in which there is a purpose of altering conceptions. However, such efforts can be problematic where (as is usual) there are multiple aspects of identity at play in the encounter and unintended consequences can arise. For example, Creed and Scully analyse an educational encounter between two women, emphasising their shared womanhood which goes wrong when one reveals that she is a lesbian, and the other, who asserts herself as the "keeper of a social identity" (2000: 406) reveals herself to be homophobic. The purposeful identity work of asserting a shared group membership in this case accidentally led to revealing identity information that resulted in a much higher degree of separation than had previously been the case.

Complexity in Identity Work

Identity work is not only how people categorise themselves and are categorised by others. It is also concerned with how the images and representations (physical, symbolic, verbal, textual and behavioural) become imbued with meaning and are taken as culturally-embedded. Identity claims that are made can be accepted, rejected, ignored, or remain unrecognised. Whatever the response, in an encounter with others, one is likely to make a judgment about the robustness of an identity claim on the basis of the reaction of others, and so interaction is fundamental to such identity work (Hatch and Schultz, 2002). However, identity work is rarely as simple as a one-to-one encounter (even though such encounters are themselves frequently intrinsically complex). Representations of self and identity claims are made within social settings which strongly influence what is 'allowable' in the performance of self (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Cultural and normative control mechanisms socialise people into adhering to particular forms of body (Trethewey, 1999), dress (Pratt and Rafaeli, 1997), language (Coupland 2001) and rules of interaction. However, there are possibilities of 'slippage' and disruption of the norms. It is possible to recognise, challenge and resist categories and boundaries between them. Whilst some people may adopt the norms of a social category, others may resist and others may 'act' – in other words make a pretence of conformity whilst actually resisting in subtle ways. Further, resistance may be partial in the sense of accepting some, but not all, of an identity attribution, or claim-response, by others.

Identity work is often conducted as part of a melange of different identity projects, co-present within the self but distinct and potentially conflicting (Beech and Huxham, 2003). Such identity projects can entail the self as, for example, professional, as

good worker, as woman, as person struggling to be fit and so on. At the same time other identity projects do not originate in the self but have one as a target. So, for example police officers may be construed by others in such a way that there are significant contradictions with their self-perceived performance of self.

An additional complexity is the issue of time. In any particular encounter, there is the shadow of encounters past and the foreshadow of encounters yet to come. In some situations there is a sense in which acceptance into an identity grouping is a moveable target in that the 'exchange currency' which enables the acceptance of identity claims is always already shifted. For example, in a health setting a nursing group on a particular project excluded the managers on the grounds that they did no 'hands-on work', but even though other groups, such as lay-workers, undeniably did hands-on work they were excluded on the basis of being untrained. Other similar nursing groups, who were both trained and did hands-on work were excluded on the basis of their underlying philosophy of care. In short, it seemed that whatever 'currency' one brought to the exchange of identity-claim and response, would or could be constructed as wrong. So, over time, and through encounters with different groups there was a degree of dynamism, which in this case served to preserve the group identity boundaries.

Finally, it is worth noting that in the midst of this melee of multi-sourced activities aimed at diverse identity targets in complex social settings over time, there is also the aspect of what is *not* going on. Elsbach and Bhattacharya (2001) rightly draw our attention to parts of one's identity that is defined by "what you're not" (2001: 393), as people cognitively and emotionally differentiate or 'disidentify' themselves with organisations or other identity groupings. Similarly, Mullaney (2001) identifies

"not doings" (2001: 3) as part of some identity constructions, arguing that 'never identities' form sub-categories of various identities, based on exclusion and those actions which could have, but were not, enacted.

Conceptualising Identity Work: an ongoing project

The aim of this paper was to elucidate a dynamic perspective of identity work and to note some of the implications of this for the management of change in the public sector. We have argued that a range of discursive activities impact on, and are reciprocally acted on, by identity work. Identity work interacts with organisational change as it affects individuals, professions, informal groups and other identities. If change is to be managed effectively it is necessary to have an adequate understanding of these dynamics and their impacts. Given the complexity, it is unlikely that a full and complete understanding can ever be achieved, however, it is possible to have a handle on the processes such that significant problems and issues can be recognised.

We have sought to indicate some of the complexities of identity work. The central issue here is that if those managing organisations either make simplistic assumptions about identity processes, or do not have these processes 'on their radar' then their efforts to change and improve things will be likely to run into, and cause, problems of identity dynamics. One way of mapping out the different types of identity work (and hence having a short-cut for getting them onto the radar) is to counter-pose the *perception of risk/opportunity* against the *perceived identity resources*. This conceptualisation does not seek to incorporate all the analytical positions expounded

above, but is proposed as one way of making sense of the melee of identity work. Figure 1 illustrates the conceptualisation.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Identity resources are things that can be used to establish or maintain an identity position. Examples include: hard-to-access status; restricted access to discursive resources; acknowledged skill or expertise; ability to position self in, and influence, networks. For example, an identity as a professional accountant offers resources as it is hard to qualify and gain professional status, only qualified accountants can undertake certain activities (such as signing off accounts), members of the profession have acknowledged expertise and individuals operate from a position in a professional network. Key resources encompassed in the theory reviewed above include discursive resources such as the right to an identity-category name (e.g. accountant, strategic manager, hands-on carer etc), the ability to use and make pronouncements (for example, professionally qualified health workers can make judgements about service users that lay-workers are not permitted to) and the use of symbols (for example, 'fit not fat' people might be listened to differently in particular social settings (Trethway, 1999)).

Perceived risk to or opportunity for achieving identity outcomes can provide people with reasons to undertake identity work. For example, if a police officer addressing a community meeting realises that he or she is being constructed as 'the enemy' there is a risk to allowing this perception to continue. Hence there is a motivation to try to alter the perceptions of the community. Opportunities are the 'positive' side of the coin. For example, a professional group might perceive an opportunity to gain status

by allying itself with another, and hence has an incentive to open its boundaries in a particular way. In the literature reviewed above, Creed and Scully (2000) provide an example of settings in which homosexual and heterosexual people act towards each other in order to preserve a sense of self and avoid the risks of being subject to the actions of the 'keeper of the social identity', whereas in other settings 'educative encounters' are possible in which the boundaries between the groups are more permeable and negotiable.

People who have low risk/opportunity and low resource have little reason or ability to engage in identity work. They might be approached by others to bolster their position (for example, adding numbers might allow one to argue that 'a majority are in favour of X'). However, those with low risk.opportunity and low resource are unlikely to be able to initiate or dominate such interactions. People who have low risk/opportunity and high resource have the ability to engage in identity work, but little reason to do so. Engagement might occur where there is a risk/opportunity for others that they care about. They may also be targeted by others to support or initiate identity work on behalf of the other.

People who have high risk/opportunity and low resource have a compelling reason to engage in identity work, but little ability to 'direct' it. They may seek allies elsewhere and other opportunities to gain resources. People who have high risk/opportunity and high resources have a compelling reason and the ability to engage in identity work. They are likely to undertake overt identity work.

This conceptualisation seeks not so much to put people into boxes as to offer a constructive means of 'reading' situations. As a change is introduced, people's

positions might shift on the axes and this could alert managers to potential actions and reactions. Position on the axes is perceived and subjective. Hence, different parties could easily disagree about where both they and others lie. In addition, positions are likely to change over time as people engage in, or are effected by, identity work. Hence, the conceptualisation is not a way of tying things down or objectifying them, rather it is offered as a stimulus to conversations which are attempting to assess the state of play, in the moment, in changeful situations.

Like any conceptualisation it has limitations. Other axes could be chosen which would throw different light on situations. There is the potential with all such models to think of them as '2 x 2' boxes which oversimplify by offering the seductive certainty of mapping through binary choices. We would argue strongly against the temptation to place a thin veneer of certainty over the evident complexities of organisational life. However, to dismiss such analytical devices out of hand, strikes us a something of a missed opportunity. Instead, our view is that using the process of mapping as a stimulus to a creative conversation and paying particular attention to the 'grey areas' between the extremes offers means of focusing on the most interesting areas in both pragmatic and theoretical terms.

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Figure 1: Reasons and Ability to undertake Identity Work

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Compelling reason to engage in identity work, but little ability to 'direct' it

Compelling reason to engage in identity work and ability to 'direct' it

Perceived risk to /opportunity for achieving identity outcomes

Little reason or ability to engage in identity work

Little reason, but high ability to engage in identity work

Lo

Lo

Perceived identity resources

Hi