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# **International Journal of Public Administration Symposium/Special issue Proposal:**

## **Exploring the impacts and processes identity change**

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### **Introduction**

Public sector organizations are being subjected to unprecedented scrutiny. Structures, processes, roles, remits and performance levels are being reviewed in settings where greater transparency is required and greater accountability is being demanded. A range of innovations such as public private partnerships and the introduction of lay-workers in public sector settings offer the opportunity to explore important theoretical issues whilst striving to improve our understanding of how to make public sector organizations function more effectively.

One key area of research is that of organizational identities. Identities can be constructed and realised in various modes in public sector organisations – the individual, the group, the profession, the interest group and the hierarchical group amongst others. People are also identified by their gender, age, presumed and enacted attitudes, their role(s), behaviours, associated scripts, rituals and symbols. The ways that such identities are formed can have a dramatic impact on the operations and effectiveness of the organisation. In the public sector there is frequently a need to work across organisational boundaries in order to deliver outcomes to service users. Such cross-boundary working introduces a range of identity-related issues such as how decisions should be made, who has responsibility for the service users and how resources should be managed.

The aim of the proposed symposium/special issue would be to further the debate on how such identities are formed and reformed in public sector organizations in order to better understand how to deliver innovation and service improvements.

Indicative questions informing this area of research include:

- Where divergent identities come into contact with each other, how can we understand the processes of interaction and meaning-making?
- What impacts do perceptions of the self and other have on identities?
- What possibilities for action are enabled and constrained through identity processes?
- How can we better understand issues such as the operation of power, agency and meaning through the lens of identity?
- What are the impacts of identity processes on people's abilities to conceptualise and achieve their aims?

And critically,

- How can an understanding of identity dynamics inform the management of change?

## Indicative Theoretical Background

The theoretical background to the symposium would bring together the areas of identity and change. 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 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 the input for the interpretative processes of others. Recent 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 of, and a producer of, interaction and interpretation. We see membership of social groups as incorporating emotional and value dimensions as well as behavioural and cognitive aspects (Haslam et. al., 2003).

Czarniawska (1997), like Giddens (1991), argued that 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 many 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). We are particularly interested in how people occupy and develop these 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 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. Thus, we are interested in developing an understanding of identity processes in such settings is be crucial to managing change more effectively.

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 toward 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.

## A Special Issue of the Journal

In order to make the special issue of the journal attractive we would seek input from an international set of authors. We run the British Academy of Management special interest group on Identity, and in association with this have/will run conference streams on Identity at the following conferences: British Academy of Management, International Critical Management Studies Conference, European Academy of Management. As a result we have a network of international scholars researching identity and change. Although not all are researching in the public sector, a considerable proportion are and we would expect to be able to draw papers from the US, Australia, Scandinavia and Germany as well as the UK.

We would expect to select between 7 – 10 papers for publication.

## Indicative Timetable

Call for Papers:	January 2005
Papers sent for review:	May 2005
Feedback to Authors:	July 2005
Revised papers completed:	October 2005

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