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The dynamic performance of identity work

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Introduction

As a phenomenon socially constructed and performed through relationships (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2004, Cunliffe, 2008, Beech, 2008), self-identity is inextricably dependent on interpersonal interactions and social contexts (Kondo, 1990, Kondrat, 1999, Ybema et al., 2009). Thus "selves and identities are 'performed within relationships', 'done in interactions' and/or 'talked into being'" (Smith and Sparkes, 2008, p.25). As this suggests, identity is *performative* (Butler, 1990, Smith and Sparkes, 2008) and, therefore, *identity work* becomes an important feature of the way in which individuals strive to enact, and become, their identity (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2001, Down and Reveley, 2009).

The literature on identity work continues to expand, and it is noticeable how much variety there is in the instances where identity work is being identified. For some authors it is individual's efforts to position themselves relative to societal or organizational discourses that enables or constrains their identity work (Davies and Thomas, 2008, Mangan, 2009). Others emphasise the interpersonal aspect of trying to gain the other's recognition for a particular identity construction by positioning self relative to other (Down and Reveley, 2009, Beech, 2011). McInnes and Corlett (2012) employ these different treatments to develop a conceptualisation that suggests different identity work 'forms' variously emphasising the degree of constraint or latitude in relational identity positioning or discursive aspects of identity work. What is missing, however, is a consideration of the dynamic and dialectic nature of identity work that emerges out of the shifting discursive relational social context (Thomas and Davies, 2002, Beech, 2008). Our aim in this paper is to address this dynamism, to use the conceptualisation offered by McInnes & Corlett to 'map' the identity work individuals engage in to construct and defend their identities, but also to dispense with the map in order to explore the fissures, schisms and paradoxes in identity opened up through the process of positioning self and other.

Research design

In keeping with our perspective on identity, a discourse analytic approach has been taken (Boje et al., 2004). The paper's empirical data is drawn from a study of individuals moving from diverse professional backgrounds into 'management' roles within a UK local authority and a social housing organisation. Data were gathered in two stages of semi-structured interviews, featuring critical incident technique (Chell, 2004). In the first interview, the research participants reflected on their experiences of 'first' becoming manager and, in the second, gave accounts of contemporary managerial challenges.

The iterative process of data analysis employed Mauthner and Doucet's (1998) voice-centred relational method. Particular attention was paid to the voice of the 'I' as a signal of relational positioning, and to the use of moral terms as indicative of social

context obligations perceived in the interaction. Illustrations, in the full paper, will be selected because they seem to highlight the complex and dynamic interplay of relational identity positionings and social context obligations.

Discussion and Contribution

Our aim in this paper is to trace the dynamic and dialectic nature of identity work, emerging out of and changing within a particular social context. The identity work framework (McInnes and Corlett, 2012) provides an interpretive device for "chart(ing) out the precarious, emergent assemblages of organizing" (Chia, 1995, p.598). The mapping of participant accounts against the framework gives emphasis to the emergent, transient, and contested nature of identity. The visual representation of positionings and movement between the different forms of identity work highlights how an individual's "rhetorical assertions" (Kondo, 1990) and self-other positionings are fleeting, simultaneous and contradictory and are often taken up in the process of resisting, negotiating or submitting to other positionings.

The discussion highlights the rhetorical assertiveness with which individuals perform discursive identity work, by exploring, for instance, a range of constructions along a continuum from the more assertive, indicated by deliberate self or other positioning, through mutually-negotiated, to the less assertive or passive, indicated by forced self-positioning. In addition to focusing attention on relational identity positionings, the social obligations dimension emphasizes that the subject positions offered, claimed or accepted are context dependent, in terms of the local social and cultural milieux.

Furthermore, attention to the different identity work forms and processes leads to the proposal of a refined identity work framework, including two additional forms of identity work, namely resisting and submitting. The refined identity work framework may be used by others as an interpretive device to trace the dynamic movement of self-identity positionings, and to accentuate the inherent tensions and contradictions in identity work processes.

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