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MGC2021
Perfecting Work and Workers:
Organising Identities and
Identification

Laura Visser





In this session we will...

1. Introduce key terms surrounding organisational identity
2. Explore how identities are constructed and reproduced
3. Consider the consequences of the 'idealised' professional self
4. Outline ways in which individuals may negotiate, challenge or subvert organisational identities





2



Hi my name is Jo and

- I'm a Stock Broker
- I'm a Waste Management Consultant
- I work for a charity
- I work for Google





3



Organisational Identity: Resource or not?

- An important concern to managers: 'the modern business of management is often managing the 'insides' – the hopes fears and aspirations – of workers, rather than their behaviors directly' (Deetz, 1995: 87, in Alvesson and Willmott, 2002: 620)
- 'Professional roles are subject to external expectations of incumbents' identities' (Reid, 2015: 998)
- Difficult to fully 'capture', making it a precarious (and precious) managerial resource



Classical Perspectives on Identity

Identity in a classical perspective is...

- Identity as relatively fixed
- Can be controlled by top down organisational processes
- Different aspects of the self contained in different areas of life with little existential conflict
 - e.g. sadistic boss during the day, doting father at night
- Often focuses on dichotomies
 - Introvert/extrovert; reliable/unreliable
 - Example [Big 5 OCEAN personality test](#)



Example of Classical Identity Theory: Social Identity Theory

- Tajfel and Turner, 1986
- Often the basis for normative perspectives surrounding identity at work
- Group attachment important source of esteem and validation
- Based on in-group and out-group concept; In-group focus on negative out-group characteristics
- Identifiers can be controlled/manipulated by managers/organisations

Identity as a Resource

- Identity can be harnessed as a managerial resource
- Resource: Something that can be valued or valued in some way
- 'Heart and Minds'
- Evident in practices surrounding
 - Employee Branding
 - Induction
 - Staff Development
 - Corporate culture initiatives such as [Australian Corporate Games](#)

Employee Branding

- Draws on marketing and consumer techniques and discourses
 - e.g. 'target' recruitment; connection to finite resources
 - A way of creating 'value' to particular corporate identities
- Must be consistent with organisational product or external facing stakeholder experience
- Should be recognisable beyond the firm



Identification

- The extent to which a person draws their sense of self from:
 - Organisational values
 - Occupation
 - Product
- 'managers may promote, more or less self-consciously, a particular form of organisational experience for consumption by employees' (Alvesson and Wilmott, 2002: 621)
- [Example of IBM](#)
 - Recognising heterogeneity but seeks to bind people together
 - Plays against 'social' perceptions of IBM



Challenges with Classical Perspective

- Context rarely seen as important
- Does not consider how new modes of working transform the way we create a working identity
 - Smartphones
 - Global labour market
- Does not reflect the socio-cultural changes that alter identity negotiation and creation
 - Family reconfigurations
 - Social media
- Underestimates identity as a creative and malleable resource (for both employees and organisations)
- Underplays negotiation, contestation and subversion

Critical Perspectives on Identity

Identity Through a Critical Perspective...

- Also referred to as 'self identity' (see Alvesson and Wilmott, 2002: 627)
- The way we see ourselves and others in relation to the world
- Multifaceted (i.e. flows in and out of organisational spaces)
- Seen mainly as a product of various **discursive practices**
 - Ideologies about work
 - Expectations about occupations
 - Socio-cultural message about what work should mean to us
- ...although now a growing concern over materiality

Identity Work

- 'The capacity to keep a particular narrative going' (Giddens, 1991: 54; Watson, 2009: 431)
- A term used to emphasise the ongoing and socially- constructed nature of 'beinghood' in organisations
- Both a **project** and an **achievement**
- Highlights the **effort** required (consciously or unconsciously) to create and maintain identity
- May fluctuate as a form of labour: 'an episode may trigger intensive identity work, in which a particular identity is defended and strengthened against an experienced attack' (Alvesson and Wilmott, 2002: 633)



3. Aspects of Identities from a Critical Perspective

1. Regulating Identity - Alvesson and Willmott (2002)

- Begin by stating classical view, critiquing 'scant regard for how meaning, culture or ideology' play a role in control (p.619)
- Relate **identity regulation** to identity work and self-identity (see p.627 for diagram)

Identity construction as a multifaceted process

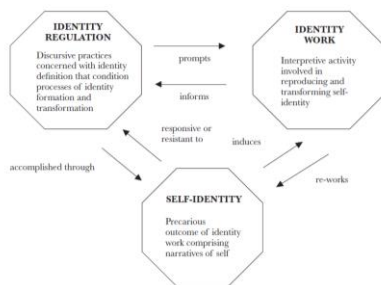


Figure 1. Identity regulation, identity work and self-identity

Alvesson & Willmott, 2002: 627)

1. Regulating Identity - Alvesson and Willmott (2002)

- Begin by stating classical view, critiquing 'scant regard for how meaning, culture or ideology' play a role in control (p.619)
- Relate **identity regulation** to identity work and self-identity (see p.627 for diagram)
- Show 9 ways that highlight 'identity regulation as a pervasive and increasingly intentional modality of organisational control' (p. 622)
- These surround defining, categorizing, constructing knowledge bases, and naturalising norms

The Importance of Discourse and Ideology in Regulating Identity

- Way of creating knowledge
- Concerned with who has the power or 'voice' to name (and speak)
- Reproductive but rarely 'complete' in totalizing worldview (Oswick et al., 2000)
- Fairhurst and Putnam (2004) suggest 3 ways discourse helps to understand organisations
 - Organisations as arenas in which discourse influences outcomes
 - Organisations as phenomena in constant state-of-becoming through discourse
 - Organisations 'anchored' through discursive forms

2. Narrating Identity - The Storied (Organisational) Self

- Narrative very important for identities at work
- All done within arenas of power and politics
- Situating self within post-hoc rationalisation, authentic current self and pre-emptive future
- A range of narrative breaks may require 'repair' (e.g. redundancy, illness, promotion failure)
- 'Management (and others) act, more or less strategically, to introduce, reproduce, influence and legitimize the presence/absence of particular discourses' (Alvesson and Wilmott, 2002: 628)



The Compulsion to Narrate

- Even when boring, there is a [compulsion to narrate](#) work
 - Why is this the case?
 - Why might other people want to watch this?
 - What does this suggest surrounding identity at work?
- Fitting one's own organisational narrative with a corporate narrative also important
 - Situating the self in an organisation's history
 - Being part of something 'bigger'



3. 'Being Yourself': Identity Tensions

- Tension 1
 - On the one hand you want to belong
 - On the other you want to be unique
- Tension 2
 - Work assume to be signature of value or worth
 - Often experienced as boring, negating or marginalising
- Tension 3
 - Want to be perceived as competent and professional
 - Want to be ourselves



3. Being Yourself (Fleming and Sturdy, 2009)

- Study of Australian-based call centre where it was 'fun' to work
- Demonstrates how paradoxical ideas surrounding control/freedom, corporate/self can simultaneously exist
- Suggests a blurring between managerial and organic identities that challenges the idea of an 'authentic' self

This is particularly difficult for those in charge of other people...

- *Managers cannot simply 'be themselves' at work. They have to act as the voice or the face of the corporation. They must be seen as knowledgeable, authoritative and, above all, 'in control'. Yet, at the same time, they must present themselves to others as credible human individuals. Without this they would be unable to establish and maintain the interpersonal relationships upon which successful performance of their jobs depends (Watson, 2008: 122)*



Making 'a professional'

Idealised Identities

- Weberian term 'ideal type'
 - An abstracted hypothetical concept
 - Not meant to signal 'perfection' but rather typical of a given group
 - Do not necessarily exist
- In organisations...
 - Sets an (often subliminal or unspoken) benchmark
 - 'Expectations are personified in the ideal worker image: a definition of the most desirable worker as one who is totally committed to, and always available for his or her work' (Reid, 2015: 997)



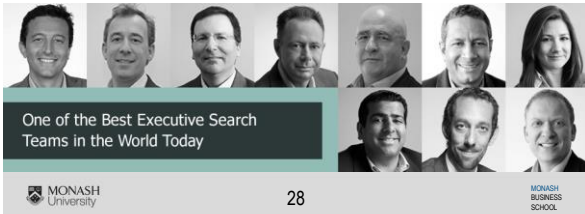
Idealised Identities ctd...

- May include
 - Demographic markers
 - Behaviour
 - Looks
- Can inadvertently marginalise or encourage discrimination
- Example of lecturers
 - Often expectation of male: therefore, those not replicating this expectation may be subliminally penalised in student evaluations
 - Studies include being 'named' in online courses and correlating exam results, promptness and attendance (e.g. Macneil et al., 2014)
 - Gender bias feeds into career disadvantage e.g. promotion
- Occurs in other traditionally gendered occupational settings e.g. medicine; science; engineering



Idealised Identities ctd...

- Can also encourage a reproduction of sameness
- Example: Calibre One, a global executive search (recruitment) company
- 'Looking' for future leaders
- Homosocial elements



Reid (2015): Expected and Experienced Organisational Identities

- Explores how individuals negotiated between **expected** and **experienced** identities in a US consulting firm
- Employees negotiate between these two aspects (to various degrees of success) through various strategies surrounding 'passing' and 'revealing'
- Also suggest that close teams may facilitate balance between work and non work
- Shows the possibility (but also precarity) of straying from the ideal worker image (e.g., gender)



The Aesthetics of Idealised Professionals (more next week)

- Implicitly or explicitly encouraging how employees should look
 - Not always in 'looks' industries e.g. flight attendants
- Often seen as enhancing 'the product'
- Internal socialization important
- Can mean consumption and production becomes blurred, e.g. how sales assistants look (Pettinger, 2004)





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What does society tell us about organisational identities?

What do you want to be when you grown up?

- Where might [these children](#) get their ideas from?
- Are their views important to how **we** think about our jobs?





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Work as a master identifier

- Work becoming the most important source of meaning
- Facilitated by the move to post-industrial society
- Work used to sequester other existential crises (Wilmott, 2000)
- Consequences of redundancy or losing jobs significant
 - Urban legends about dying a week after retirement



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Sociocultural messages about occupational identities

- Despite organisational attempts to move to organisational identities, occupation still important
 - Example: Tattoos (Wicks and Gandy, 2007)
- We often hold latent ideas of what certain jobs 'should' be like
 - E.g. [Sheldon job hunting](#)
 - Exacerbated by the narrowing of social circles due to mobility and educational trajectories
 - These have an impact on how we think about others as more or less 'worthy'
- Occupational expectations (or misunderstandings) also have significant consequences for large organisations

Breaking free (or being broken) by organisational identities

Subverting organisational identity

- 'When exploring processes of organisational identification, it is relevant to temper a focus on the oppressive effects of covert forms of control with consideration of expressions of employee resistance and subversion of such controls' (Alvesson and Wilmott, 2002: 621).
- Instances of 'micro emancipation' often happen daily
- As formal organisational practices, such as culture become more narrow and restrictive, the potential to 'call them out' increases



Subverting organisational identity 1/4: Humour (Rhodes and Westwood, 2008)

- Study of how 'employees, using humour, responded in ways that challenged and subverted the program's promoted meanings' (p.788)
- Observed 13 x 2 hour workshops
- Participants saw political correctness as impinging on 'authenticity' of their identities
- Highlights employees as 'resisting their organisation's attempt to construct proper personas and particular identity locations in a discourse of managerialism' (p. 797)
- Highlights the 'polysemousness of popular culture texts and the variable pleasure sought therein by audiences' (p. 795)

Subverting organisational identity 2/4: Expressions in alternative spheres

- Cut or distance their self/identity from work
 - e.g. developing a professional 'shell'
- May involve reparation work
 - Volunteering on the board of a charity
 - 'Night' job
- Constant performance and severance can be emotionally exhausting
- Possible ethical consequences
 - Making humane decisions
 - Cohesive sense of self
 - Challenges when different worlds collide

Subverting organisational identity 3/4: Exiting

- Changing career or occupation due to misalignment
- Finding somewhere to 'be oneself' becoming the priority for millennials in their career life course
 - Organisations often in a double bind of being more flexible but also providing 'strong' sense of identity
- May involve more radical departure to different model of work
 - Beyond a capitalist mode of logic

Subverting organisational identity 4/4: Whistleblowing

- Turning on your organisation
- Almost always because of moral/ethical reasons
- Societal sympathy for this practice
 - Also legislative



The ultimate subversion – or submission?
Corporate Suicides (Cederstrom and Fleming, 2012: 55)

'With its magnificent rooftop garden overlooking central London, the French restaurant Coq d'Argent is, as a Time Out review has it, 'an obvious recommendation for people seeking a special occasion venue'. Two days before his 25th birthday, on July 9th, 2009, Anjoal Malde, dressed in his favourite Hugo Boss suit, added a new twist to this description as he jumped off the eight story roof with a glass of champagne in his hand. He was a stock-broker at Deutsche Bank. On the morning of his suicide, his employer had deleted his Bloomsbury account. He was also asked to leave early, not to interfere with an inquiry into an IT matter. No other details were made public. While his death was not the first in a series of banker suicides, it was arguably the most spectacular. 'He went out in style' as his family is reported to have said'.

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K2y_QnFTB7o
(Up in the air)

Liminal identities (Beech et al, 2016; Beech, 2011)

- Liminality: spaces of being in-between identities
- Often occurs in times of organisation change
- As such, identity not always stable + people take on different approaches to constructing their identities

Next week's preparation....

- Next week's lecture: Bodies at Work, Bodies that Work, and Working Bodies. Before the lecture, read Angela Trethewey's (1999) Disciplined bodies: Women's embodied identities at work. *Organization Studies*, 20(3), 423-450.
- Next week's tutorial (Week 3): Come to class having chosen two short excerpts where people talk about or mention their work, job or career from www.humansofnewyork.com (you can also access this via Facebook) or <https://www.facebook.com/womenofsiliconvalley/>. Also reflect on the objective of the website and how the medium of photos and short stories contributes to achieving this objective.

References (in addition to rec. reading)

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