



## ‘She has received many honours’: Identity construction in article bio statements

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### A B S T R A C T

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In contrast to the prescribed anonymity of the research article, the bio which accompanies it is perhaps the most explicit assertion of self-representation in scholarly life. Here is a rhetorical space where, in 50–100 words, authors are able to craft a narrative of expertise for themselves. It is a key opening for academics, both novice and experienced, to manage a public image through the careful recounting of achievement. Yet despite the current interest in identity, the bio has largely escaped attention. In this paper we address this neglect through analysis of 600 bios across three disciplines, exploring the importance of discipline, status and gender in mediating the ways writers claim an identity. Our argument is that, despite its brevity, the bio is an important means of representing an academic self through the recognition of collective values and membership.

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### 1. Introduction

While identity is implicated in every interaction, the biographical statement which accompanies a research article is probably the most explicit assertion of self-representation in scholarly life. Its juxtaposition to the prescribed anonymity of the article itself only serves to highlight the opportunity it offers writers to construct a disciplinary aligned presence and shape a professionally credible self. The near ubiquity of the genre suggests that readers are interested in knowing more about the person behind the words in an article and that publishers are prepared to indulge them. Here we find a rhetorical space where, in 50–100 words, authors are able to reflexively craft a narrative of expertise for themselves, albeit within tight constraints. The bio, then, is a key opening for academics to manage a public image through the careful recounting of achievement. It is an opportunity to make a claim for a particular identity.

Despite the current massive interest in identity, the bio is an unsung and disregarded genre which has largely escaped the notice of discourse analysts. We know little, for example, of its typical structure or the language writers use to present themselves in it. Do established celebrities construct the genre in the same way as novices? Is there a common pattern of self-representation across disciplines? Do male and female academics do things the same way? In this paper we address these questions, offering an account of the biographical statement by drawing on 600 bios in three disciplines. This account, we hope, will assist teachers seeking to offer pedagogic support to students and, beyond this consciousness-raising value, contribute to the growing research on academic identity. More specifically, by comparing authors’ systematic choices in this genre, we reveal how linguistic resources help to construct both disciplines and individuals.

In what follows we first outline the understanding of identity which underpins the paper before going on to describe and analyse our corpus. Our main claim is that, despite its brevity, the bio is an important means of representing an academic self. Here academics construct themselves as credible researchers, build a relationship with others and signal allegiances.

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## 2. Identity and community discourses

Research on academic writing has long stressed the connection between writing and the creation of an author's identity (e.g. Ivanic, 1998). Identity is defined by the actions of the writer in the text: what the writer *does*. It is said to be implicated in the texts we engage in and the linguistic choices we make, thus relocating it from the private to the public sphere, and from hidden processes of cognition to its social and dynamic construction in discourse. For many, identity is a *performance* (e.g. Butler, 1990) constructed through interaction, while others see it as the product of dominant discourses tied to institutional practices (e.g. Foucault, 1972). What this work stresses, however, is that identity is not something achieved in isolation but is part of a social and collective endeavour: it is not simply a matter of personal choice. We cannot just be whoever we want to be. While questions of agency, and the extent to which individuals are able to carve out an independent and creative self from the constraints of particular contexts and discourses remain controversial, the identities we seek to project need confirmation in the responses and recognition of others (e.g. Jenkins, 2008).

Put more directly, identities are constructed out of the rhetorical options our communities make available, so that we gain credibility as members and approval for our performances by aligning our discursual choices with those of our social groups. We *position* ourselves in relation to others using these discourses and in turn are positioned by these same discourses (e.g. Davies & Harré, 1990). Community Discourses, and their social ideologies, thus assist the performance of identities by providing broad templates for how people see and talk about the world. Constraints and contexts matter, and individual actions and responses are part of a social order that encourages some actions and proscribes others.

This doesn't mean that we are prisoners of our social groups. The idea of 'positioning' offers a way of seeing how language can represent people in particular ways and, at the same time, how it can be used to negotiate new positions. While we become who we are only in relation to others, adopting the modes of talk that others routinely use, identity also means assembling the elements of a communicative performance which shape our interpretations of these discourses. In sum, both similarity and difference, communality and individuality, are socially constructed.

## 3. Bios and representation of self

Following the pioneering work by Goffman (1971), there is now considerable interest in how individuals self-consciously manage the impression they give of themselves to valued others. Some of this interest takes the form of analysing the ongoing discourse of interacting participants, using the methods of Critical Discourse Analysis (e.g. Billig, 1999), Conversation Analysis (e.g. Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998) or Corpus Analysis (Hyland, 2010).

A great deal of identity research, however, focuses on what people say about themselves in formal interviews with academics (e.g. Block, 2006; Wortham & Gasden, 2006). This approach is essentially an autobiographical reconstruction which allows subjects to reconceptualise their actions as representing a coherently motivated picture of continuity without implying an unchanging essentialism. This reflects Giddens' (1991) view that self and reflexivity are interwoven, so that identity is not the possession of particular character traits, but the ability to construct a reflexive narrative of the self. Clearly this approach is profoundly social and emphasises the subject's continual interpretation and reinterpretation of experience through a cultural lens. But it is also highly contrived. Most of the time we are not performing identity work by narrating stories of ourselves to complete strangers from the local university but presenting ourselves through our understandings and re-workings of available cultural resources.

The kinds of narratives produced for interviewees are self-conscious and reflective assemblings of experience for the purpose of constructing an identity in a relatively formal and low-stakes context. Such interviews preserve anonymity and there is little evidence that they have significance for the participant or consequences beyond the event itself. It would seem preferable, then, to capture the same kinds of deliberately constructed identity claims where the elicitation is not the motive for the telling. This means examining identity claims in contexts which matter to individuals. Generally, however, identity work is going on while we are engaged in doing something else, in academic environments these are things like giving a presentation, teaching a class, or writing a paper.

A more mundane way of doing autobiographical work is found in the short personal bio statements which accompany research articles. Bios are naturally occurring texts constructed for a genuine purpose; a site where academics stake a claim to a certain version of themselves for their peers and institutions. This is a genre which requires a self-conscious and public recounting of a professional persona that fits both who they want to present themselves as being and the relatively constrained format that is available to them. Authenticity demands that the text is fashioned from the resources that the genre and the discipline make available, using language and aspects of autobiography that are recognisably appropriate and effective for the purpose at hand. Admittedly this is a fashioning of the self accomplished through relatively formulaic means, but it avoids a researcher-produced accounting and offers a conception of identity located in disciplinary realities.

The notion of 'identity claim' (e.g. Kiely, Bechhofer, Stewart, & McCrone, 2001) is important here as it leaves open the nature of the subjective experience. The bio implies no inner psychological states or unvarying personal commitment and says little about whether the identity presented is deeply held or lightly worn. It simply connects how people want to be seen with concrete instances of language. The aspects of self that writers elect to include in this genre and how they chose to express these offer insights into the dynamic between a conception of what he or she holds to be important *in this context* and points to the kinds of identities which are likely to be recognised and approved by disciplinary peers. It is, then, a way of exploring personal identities and disciplinary values. We turn now to our study and the ways bio authors rhetorically

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