The temporal becoming self—towards a *Ricoeurian* conceptualization of identity

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ABSTRACT

To enrich conceptually the study of identity work, the paper directs attention to how identity-self constitutes in individuals' interactions and relationships. By using a narrative approach that includes Ricoeur's notions of *idem* and *ipse*, it elevates temporal dynamics of identity work with reference to the becoming aspect of the individual self in relation to the other. *Idem* identity denotes sameness and permanence through time and space, and *ipse* identity concerns selfhood in the sense of change and interrupted continuity. As pointed out, a *Ricoeurian* conceptualization of identity helps to extend our understanding of practical actions beyond individual character and traits. In consideration of both concordance and discordance in narrative structure, this conceptualization suggests a middle way between stability and variability, refraining us from relying on a narrative that pre-supposes a linear plot based on a causal-type model of occurrences to construct and maintain a stable and coherent personal identity.

1. Introduction

The growing interest in personal identity in organization and management studies has contributed insights into various discursive forms, such as autobiography, everyday conversation, narrative and storytelling, through which individuals craft and sustain their identities. By directing attention to identity work, studies demonstrate that identity is socially constructed and communicated through language (e.g. Beech, Gilmore, Cochrane, & Greig, 2012; Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004; Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006; Watson, 2008). Particularly with a focus on narrative identity work it is contended that people render their working lives meaningful through self-narratives, combating vulnerabilities and insecurities that may result from organizational change, for example (e.g. Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Malett & Wapshott, 2012; Snow & Anderson, 1987; Thornborrow & Brown, 2009; Watson, 2009).

Although identity work scholars illustrate how people create meaning and make identity claims as a way of anchoring the self, there is still a need for studies that highlight temporal dynamics of identity in relation to self (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; McInnes & Corlett, 2012) with more theoretical and empirical light shed on identity work through a focus on process (Ainsworth & Grant, 2012). The term 'identity work' emphasizes change but largely renders implicit reliance on temporal dynamics with social processes implicated in identity formation described as 'recursive, reflexive, and constantly "under

construction"' (Ybema et al., 2009, p. 301). Temporal dynamics is rather a question of balancing external and internal aspects of identity in relation to personal and social identities (Kreiner et al., 2006; Watson, 2008) and is also examined through a focus on the relationships between role, identity and self (Snow & Anderson, 1987). In studies more geared towards the fragmentation of identity, identity work is often seen as a way of dealing with various versions of the self and verifying self in response to others (Clarke, Brown, & Hailey, 2009; Down & Reveley, 2009) without explicitly reflecting on temporal dynamics.

In supplement to existing research on identity work, the aim of this paper is to make temporal dynamics more explicit, elevating the becoming aspect of the individual through the upgrading of time in relation to identity with a concern for self as it constitutes in relation to the other in the discursive form of narrative. Narrative is seen as especially valuable for providing a refined understanding of the complexities involved in identity work, allowing us to recognize the self in relation to identity and the other through stories (Mallett & Wapshott, 2012). By drawing inspiration from Ricoeur's (1992) hermeneutic-phenomenological writings on narrative identity we are able to advance our process understanding of identity work. This implies addressing the dialectic of sameness and selfhood of identity with reference to *idem* and *ipse*, supplemented by the dialectic of self and the other than self. *Idem* identity denotes sameness and permanence through time and space, and *ipse* identity refers to selfhood in the sense of change and interrupted continuity. The becoming aspect is considerate of *ipse* and

idem identities in close relation to the individual self as coexisting with a world that 'grows from relationship, and is embedded not within individual minds but within interpretative or communal traditions' (Gergen, 1999, p. 122). So, if we want to know 'what the self *really* is', we are 'making a category mistake' (Dennett, 1992, p. 7). Drawing support from basic grammar, Ricoeur (1992) points to the equivocality of the term 'identical'. The reflexive character of all personal pronouns denotes that 'I' cannot be positioned immediately as the subject, as emphasized in this paper.

The remaining part of the paper is structured as follows. The next section looks into previous studies on identity work, pointing to the limited recognition of the identity aspects of *idem* and *ipse*. Then, the attention is turned to Ricoeur (1992), and the qualitative method implied in a Ricoeurian narrative approach to identity work is discussed with a focus on interpretation and understanding and narrative truth. Four little stories open up to a process understanding of identity work that makes temporal dynamics explicit, illustrating how *idem* and *ipse* identities, self and other interrelate. The concluding section underlines the importance of adding a Ricoeurian-inspired process conceptualization of identity to the study of identity work, outlining a threefold contribution. A note on limitations and suggestions for future research is also included in that section.

2. Prior research on identity work

A rich body of theoretical and empirical work has contributed to the advancement of knowledge about identity work, yet with little explicit focus on temporal dynamics with reference to *idem* and *ipse* aspects of identity and their dialectic tension and interrelatedness in complement of the dialectic of self and the other than self. Rather, inner and outer aspects of identity and a balance between social and personal identities are in the centre, emphasizing integration of the individual self. Where scholars show an interest in fragmentation, identity work is seen as a way to deal with various versions of the self and attempts to verify a self in response to the other, but still with little notion of a temporal becoming aspect with regard to *ipse* and *idem*.

Social identities refer to identities imputed to others, personal identities concern the meanings attributed to the self, and self denotes an overarching image of the individual, as Snow and Anderson (1987) posit in a study of activities homeless people, living in the streets of Austin, Texas, engage in when trying to sustain some self-worth and self-respect. Drawing on Mills's (1970) notion of social imagination, Watson (2008, 2009) too distinguishes between the outer and inner in relation to the individual self. He focuses on outward-facing managerial identity work that becomes absorbed inwardly through the language used. In McInnes and Corlett's (2012) study, the outside-inside dynamics suggests a dialogic route to meaning construction of self-identity. They refer to a process of managing a person's inside in consideration of an external position that helps regulating the person's self-identity. The outside flows in from contextual discourses, implying that the interplay between the inside and the outside can alter the meaning of self-identity.

Identity work, associated with maintaining a balance between the outside and the inside, in the sense of a quasi-stationary equilibrium between social and personal identities, is particularly challenging, according to Kreiner et al. (2006). In a study of Episcopal priesthood they illustrate how the priests use different tactics to counteract over-identification when perceiving too much identity tension towards the collective of priesthood, and counteract under-identification when perceiving too much identity tension toward individuation. Examples of such tactics are 'setting limits' through acknowledging one's capacity to perform occupational demands, and 'integration' through consciously merging identities, not treating the self and the occupational role as separate elements of identity.

Rather integrative in nature, social processes of identity produce 'a socially negotiated temporary outcome of the dynamic interplay

between internal strivings and external prescriptions, between self-presentation and labelling by others, between achievement and ascription and between regulation and resistance', summarize Ybema et al. (2009, p. 301). Individuals strive for comfort, meaning and integration as well as the achievement of some congruence between self-identity and work situation, Svenningsson and Alvesson (2003) remark. Along with integration, identity work scholars also give fragmentation a salient feature, acknowledged next.

2.1. Acknowledging fragmentation

As 'organizations mutate more rapidly, commitment and loyalty are less evident and identities are less secure, more open and increasingly differentiated' (Coupland & Brown, 2012, p. 1), identity work implies fragmentation in terms of antagonism, dis-identification and even struggle. Clarke et al. (2009), directing attention to various versions of self, conclude that the managers (in a large UK-based engineering company) draw on mutually antagonistic discourses, that their identity-narratives incorporate antagonisms, and that they continuously re-author their selves based on organizational disciplinary practices. Antagonisms refer to being emotionally detached and engaged, acting professionally and unprofessionally, and assuming responsibility for the business while, at the same time, caring for the employees. Studying the creative setting of an opera company, Beech et al. (2012) reveal that tensions between the current and aspirational self emerge in the form of dis-identification, and hybrid identities, exemplified with reference to a person acting as both conductor and senior manager. From the perspective of Costas and Fleming (2009, p. 374), dis-identification is associated with self-alienation as a mode of experience, 'a kind of unhappy consciousness'. In their study, identity work is concerned with people's experiences of being live selves of the corporate life and their attempts to live out narrated imaginary of authenticity, that is, generate engagement with self and work through aligning self-interests with company interests

Dis-identification also occurs through 'defensive othering'. Ezzell (2009, p. 114), studying a women's rugby team at a large public university in the US, exhibits that the members of the team found themselves stigmatized by outsiders calling them 'butch lesbians'. But instead of rejecting this, the team members resorted to defensive othering while regarding themselves as an exceptional group of tough, heterosexual and attractive women. However, this rather reinforced the stigma of the identity the women sought to deflect, Ezzell (2009) comments. Referring to bullying in a workplace, Lutgen-Sandvik's (2008) too brings stigma into focus. On the basis of a study of twenty US workers, she concludes that much time was spent responding to the stigma of bullying through engaging in sensemaking, self-defense and identity management. The relation to the other arose in them fear-dread emotions. There could then be a void of meaning, which, according to Kärreman and Alvesson (2004), relates to sensebreaking. They purport that an individual's belief about the group or the organization defines the self and is constructed through both sensebreaking and sensegiving. Sensebreaking creates void of meaning, as opposed to sensemaking, which is concerned with meaning making.

Further, identity work studies aim at enhancing our understanding of organizational power relations, ideology, culture, and survival strategies, accounting for the insecurities, ambiguities and multiplicity that may characterize a workplace (Collinson, 2003; Zembylas, 2003). From the viewpoint of Symon (2005), subjectivity in combination with agency and structure is a rhetorical resource that can be used to defend and legitimate certain claims and undermine others. Moreover, studies illustrate how male and female managers draw on different gendered discourses when constructing a sense of self (Linstead & Thomas, 2002), how frontline managers narratively verify their selves in response to co-present others (Down & Reveley, 2009), and how the identities of leaders and followers intrinsically link and mutually reinforce each other (Collinson, 2006).