

Underlying processes of identity work: Teaching critical management studies in a higher education business school

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In this study, we advocate and use 'autoethnographic vignettes' to research and consider underlying processes of identity work – *inner-tensions* - the 'working compromise' between self-identity ('I') and 'imputed social identities' ['me'] (Snow and Anderson, 1987: 1348). As Watson (2008, p.127) notes, a significant way to contribute to and strengthen extant organizational literature on identity work is to consider 'what might be seen as a link between the 'self' aspects ['I'] of identity and the discourses to which they relate' ['me']. Subject matter that 'analytical autoethnography' (Alvesson, 2003; Anderson, 2006) might be based, 'to produce work that is evocative, but also has an analytic purchase and engagement with social theory' (Humphreys and Learmonth, 2012: 317). In our case, George H Mead's work: *The Mind, Self and Society* (1934) – which has had an overarching influence on subsequent conversations in organization studies, on identity construction and identity work (see for example, Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Clarke et al., 2009; Harding, 2008; Weick and Roberts, 1993). Such studies posit identity work, as constructed through social discourse, 'so that not only is conduct social but [self] consciousness becomes social as well' (Mead, 1918: 579).

We conceive identity work as a *reflexive learning process* that shapes how we teach (and interact with) second year undergraduate business studies students on our module, Critical Management Studies (CMS) in a UK higher education (HE) business school. To do this, we draw on the work of Mead (1934) who argues: self-consciousness can only be achieved by taking on or assuming the position of the Other. One's self-identity(s) is 'profoundly social' and guided by available 'cultural resources' that shape one's interactions with others (Brown, 2015). This involves two distinguishable phases: The 'I' is the 'acting self' - the 'ego' - that reflects on past experience, anticipates the future, has desires- motives, acting reflexively (and often unpredictably) in the moment (Jenkins, 2004: 17). The 'me' is 'the organized community or social group', what Mead refers to as 'the generalised *other*', which we, each, assume in constructing our self(s) (1934: 72 *emphasis ours*). As Jenkins notes, the 'me' is 'what 'I' react

against, the voice in part of others, the foil which gives form and substance to the ‘I’... although [the ‘me’] represents external control... ‘me’ is not a Freudian censor: the ‘I’ is capable of winning the argument’ (2004: 40). The result, according to Schön, is that teachers (of management) face many personal dilemmas, which occupy and make salient ‘*indeterminate zones* of practice – uncertainty, complexity, uniqueness [and] conflict’ (1995: 28, emphasis his).

Our case study contributes to research on identity construction and learning in the context of a HE business school (e.g. Moore and Koning, 2014; Petriglieri and Petriglieri 2010; Sturdy et al., 2006; Wilson and Deaney 2010) – seeking to answer how processes of reflection and reflexivity constitute learning through identity work? First, there are relatively few empirical papers examining the centrality of ‘identity work’ to becoming a teacher of HE (cf. Knights and Clarke, 2014; Moore and Koning, 2014 for rare examples) and no studies specifically examining underlying processes of identity work - constituted through reflection and reflexivity: a ‘complex and dialogic space of struggle and tension in which one’s own biography transacts with other factors – circumstances, commitments, contexts, and discourses – to create a teacher’s sense of what she/[he] does’ (Holbrook et al., 2010: 684). Our study illustrates how this tension is an ‘essential condition’ for learning (Mead, 1934: 63), because underlying processes of identity work frame how one engages pedagogy and others, constituting one’s ongoing practices. While there is growing interest in the importance of ‘pedagogy through... personal construction and socially mediated dialogue’ there has been, as yet, ‘very little empirical research’ (Wilson and Deaney, 2008: 169–170) within organization studies and management learning. Second, through ‘the utilization of an ‘autobiographical and self-reflexive’ (Fletcher and Watson, 2007: 1351) genre of empirical research, we problematize calls for ‘the reflexive practitioner’ (Brookfield, 1995; Cunliffe, 2004; Schön, 1987). We argue that Mead’s (1934) conception of self-social identity(s) is critical to understanding how identity work plays out in practice (cf. Simpson, 2009; Snow and Anderson, 1987; Watson, 2008) by examining our own experience of forging identities, as teachers of critical management studies in a HE business school (cf. Alvesson, 2003). To do this, we utilise Brookfield’s (1995) four lenses for ‘critical self-reflection’ to construct ‘*indeterminate zones*’, through which identity work *happens* (Schön, 1995). We argue that reflection plays an important role in resisting the Other and that this emancipatory form of identity work is critical to becoming a critically reflexive practitioner?

The paper is structured into four major sections. First, we review relevant literature on identity work, before considering Mead's conception of the reflexive-self for researching underlying processes of identity work. Outlining how Brookfield's (1995) lenses for critical reflection provide a useful heuristic through which to consider four intermediate zones for identity work. Second, we describe our methodology and processes of analysis. Third, we present four autoethnographic vignettes, each reflection conceptualizes an intermediate zone for learning through reflexive identity work. Fourth, we discuss the implications of our self-other stories for learning to become a critical management educator, before drawing brief conclusions.