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Identity construction among boundary-crossing individuals

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Abstract

In this article we describe a study of boundary-crossing individuals (individuals who change organisation frequently) and the way they construct identities through interaction and self-reflexion. It is argued from a social constructionist perspective that studies of the way individual identities are constructed are important to our understanding of the complexity of the identity phenomenon. Identities cannot simply be reduced to certain stable institutionalised aspects such as profession or gender. Rather life should be seen as an ongoing process of identity construction, whereby reflexion upon life episodes and the pattern of such episodes shape identities. The results suggest different patterns of articulations through narratives. These narratives are associated with different underlying ontological discourses that describe diverse ways of reasoning among boundary-crossing individuals. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Traditional organisational research on human needs and identity construction in working life has drawn attention to certain human needs such as security, social belonging, commitment and identity (Herzberg, 1966; Likert, 1967; Kanter, 1972; Schein, 1978; Hackman & Oldham, 1980; Brunsson, 1987; Schein, 1988; Alvesson & Björkman, 1992). The prospects for satisfying these needs appear to be limited for

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individuals who work in organisations for a short time only, for example on project work or in short-term employment. Among other things, jumping from one organisation to another can create difficulties in establishing social relations with other people and organisations (Buchanan, 1979). Since temporary work is characterised by a focus on tasks and goals, on short-term personal interaction, effectiveness, rationality and immediate responsibility (cf. Stinchcombe, 1985), it can be difficult for those in such work to construct a stable social identity: it takes time to become socialised and to find people to work with in friendship and harmony (Bennis, 1968). The same problem can be found among boundary-crossing individuals, i.e. people who change jobs often as a consequence of their intended career development.

Individuals go through many group changes during a lifetime, and socialisation problems arise more frequently for people who change organisations often. Boundary-crossing individuals who frequently make such moves do not have the same opportunities as others to gain support from stable groups at the workplace, since their social belongingness there will be weaker. On the other hand they can act more independently vis à vis other people and can make sense of these interrupted relations by using them as occasions for learning (Weick, 1996).

However, the established group inside a specific organisation is not the only potential base for an individual's social belonging. Many actors rely heavily upon relations beyond the limits of the work group, for instance on informal contacts outside their own organisation (Sjöstrand, 1985; Monge, 1987; Nohria & Eccles, 1992). Networks across traditional organisational boundaries can provide a sort of social base for the individual on occasions when the formal organisation no longer fills this function. Moreover, the network may also fulfil an existential function: social networks usually last longer than the duration of individual employment contracts and can thus be a source of continuity in terms of values, culture etc.

The recognition of boundary-crossing and existential networks highlights the need for new theories on human identity construction in and between organisations: how do modern individuals construct their identity in the absence of traditional stable work-life contexts? Recent developments in this field indicate new possibilities for understanding how modern individuals distinguish themselves from each other (cf. Jenkins, 1996; Nord & Fox, 1996; Giddens, 1991). According to this view, people construct their identities through social interaction and repeated self-reflexion, which means that to a large extent identity becomes something unique to the individual (albeit incorporating parts of surrounding institutionalised identities). The aim of this paper is thus to investigate this form of identity construction ('reflexive identity construction') and to analyse how boundary-crossing individuals construct their identities in a reflexive manner. With this analysis we intend to provide an alternative to the traditional theory of institutional identity (i.e. gender, profession, etc.) with respect to individuals in organisations.

In the first section, the concept of reflexive identity construction is analysed in greater detail, and the need for understanding identity as a dynamic and in some respects unique construct of the individual is stressed. The problems involved in subjecting reflexive identity construction to empirical investigation are then discussed, and the nature of identity construction as a narrative construction requiring

a narrative methodological approach is pointed out. Next, a set of narrative accounts of boundary-crossing individuals — highly educated people with experience of a number of employers and positions behind them — are summarised in the form of life-stories. The article closes with three sections in which the implications of reflexivity are discussed and two dimensions of discourse in the narratives identified.

2. Shaping individual identity: reflexive identity construction

The identity construction of the individual can be perceived as a process of self-reflexion that arises as a person moves through time and space, and through different organisational and institutional environments. This reflexively constructed identity unfolds in the conscious interaction between the self and its social context, a notion that can be seen as a step towards the theoretical renewal of identity theory (cf. Jenkins, 1996; Nord & Fox, 1996). According to this view, the individual identity is not fixed once and for all after achieving a certain degree of maturity. Rather, it is continually socially constructed and subject to contradictions, revisions and change through reflexions throughout the life-span of the individual concerned (cf. Hall, 1992; Nkomo & Cox, 1996). Interpreted thus, identity construction can also be seen as the continuous handling of the tension caused by adapting to the norms of the social context while also maintaining an individual uniqueness vis à vis this context (Festinger, 1954; Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Tajfel, 1972; Turner, 1987; Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Giddens, 1991; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1994; Whetten & Gregersen, 1995).

A modern definition of identity must thus reflect both the unique personal dimensions of biography and the dialectical pluralism and tensions of modern life (Weigert, Teitge & Teitge, 1986). It should allow for characteristic features of the individual's present situation and the links to the multi-faceted institutional context. Among researchers the modernist understanding of identity as coherent and consistent is currently the subject of considerable debate (Gergen, 1991; Giddens, 1991; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1994), a debate that is equally relevant on both the individual and the collective levels (i.e. groups, organisations or societies).

To simplify, it seems reasonable to say that this debate involves “essentialists” on the one hand and “constructionists” on the other. The essentialist perspective assumes that, as well as individuals, groups are also bearers of a unique character coherent in time and space. The constructionist perspective (which is the perspective employed in this study) claims that since an individual's understanding of themselves is a product of interaction with significant others, it cannot be said that identity emanates exclusively from within the person and that it is stable throughout life. Modern organisational literature puts greater emphasis on context and less on the essence of the individual, and stresses the need for new theoretical views, not least on how individuals in organisations shape their work lives (Nord & Fox, 1996).

In contemporary societies the available modes of identity construction expand and change rapidly. The individual interacts with so many organizational and societal discourses that fragmentation is difficult to avoid (Gergen, 1991). In a differentiated culture, opportunities occur that create possibilities for different lifestyles (Asplund,

1992; Alvesson & Deetz, 1996). As society becomes more fragmented and virtual (discourse is disembedded from any world reference; cf. Giddens, 1991) the common identity-stabilising forces disappear (Berger, Berger & Kellner, 1974). Such a position suggests the possibility of considerable freedom and widespread opportunity for individuals to interface with different discourses. On the other hand, it also implies an insecurity that can lead to normalisation strategies, whereby people attach themselves to superficial organisational ideologies through the enactment of corporate careers and cultures.

It is thus important to look beyond single organisational ideologies and individual careers and to attend to people's basic values in life and in their ongoing interactions in different settings. A focus on the process of interaction underlines the reciprocal dependency between the self and the environment, and consequently draws attention to something beyond an exclusively self-fulfilment.

Taylor (1989) asserts that:

... our normal understanding of self-realisation presupposes that some things are important beyond the self, that there are some goods or purposes the furthering of which has significance for us and which hence can provide the significance a fulfilling life needs. A total and fully consistent subjectivism would tend towards emptiness: nothing would count as a fulfilment in a world in which literally nothing was important but self-fulfilment. What is more, the primacy of self-fulfilment reproduces and reinforces some of the same negative consequences as instrumentalism (Taylor, 1989. p 507).

Against this background we stress the need to examine the ontological character of identity construction through self-reflexivity. We argue that a more rigorous defence for reflexive theorising can be achieved by addressing these ontological assumptions and by explicitly articulating alternative sets of ontological prerequisites for identity construction (e.g. the view of human beings, grounded assumptions of life). Giddens, for example, describes in a reflexive manner the importance of ontological assumptions when he discusses what he labels 'ontological security' which he defines as follows: 'to be ontologically secure is to be confident in the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography' (Giddens, 1991, p. 53).

Hence, we need to understand the life-history of the individual and the way every individual keeps a particular narrative going, rather than simply the way they perceive their identity at any particular moment. Only then can we understand the multifaceted nature of the process of constructing identity constituted by its 'becoming' as well as its 'being', thus also exploring the ontological dimensions of the phenomenon (Chia, 1996).

Hence identity can be constructed both inwardly and outwardly through a person's own reflexions and transformations of categories and typifications. The individual is not only someone who exists as a definition generated by others, but also as a self-defined person with a free will and the possibility of choosing direction. In everyday life we are routinised participants, but as soon as we take a step backwards and begin to observe what happens in a wider perspective, occasions for reflexion

occur. It should therefore be interesting to study boundary-crossing individuals, who in their outer journey encounter more such occasions for reflexion than most other people, in order to extend our knowledge about modern individuals' identity construction. In the empirical study we will see what happens when such people cross boundaries and how they reflect upon these episodes in different ways.

We have thus labelled this more profound form of identity construction rooted in the biographies of individuals and incorporating the tensions of modern life, *reflexive identity construction*. By using the word 'reflexive' we draw attention to the fact that people reflect upon life in different critical situations, and also that their reflexivity is revealed when they articulate their narratives in interaction with others (for example, ourselves as researchers). This reflexive identity can also be described as a bridge between the theoretical concept of 'self-identity' and the concept of 'social identity' which again emphasises the continual re-definitions associated with identity construction. However, it is important to note that a reflexive identity is not something totally unconscious, or something that can only be unmasked in a psychoanalytical way: it is an ongoing process of constructing a meaningful pattern that combines a person's articulated and un-articulated experiences of life.

In this article we have used cases from an empirical study conducted over the last two years, to show how reflexive narratives can be used in exploring different ways of constructing identity in empirical research.

3. Studying reflexive identity construction: a narrative approach

Most modern research on individuals and organisations draws attention in one way or another to the importance of language as a medium for information about reality. In this article we see the narrative approach as the main medium through which individuals convey their interpretations of reality (cf. Czarniawska-Joerges, 1994). Linguistic approaches in which language is viewed as a complex system in itself are thus excluded; rather, our discussion is directed towards language as it is used to convey stories told by individuals. This means examining how individuals describe their daily lives, how different phenomena are described, and what different meanings and levels of importance are attached to certain concepts (cf. also Foucault, 1969/1972).

During the last decade, the narrative approach has been taken far beyond its origins within the field of literary analysis, where the philosophical foundations were laid in the works of Alasdair MacIntyre (1981/1996). In this tradition it is emphasised that individuals are exposed to many different and sometimes contradictory and competing discourses, which means that it is becoming increasingly necessary to arrive at personal views on reality through self-reflexion. The narratives about the personal journeys through work life can thus fill a sense-making function for both individuals and their social contexts. Putting more or less articulated experiences together into a coherent narrative is a way of clarifying how individuals relate to their environment over time. One might say that the narratives fulfil a pragmatic function, insofar as the individuals concerned try to organise their life stories by finding reasons for their

actions in different situations, and a sense-making function when different episodes are to be explained on a basis of some sort of meaningful philosophy or value (Czarniawska, 1997). A CEO who refers to a number of difficult situations as the critical incidents in her career is constructing a pragmatic narrative when she explains the situations, and a sense-making function when or if the situations can be related to some underlying line of thought, such as a managerial philosophy or a principle.

Different styles of narrating can also be associated with diverse modes of communication, and it is important to note the importance of distinguishing between language, speech, discourse and narrative (cf. Schrag (1997). Discourses can be regarded as being located somewhere between the constitutive elements of speech and language on the one hand, and the wider contextual and holistic intertexture of narratives on the other. The introduction of narrative constitutes a critical supplementary perspective on discourses, and provides the ongoing context in which the figures of discourse are embedded and achieve their determinations of sense and reference. Without its contextualisation in the configurations of narrative, discourse is in danger of being reduced to standardised behaviour. The creative and intuitive event of the articulation of narratives organises human experience into meaningful episodes and functions as a 'lens through which apparently independent and disconnected elements of existence are seen as related parts of a whole' (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 36).

Hence it is necessary to state that single narratives are different from discourses. Although the identity construction of the individuals studied is constituted by discourses, the discourses do not wholly determine these people's narratives and identity construction (cf. Benhabib, 1992). In this sense narratives can be seen as meaningful combinations of or movements between different discourses that are connected in a way that makes sense to the individuals themselves. In symbolical terms we associate these reflexive acts revealed through narratives with the metaphor of the journey, in order to emphasise the emerging and ongoing nature of identity construction.

However, from the individual perspective the narratives can also turn into fiction and the borderline between fantasy and vision can be weak. Nevertheless, when we stress *reflexive* identity construction we are demarcating the border to storytelling as fiction: reflexivity is used by individuals in the process of getting to know themselves better, thereby getting rid of fictive elements in their self-understanding. The drawback of reflexivity, however, is that this ability can also be used for presenting oneself in a positive, non-problematic way. Thus critical questions and contacts in the respondents' social networks were ways for us to see beyond these facades of self-deception and fantasy — and instead we were often surprised by the open manner in which they related to critical and painful incidents in their lives. But at the same time we have to be aware of that these narratives were constructed in interaction with us, as researchers, and that their reflexivity was articulated in these interactive situations.

In the analyses described below we will use this narrative approach in analysing the identity construction of individuals. Our ambition is to go beyond formal positions (such as accountant, manager, professor, etc.) and other institutionalised identities (such as Swede, Catholic or woman) in order to understand patterns in the way individuals perceive themselves in relation to work and organisations, and how these

patterns unfold over time. An analysis free of such guiding presuppositions seems more promising in articulating the reflexive identity construction of an individual (as defined in the previous section). In these cases we start by obtaining the individuals' own narratives on their journey through work life — narratives that we see as a basic way for the individuals to construct and reflect upon their experiences. This does not imply that formal positions and/or institutionalised identities are unimportant. But if they are important in the cases concerned, this must emerge from the narratives rather than being imposed on the individuals from the beginning. Narratives can be seen as a process whereby individuals construct their identities in interaction with the researcher/s and the situation.

We talked with eight individuals (four women and four men) about how they perceived their careers and their social relations. To fulfil our purpose, we chose four individuals as representing fundamental differences in the way their lives were narrated and their identities constructed. Our first subject, Diana, now works as managing director of a media company. Our second, Richard, is currently manager of a research institute, while Ann free-lances as a management consultant and Grace is managing director of a subsidiary of a major Swedish corporation.

On the first occasion, the individuals were just asked for a spontaneous account of their journey through work life. Any questions asked at this stage were aimed mainly at the clarifications of details in their stories. In the subsequent interviews, various themes from our theoretical preconceptions and from the first narrations were introduced in order to get the individuals to articulate their reflexions and to clarify their lines of thought. Examples of such themes included their views on work in relation to life in general, their views on themselves and others, their views on participating in organisations and on changing between organisations, their views on where the borderline between themselves and their context should be drawn, and so forth. This process continued for about a year for each respondent, and involved between four and six long meetings and the exchange of written material. In the course of this series of interviews the relationships between ourselves and the respondents became increasingly natural and developed into reflexive conversations. The pattern of reflexive identity construction emerged in the course of the interviews, and we also discussed and reflected with the respondents about our descriptions and analyses of their narratives. They also accepted our interpretations and descriptions of their respective identity constructions. However, out of respect for their integrity as human beings, our intention was always to present their narratives as anonymous accounts.

In the following section we will give some examples of episodes illustrating the respondents' identity constructions as they passed through different organisations.

4. The narratives

4.1. Diana

At the beginning of her narrative Diana paid considerable attention to memories of her childhood. She felt this was important to understanding the development of

subsequent events. Diana had to move house at an early stage because her parents changed their teaching jobs. The place where she lived between the ages of seven and fourteen came to represent a fixed reference point in her childhood: 'It was like growing up in Bullerbyn¹'. She also saw her childhood as enriching and as fashioning her character, due to the close proximity of everyone in the community and the democratic upbringing that this enabled.

Diana's vision was a job in the cultural sector. She took an Arts degree followed by a media course. She got her first job with a media company, where she was the most highly educated member of the staff. She felt that this was seen as a threat by many of her male colleagues. She also had difficulty reconciling herself with the company jargon, and the affected way of talking adopted by the people in that particular environment. This experience is referred to again later in the narrative, when she is working as a travel courier at a typical tourist resort. She perceived the environment as artificial, constructed for brief stays involving sun, bathing and good food. Here too Diana had difficulty in acclimatising, and told us that she developed gastric catarrh for the first time in her life.

She became increasingly aware of the importance of the environment and therefore actively looked for another resort with stronger cultural associations, but still within the travel company, and eventually ended up in Italy. This was an easy choice to make because she had heard a popular teacher describing the place in vivid terms, and because she had visited Italy many times before. She learned Italian and committed herself to greater cultural involvement in the cultural life there. She saw the town as a 'real town with a real life of its own.' In Italy she also fell passionately in love, married, and gave birth to a daughter. She and her husband lived together for four years, but she found the cultural differences increasingly difficult to overcome: 'Yes, some time I'll write a book ... inferno is a relevant description of what I've been through'. They divorced and she moved back home to Sweden and to her parents, together with her daughter.

Eventually she obtained a temporary teaching post and began gradually to enjoy her new profession. In view of this she decided to extend her university education in order to achieve formal teaching status. With this achieved she sought a permanent teaching post, but finding work was not easy at that time. She therefore accepted an offer from a media company which wanted to employ her. The company offered good terms and Diana took the opportunity, but with the idea in her mind that she could always return to teaching if she found she was not happy. She was very content, however; the firm expanded and Diana took on increasing responsibility and eventually became managing director.

After some years, Diana began to feel that she was being subjected to a great deal of unfair criticism, and she started considering alternative career paths. She thus sought a managerial position in the culture sector in another town. She was struck by an advertisement that was looking for an 'unconventional manager', while at the same time she saw prospects of realising her ambitions about raising people's cultural

¹ A fictitious idyllic village in the books of Swedish children's author, Astrid Lindgren.

awareness. Even so, she was also filled with a terrible sense of dread when she took the job: she had bought a house quite recently and her daughter was enjoying life both at home and with her friends. But Diana moved with her daughter to the new town, and fulfilled a promise to get a dog. She then faced many difficult years, and carried out a reorganisation with a view to achieving greater efficiency and a stronger outward-looking orientation.

When the reorganisation was complete, a timely approach was made by a politician in her home town about a managerial post in the culture sector. The offer came at the right time, since neither she nor her daughter liked the town where they were living. She worked hard to fulfil her ambitions in the culture field, but felt that all her efforts got her nowhere. 'I felt I had worked terribly hard, and I never understood why another manager in the local authority had a much higher salary ...' Although she was enthusiastic about the job as such, and developed visions in the culture field, she nevertheless felt exploited. After three years, there were signs of interest from the personnel section of one of the region's largest media companies, and she immediately took up the challenge. The terms proved favourable and so she took the job. However, she had the same feeling about the job as always: an initial period of anxiety and regret. But this time she had the chance to work creatively with culture and the media, often on a national basis.

4.2. Richard

Richard recounted that he was the only child of parents who were both in business. His lasting memory of his parents was that they worked a great deal, which also created a type of norm for his own actions. After upper secondary school he went on to university with a view to going into journalism. But after getting his undergraduate degree he was encouraged by several of his teachers to become a doctoral student at a social science department. The prospect of long-term financial support was appealing, and Richard completed a Ph.D. thesis project together with a colleague, with whom he worked well and effectively. After obtaining his doctorate he continued to research at a seat of learning overseas. He found this work rewarding from a professional viewpoint but problematic in terms of his family, because his wife was unable to obtain work. For this reason he looked for ways of moving back to Sweden and after a while obtained a post in the civil service. However, the job as a whole did not come up to expectations: his duties were in themselves interesting, but he considered the work organisation to be unwieldy and bureaucratic.

On the other hand he found his later postings in the health care administration to be exciting, because his co-operation with senior surgeons, administrators and politicians often worked well and he learnt a lot from it. In one of his jobs he also worked as a co-opted professor. He found this combination stimulating and it led to a number of publications, but it was also somewhat detrimental to his social and family life. Richard felt he had not enough time for his two children or his wife. He described how at the time he thought: 'I'll either go back to academia, or go in for something different from this.' The crisis was solved when he was conveniently offered a managerial post

with another county health care board. In view of the divided loyalties he was experiencing at the time between work and home, he did not find the choice difficult to make. At the same time the idea of the move seemed like an exciting challenge that suited the ‘adventurer’ in him.

His work often involved extensive external contacts with consulting firms. In the course of these exchanges the idea came up that he might like to work in consultancy himself, and he was asked whether he was interested in working for a consulting firm with many international assignments. His interest was aroused and he was given the opportunity to work on many change projects around the world. In this context he developed a speciality in the management of change projects. This professionally inspiring work led to transitions between different professional contexts, each with unique project characteristics. Every commission meant new sequences of action with their own contents, and Richard said that he had to develop a whole set of role repertoires depending on the different nature of every institutional context.

One of the downsides, however, was the tough travelling schedule with up to 200 days travelling per year: ‘Naturally this was socially disruptive, since I lost contact with the children which also led to my second broken marriage.’ At this point someone from an administrative unit in the town where he grew up rang him and asked if he would like to take up a post as an administrative director. His first impression was that the job was not all that attractive, but the consulting firm where he worked was being hit by the recession, and at the same time he was newly separated from his wife and in the early stages of a new relationship. After sounding things out a little more his interest in the new assignment grew, and following a period of consideration he decided to move. As director, he again faced the task of re-organising a traditional and bureaucratic organisation.

4.3. Ann

Ann started her narrative by talking about her childhood. She recounted that she grew up in a family that at the time was considered unconventional. Both parents had children from earlier relationships and she was their first child in common. This new extended family shaped many of Ann’s basic values. Among other things it nurtured a competitive instinct since both parents were top athletes. ‘But this whole sports circus held us together. They dragged us out of bed at nine o’clock every Sunday morning to play competitive sports in the park. I still don’t understand how they got away with it.’ Her schoolwork progressed satisfactorily and she became active in the student council and sports clubs. By the time she reached upper secondary school, however, she began to feel that the subjects she was taking were boring: ‘There was too much history and religion.’

In order to support herself financially she also worked in health care, in parallel with her schooling. On completing her exams, she started a job as a salesperson for a company in the music business. To start with she saw the work as a challenge, but after a year and a half she felt her interest in it was fading away. She then started a course in design, and through her contacts during this period she was invited to

a hotel in the Swedish fells, and worked there as a receptionist on graduation. The climate, the environment, and not least the opportunity to ski seemed to her like a breath of fresh air. After the tourist season she received a timely invitation from a school friend to join her in southern Europe. She quickly sold her old car and set off. Through contacts, she obtained work for a time as a guide for Swedish tourists.

Her money ran out, however, and she returned to Sweden. She obtained a job as buyer with a large fashion store in the capital where over a period of three years she gained valuable experience of the fashion industry, not least from extensive travelling. However, she felt increasingly servile and the relationship with one of her bosses became strained. This led to a parting of the ways and Ann had to leave the company. At this point she met her first husband and moved to another town. She considered various occupations, and after a while she was offered work as purchasing manager with another fashion company. During this period she gave birth to her first child. When she returned to the company after maternity leave she did not get her former job back. She regarded this as unjust, and tried to find an alternative source of livelihood. She borrowed money from her mother and started her own shop. The business did quite well in terms of turnover, but liquidity became strained. The company was gradually forced to enter a compensation agreement, and at the same time the man in her life let her down very badly. She wanted a divorce, but did not have any means of independent subsistence. The prospect of a new job as purchasing manager in a yet another fashion company was brought to her attention and after a while she took it up.

Once she had taken this position and secured her means of subsistence, she completed the divorce proceedings. She went on to take evening courses at university. After three years, however, an unpleasant power struggle broke out in the company. The company had entered a period of reorganisation that involved cutbacks, and she was exposed to backbiting because others wanted her job. She sued the company for sacking her on false grounds, and there turned out to be no legal substance in the accusations against her. A settlement was reached and she was given severance pay. As on earlier occasions, she fought hard for her rights, but these events sapped a great deal of her energy, and she contracted psoriasis.

At precisely the right moment the leader of a course she had once been involved in rang to ask whether she would be interested in taking on the job of project leader, for arranging a trade fair. She worked extremely hard on this project for five years. Considerable interest was shown in this venture. The project turned out to be successful and brought her many new contacts. During this period she also met a new man and gave birth to her second child. They chose for various reasons to live in separate homes, however, and she was still living in this way at the time of our interview. She also started her own consulting service in the information sector and this brought her into contact with someone who worked for a company whose business idea was 'managers for hire'. This person asked whether she would like to associate her company with its activities, thus offering complementary resources in a partnership network.

4.4. *Grace*

Grace's memories from her early years were vague, but she recalled her move to an industrial community close to a large town at around the age of six. She grew up in this community, where class differences were clearly marked. Her family was considered to belong to the more privileged level in the community, and Grace said that her upbringing was generally speaking very traditional. She went to upper secondary school in the nearby town and 'ended up' at the technical college, although in fact she wanted to become a welfare officer, a psychologist or something along those lines. She said that she liked working with people, and also felt she had a special gift for it. It also turned out that the course at the technical college did not really suit her. 'I realised I was no engineer, but I thought I'd complete the course anyhow.' During her time as a student she became active politically and became president of the local youth movement of one of the political parties. Her political commitment took up an increasing amount of her time, and she was elected on to the district committee of the movement.

When she had one year left of her course, Grace's parents moved to another town but she decided to stay put. 'I then became independent of the family, and moved to a one-bedroom flat. It was great to have control over my own life and I had no worries about it at all.' After graduation she was offered a job as an official of the party. She was now working for an 'action-orientated' organisation, where lots of different things happened at different levels. She said she enjoyed being the 'spider in the web'. At this time she met a man from another part of the country and they moved to his hometown. She had no deep roots where she was living then, and saw the move as something exciting. She did not feel that the cultural differences were especially important, and in general she was able to continue working in the same spirit and with the same party in the new town.

But after a few years she began to ponder over what she wanted to do with the rest of her life: 'Politics wasn't really my thing.' She started to weigh up her prospects in the travel industry and in insurance, because those professions would give her opportunities for saleswork. After entry tests, she started as a trainee with an insurance company and joined its sales training programme. She was the youngest ever trainee with the firm and — what was more — a woman. When she went out into the field she met many male colleagues who did not see her as any threat in the competition for customers. She was therefore able to work independently and her sales results developed favourably. After a short period with the company she gave birth to her first two children. She stayed at home for nearly two years but then returned to work. She found this to be a difficult time, however: 'But then I suffered from depression and was very doubtful about whether I could carry on with the job.' But at the time she was given good support — notably from her colleagues. Privately, however, she was having problems with her relationship that ultimately ended in a divorce.

Grace started to study at university in parallel with her job. She also started a new relationship and after a while gave birth to her third child. She stayed at home for a short time only, so that she could quickly return to work. She began to tire of her duties at the insurance company, however, and started looking — successfully in the

end — for a new post in the banking and finance sector. But this job proved to be quite different from her work with the insurance company, which had very different traditions. Grace found the task of achieving greater market orientation in the new milieu to be an arduous process of change.

Several years later the family sold their house and bought a new property in the capital city. They wanted to be at the centre of events, as Grace put it. But Grace regarded the first job she accepted as being utterly demoralising: ‘The worst thing I’d done — claustrophobic and boring.’ That was the situation when she came in contact with the Head of Personnel of a competing firm whom she had met previously. After a while, she was offered a post as sales manager, and after some reflection she accepted it. She found the new work stimulating, but was given a tough start when she had to deal with closures and a reorganisation. But she ‘rode out the storm’ and her unit began to achieve increasingly better results. After a time she advanced to a management position at the group level and assumed responsibility for a large number of sub-units. She described the new work as challenging but demanding. Her commitment was further strengthened by the fact that she was selected to take an advanced course in management. But one problem, as she saw it, was that she had insufficient time for herself. Nevertheless, she saw the situation as ‘the rule of the game’. As she put it: ‘... first priority was the job, then the family, and after that I had no time left for myself.’

5. A reflexive journey inwards and outwards

Exposed narratives can be described metaphorically as a reflexive journey inwards and outwards, and the aim is to highlight in an integrated way the symbolic meaning of the narratives revealed. Although these narratives tend to concentrate on the respondents’ outer journeys, we argue that identity construction can be described as travelling both outwards and inwards. As we can see in the stories described, some of the individuals told how they had experienced critical incidents and personal crises during their lives, and in the series of interviews they said that these critical incidents had caused them to take their way of living up for serious reconsideration. We observed that the crises were related to work and to private lives, and that those concerned found it necessary to reflect on their lives in an existential manner. In such situations they reflected upon the past, their roles in the present and possible future situations. In periods like these, identity construction becomes a reflexive project, whereby the person, in the light of changes, must be able to reconsider standpoints and ways of living. Their journeys to other places (both outer and inner) give them perspectives on themselves and develop their self-awareness in a more reflexive manner.

Some of those interviewed had experienced anxiety during these periods of reflexion (especially Diana and Ann said that they had gone through periods of anxiety), but when the interviews were being conducted they felt the need to think in a more comprehensive way about their place in life and about the meaning of life. Although we can say that these questions and reflexions arise for all of us, boundary-crossing

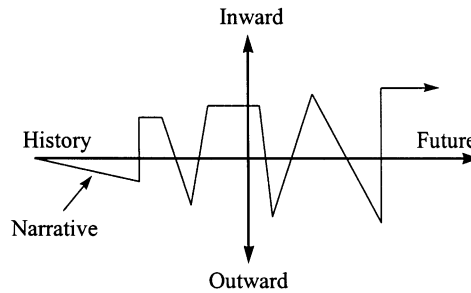


Fig. 1. Confrontation with discontinuities generates self-reflexion in time and space.

individuals meet discontinuities more often. And discontinuities like these often bear some resemblance to personal crises and transformations. Consequently, we can identify clear signs of transitions that create anxiety in people, as well as impulses towards confronting themselves in a special way. The reflexive character of identity construction can be identified more specifically by paying simultaneous attention to four directions: inward and outward, backward and forward (see Fig. 1 for a brief and simplified illustration of how individuals can express this interactions in their narratives).

Reflexive identity construction can be described metaphorically as a journey in both time and space, suggesting that we need to travel to other places in order to understand ourselves better and to discover more about who we are. For example, the journey in space can be associated with concrete geographic or organisational moves (outward) and with people's inner moves (inward) involving such things as feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions and moral dispositions. When individuals move and break patterns in their outer journey, periods of increased self-reflexion occur. 'Who am I?' and 'Where am I going?' are examples of the kind of questions raised. In these situations people tend to turn inward in search of deeper values and/or theoretical grounds for their pathfinding. New locations and new working environments call for reflexion relating to both the past and the new, creating an openness to what is happening in the present. The inner and outer journeys through life interact in a special way for boundary-crossing individuals, since discontinuities appear more frequently and emphasise the search for inner safety and ontological security. Although self-realisation is one of the aspects at the centre of the reflexive acts of boundary-crossing individuals, it is important to stress the importance of something that gives them meaning beyond the self.

In our empirical study we observed that our respondents gave voice to something beyond self-fulfilment and instrumentalism (Diana's passion for culture is an example of this). From their narratives we were able to identify certain underlying themes in the actors' identity construction that were consistent over time, and that to a varying extent connected their different functions and roles. Elements of this more profound identity, beyond institutionalised identities, are constructed in a reflexive manner through ongoing narratives that more or less integrate the inner and outer journey.

6. Integrative and multiple modes of reflexive identity construction

In the narratives we could identify reflexive descriptions of episodes such as moves between positions, projects or decisions (i.e. a change in work and/or cultural context). All the individuals in our study were able to identify such episodes in their lives and to explain their behaviour in the relevant situation in a way that connected themselves to their social contexts. Differences between the individuals emerged when they reflected upon the connections between the episodes and the long-term development implied by such connections. The pragmatic functions of the narratives were thus obvious, and the individuals were usually aware that their interaction with the environment in different episodes could not be reduced to formal positions or informal social roles. Instead, the explanations usually formed a pattern on a more unarticulated level, a pattern expressing deeply rooted values in the individuals. Some of these patterns are combined in a more synthesised way by the individuals, making what we termed *integrated identity construction*. Others exhibited narratives where the pattern connecting different episodes and contexts appeared more ambiguous and inconsistent, in other words what we called *multi-identity construction*. 'Inside' each episode these individuals developed a coherent sequence of function, role and identity, but when they went through transitions into new episodes these sequences were left behind and a new sequence of identity construction emerged. Some individuals almost made a point of the fact that they had different functions, roles and identities in different social contexts. Rather than having one evident profession, these people saw themselves as multi-professionals (see elements in Richard's narrative). Their narratives were 'packaged', in the sense that each episode was described as a single 'parcel' with its own wrapping and its own content. The individuals exhibiting an integrated identity construction, on the other hand, were less preoccupied with detailed descriptions of the various parcels. Instead, they focused on what was common between the different episodes during their work life, emphasising the overall pattern as the level where coherence must be found. In some cases (Diana's narrative is the most significant of the narratives described here) there are profound ontological assumptions (based on ideology and/or religious beliefs) that keep life, and different parts of it, together. These individuals express grounded values that they use to integrate their life, despite the variety of social contexts.

The individuals representing the multi-identity category tend to describe their work-life experiences as separate episodes with different social contexts and contents. Some of those interviewed have difficulty in connecting external incidents and their self-conceptions with each other. Some of the individuals exhibiting a multi-identity construction pattern tried to relate their experiences to their professions, but in fact described their work lives as a series of separate social episodes (for example Grace's account of the limited time for her own self-reflexion relative to the time devoted to work and family). Their narratives are packaged in different boxes (different realities), and they do not express any obvious need to question their own way of packaging and/or integrating the boxes/pieces. Even though this difference can be attributed to some extent to different personal styles of narrating (emanating from their various social contexts), it is our opinion that it reflects different individual modes of identity construction.

7. Traditional and emancipated modes of reflexive identity construction

The empirical study also revealed some interesting differences in the way individuals relate to the cultural context in which they have lived their lives. Boundary-crossing individuals express different approaches in this respect. Some refer continuously to cultural traditions in order to explain their line of reasoning, while others make an explicit point of being emancipated from all sorts of traditions and social structures. If we combine this cultural dimension with the identity construction dimension described above, we arrive at the following figure (see Fig. 2). The two dimensions in the model must of course be seen as continua with a variety of options. However, our interpretation of this grid is that four particular ontological discourses can be proposed, combining the two central dimensions involved (if dichotomised). These ontological discourses can be seen as different ways of expressing reflexive awareness of the double interaction between the self and the context. The discourses represent chains of connected statements that could be identified in the narratives. These conceptualisations should be seen as ways of calling attention to similarities and differences that are important, rather than devices for division. Consequently, the underlying discourses also represent the space where boundary-crossing individuals construct their narratives and become authors of their own journeys through working life. The four different discourses are explained in the description below.

The first way of reasoning stresses the links with cultural traditions in various professions as representing important value bases for different work settings. But, as a consequence of the multi-professional character of their working lives, the people concerned end up by packaging their narratives in different boxes. On the surface we get the impression such a person functions as a kind of ‘civil servant’, regardless of what organisation they happen to work for. They are part of the modernistic project and perceive themselves as representatives of the organisation, and they want to work in a professional and rational manner. Different positions thus become separate

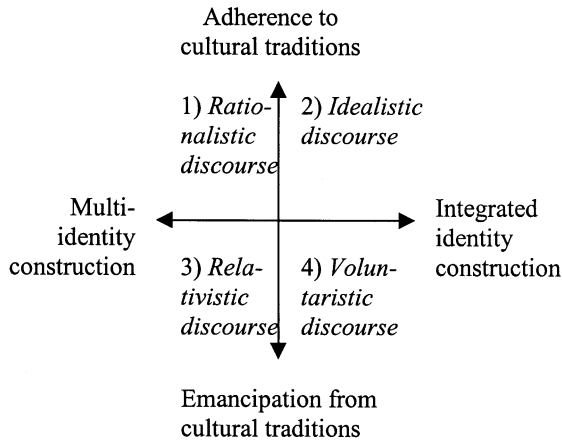


Fig. 2. Different ontological discourses revealed by boundary-crossing individuals.

projects in their working lives, and each project represents a separate identity which is hard to relate to the others. These people become multi-professionals through their working life journeys (e.g. Richard's views, especially as articulated during his work as a consultant for change projects). In our view certain underlying ontological prerequisites can be linked to this way of reasoning, which we associate with a *rationalistic* discourse.

The second discourse also includes the importance of being connected to cultural traditions, but this way of reasoning emphasises the importance of individuals as bearers of ideological and spiritual needs, as well as their responsibility for 'using' these traditions in a way that makes their lives more integrated and consistent. They seek a deeper philosophy in their travel through their working lives, and try to open the boundaries between professional and private spheres in making sense of their lives. One expression of this is the description of oneself as an autonomous part of a social movement (e.g. Diana's ambitions to enhance cultural awareness in the population). We can say that the narratives in this group correspond to a more *idealistic* discourse.

The third discourse also implies dividing work-life stories into separate parts. The stories describe people usually involved in a turbulent and time-consuming career race. Exciting tasks and experiences dominate the stories told. Action and the outer dynamic tempo provide a vigorous pulse in the different narratives; such narratives convey what can be called multiple endpoints (Gergen, 1997). This dynamic work situation marked by a plurality of voices can also be found in the individuals' private lives. It is difficult for them to find time for deeper reflexions when they are always on their way to new locations (as Grace, for example, describes in her narrative). These individuals live in an overwhelming stream of present experiences and have distanced themselves long ago from cultural traditions in classical ways. They construct their own collage of cultural impressions. Stimulating experiences in the present are the dominant memories related, providing a way for emphasising self-images. Those who convey stories of this kind seem to have a more *relativistic* way of reasoning.

The fourth discourse also communicates liberation from cultural traditions, but at the same time it includes a more integrated view of identity construction. Crises or other important changes force these people to develop a more complete view of themselves and to listen more to their own voices. They stress the need for self-knowledge and have also created space for a journey inwards. Such individuals act as free entrepreneurs and they do not describe their role as being related to any movement or tradition. Instead they make a point of the fact that they break patterns, and that they choose their own directions independently (as expressed by Ann in her narrative, for example). This outer boldness seems to arise because these individuals have reached a higher level of self-understanding. They also exhibit instances of free will and we can therefore link their ontological reasoning to a *voluntaristic* discourse.

Fig. 2 describes the extremes of the dimensions of identity construction and relations with cultural traditions. We believe it to be meaningful to reflect in these dimensions, even though it is difficult to classify every individual in an unambiguous way. Rather, every actor is on a journey in the space that the figure represents. In other words we can see movements from one way of reasoning to another throughout their working lives. For example, many of the subjects try to link their 'life fragments'

together into a more integrated way of living after repeated critical incidents (Diana, Richard and Ann are examples of this). Grace's identity construction can be described as an ongoing process in which she tends to talk more and more about the need for time and space for herself in a more existential way, implying the incorporation of new discourses in the future.

However, with the different discourses we can identify interesting meetings between 'the old' and 'the new' through the different ways of describing identity construction. We can also identify an interesting junction in the meeting between different ways of reasoning. Discourses number 2 and 4 unite in their quest for an 'inner entirety', but this search emerges in different ways. One discourse is to be found in the encounter with a cultural tradition while the other discourse finds itself in a new pattern of cultural impressions. Both these discourses are expressive of personal networks described in a more existential manner. In the narrating, no reference was made directly to professional contacts. Instead those concerned talked about deeper personal relationships with different kinds of significant people, e.g. parents, the family or close friends. A common denominator, however, is that these individuals express the need for articulating basic values and ideals in order to be able to create an integrated view of their own identity construction.

The content of discourses 1 and 3 also addresses value questions, but these descriptions and the associated reasoning are more instrumental. Discourse 1 represents adherence to cultural tradition, but the individuals do not connect this role with their own identity construction in their narratives. They act as rational and professional agents in different projects and stress the task and the institutional links (not their own individual role) in each such project. Those sticking mainly to discourse 3 emphasise the temporary character of different positions, and that their own voice is only one of many possible voices (cf. post-modernism). However, these individuals express identity construction in well-specified areas and package their narratives in special segments (multi-identity construction). But this loosely coupled self-image seems to be susceptible to the manipulation and domination of other discourses. These individuals are aware that each 'truth' concerning themselves is a construction of the moment. Nevertheless, both discourses describe contacts with other people as professional in a more instrumental way, i.e. the individuals mention people who have helped them get new work and people who they communicate with in their daily work.

8. Conclusion

Through our study of how boundary-crossing individuals construct their working life narratives in a self-reflexive manner we have uncovered ontological prerequisites behind their way of packaging their working-life stories.

The different discursive features can be seen as simplifications of the diverse ways in which boundary-crossing individuals interface in different contexts. Modern individuals search for identity in a multifaceted and boundaryless manner, and with high expectations. Accordingly, the contrasting perspectives presented here demonstrate

particular discourses that develop ways of understanding differences and similarities in identity constructions — that cross organisational borders and create new islands of meaning.

It is important to remember that identity construction should also be considered as a process. As the empirical study shows, people construct and re-construct identity throughout their lives, and they can move from multi-identity construction towards integrated identity construction and probably in the opposite direction too. They can also emancipate themselves from traditions or link themselves back to them again. Thus, boundary-crossing naturally also means that people can travel between different discourses and between different ways of organising their work at different periods in their lives.

This approach can be seen as an alternative or complement to traditional approaches to identity construction in working life (such as professionalism and gender). We further suggest that reflexive identity analysis promotes a descriptively more accurate understanding of differences in the way of reasoning among boundary-crossing individuals.

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