

The researcher's trajectory of transient identities while completing research and field work.

Introduction

This paper is a reflexive analysis of the plurality, modality and agency of identity transitions that "I" as a worker and "I" as a researcher have undergone during a period of insider research within a large Governmental Organisation.

The research project from which this paper arises is an ethnographic study that seeks to problematize and describe how identity affects group behaviour (Ellemers, 2005, Haslam, 2001, Tajfel, 1986, Thornberrow, 2001, Trice, 1993, Brown, 2001, Brown, 1999). This paper discusses in particular the researcher's identity while carrying out fieldwork (Coffey, 1999 :p 105, Coffey, 2000) and reflects on how that identity has changed over the course of the research as "I" as researcher matured (Coffey, 1999 p : 105) and "I" as a member of different teams learned and grew as an organisation member (Kirke, 2011, Ybema, 2009a, Ybema, 2009d). The research has produced a model of organisational and social identification that represents the strength of identity, hierarchical position of the respondents. "I" as a researcher also step aside and write about the "I" as a worker. This is autoethnography (Coffey, 1999 p:119) and (Richardson, 2000 p : 931 in Ybema p : 160). It also describes how my research and role identities have diverged and converged over the period of the research to the point where "I" now have a legitimised and combined research and role identity.

The paper also discusses how "I" as researcher discovered another personal identity through the research, that of the reflexive ethical controller of the self.

The ethical framework that the research was conducted under was one of “do no harm” and of gaining informed consent¹. This was achieved but at times elements of that framework were de-legitimised by actions of some members of the organisation who held hierarchical power and control over my action in my work and academic roles, and this conflict caused some disturbance in by research stance and conduct, as discussed below..

Narrative: A Personal Trajectory Of Identities

My progression through these identities began when “I” started to think about “identity” as being a possible factor in group behaviour. “I” was, at that time, a professional librarian responsible for delivering library, information and knowledge services to an identity group called a “business unit” that worked across the world and which was “subsidiary” of an American parent company.

As well as my work and research roles identities throughout the research “I” had other identities that formed a hierarchy(Pate, 2010) that was flexible and useful in different ways at different times. “I” have a gendered identity(Kopf, 1996 p : 645) as a white male; an educated identity as a post graduate; a class identity of notional lower middle class; a non work identity as a father, musician morris dancer and at that time, a proto student of anthropology. It is this and my work and role identities that are discussed in this paper in terms of how they have changed as “I” progressed through the research.

“I” was an insider in some fields, an outsider in others and in all fields trod a path of liminality, taking part but watching and questioning from “my” role identity. “I” was not an anthropologist or ethnographer at this stage, although “I” now look back and realise that “I” was acting as though “I” were one, and in

¹ <http://www.theasa.org/ethics.shtml>

my naiveté using some basic ethnographic fieldwork techniques. of questions and observations (Bernard, 2006p:2).

After five years observing group behaviours in a multinational, multi cultural revenue generating organisation my role changed. This occurred because my post was made redundant and I moved to work in the UK Civil Service.

The change of work role also enabled another identity transition. This was to be a more reflective one rather than a managerial “doing” identity. My academic identity had also changed as “I” had completed an MSc² and this enabled me to start thinking *in a more academic way* about identity and group behaviour. It is at this point that the legitimisation of identity can be addressed as it plays into an ethical identity which is addressed later. My burgeoning academic identity was legitimised in a personal sense but not an organisational one, as “I” was not carrying out meaningful research in any organisation and was not legitimised by the organisation that “I” worked for *at that time* to carry out research in the organisation. That legitimisation was to come later within the research period.

My role identity on joining the Civil Service was an industrial Information and Knowledge Manager, familiar with profit and loss but not at all familiar with policy and bureaucracy. It took some time to discover the Civil Service culture as an outsider because very little was done to help incomers like myself, to become part of the culture. The socialisation and liminal aspects of this transition cannot be covered here, suffice to say “I” found it very difficult to “become” a civil servant, and “I” still do not consider myself to be one.

² MSc Library and Information Management Bristol University 2004.

In 2005 “I” was promoted. This was multiple identity transition: role Identity, a change of geographical identity; a change of hierarchical identity as “I” was being promoted; a change of responsibility as “I” was to become responsible for staff management and organisational identity as “I” was to be working in a different part of the Civil Service.

The identity that from which “I” transitioned was one of being responsible for Policy Rules and Guidance (PRG), to one of being responsible for implementation of that policy. My core identity can be summarised up to this point as being; “I” work for the Civil Service but “I” am not a Civil Servant, even though “I” am an established Civil Servant with a Civil Service Pension.

My new role identity required that “I” was to enable different domain groups to understand what they knew about their work and to get them to share this knowledge with other groups in the organisation.

In my work identity “I” realised that there was a very definite series of signals being sent through the agency of clothing and other systems as described by (Lurie, 1981 p:3) and Bourdieu in his concept of bodily hexis and habitus(Bourdieu., 1977). As “I” grew more in that role identity, in parallel “I” also socialised myself into an academic identity by reading more about identity and organisational behaviour.

It is now appropriate to talk about the legitimisation of my identity in the organisation. It was at that point that my academic identity was legitimised in an organisational sense when “I” was given permission by my organisation to formalise my research interest, and applied to Cranfield University to carry out a PhD study³.

³ Supervised by Dr C Kirke, Socialisation identity and their effects on group behaviours. (Provisional title.)

This then presented an additional, personal ethical dilemma, one that at the time “I” was not fully aware of. Prior to this point “I” had been able to observe groups with relative ease. Because it was within my role identity to do so and my academic identity was not legitimised. “I” was able to observe groups and their interactions with an interested but not necessarily detached or self-conscious viewpoint. It was certainly not from a rational Academic point of View(Lastrucci, 1963 p:6, in Bernard 2006 p:5., Alvesson, 2010 : p156)

“I” now experienced my first period of transition where my academic and role identities started to merge. “I” became a participating insider(Ybema, 2009b), having to learn to detach myself from the group and having to observe using an academics eye. It was at this time that “I” also came to be viewed as an outsider by my organisation because “I” was observing them, watching them and in some sense marking them.

This reaction came from the person who was supporting me in my work and it was the first time but not the last that people would be upset by my work. This was the first time as a naive field worker that “I” had engendered this reaction.

The next identity transition occurred when, due to organisational changes “I” went to take a different post. Again my role identity changed; my geographic identity changed as did my academic identity and the legitimisation of that identity.

When “I” joined this team everything at this office was new to me. It was easier to see and maintain that academic boundary between the “I” of my role identity and the “I” of my academic identity. However my new line manager objected to me carrying out the research and de-legitimised my academic identity from his point of hierarchical power (Marcus, 1998pp:121-122 in

Ybema et al, p:145). “I” as a researcher had to resort to taking notes and observing, and observing without appearing to my line manager to be doing so. While I did not go as far as Collins, in having two different selves with different names (Collins, 2002), I did have two different research identities, an explicit and legitimised one when away from my line manager, and hidden one when in their presence. This enabled me to maintain at that time a more defined sense of liminality. “I” as researcher couldn’t openly take notes or talk to people about how groups behaved. “I” had to develop a covert field work identity and “I” became a subversive, underground anthropologist and “I” was viewed as an outsider, with my academic identity seen as a threat⁴.

The effect on my ability to carry out the research was that my ability to observe wider group behaviours was hindered. The positive outcome was that this enabled me to concentrate my observations on a group of four people based in one room.

“I” had not realised it at that time, but “I” as both a civil servant and “I” as an academic researcher were on another transition path. My role identity was about to change again. My post was closed and “I” as a worker would have no current role identity apart from being a Civil Servant and “I” would then be placed into the Redployment Pool (RDP), this was an identity that “I” emphatically did not want.

“I” had five weeks to prepare for another transition of my role identity.

At the time my feelings were that “I” had a new opportunity to work in and observe another team. “I” had already made my mind up to leave this team as

⁴ This will in due course form the basis of a separate paper as the act of having to be a subversive researcher in some senses hindered my research, but in others provided a very rich and interesting seam of observations on group behaviours towards individuals and other groups.

soon as “I” could. This event marked another transition point where my academic and role identities were moving from parallel identities to a combined and converged academic work/role identity.

The next day “I” in my academic identity was briefing one of my informants on the initial themes and the model from the data. This was because of her role identity in the organisation. On hearing that “I” was about to be placed into the RDP her eyes lit up and she asked me if “I” would like to work for her. This was a transition from two separate work based identities, to one where my academic and work identities converge on one that “I” call a pragmademic identity and role.

At this point, therefore, “I” started the formal process of transitioning from being an insider as both a role and de legitimised and subversive academic identity to becoming an outsider from that group and a re-legitimised academic identity in a different group.

“I” would be using the outcomes and learning from the study to improve group behaviours as part of my new line manager’s “Transformation” work. “I” wouldn’t need to hide the study as it was that cognitive identity she wanted as a key role to help her. My academic identity would be re-legitimised. “I” agreed to come over to do that, notwithstanding the ethical issues that now became salient in my now converged researcher/worker identity⁵.

This new ethical challenge was but another step in an extensive relationship with research ethics. My ethical identity developed a greater salience during both my Civil Service Career and during the period of my research.

⁵ “I” am writing this paper at my work desk with my Line Manager in full view.

When “I” joined the Civil Service my ethical identity was latent. “I” was ethically aware but this was in a sense of being “unconsciously competent”⁶.

Analysis and discussion

I have been observing groups in this and its predecessor organisation since 2005. The theoretical and wider themes that are recounted through the narrative are many and with their genesis in the fact that that during this period in my role identity “I” worked in a number of different teams and was familiar with many more as a partial outsider (Ybema, 2009b). Over this period “I” had transitioned from an interested amateur taking a managerialist approach (Alvesson, 1996 p:161) to a managerial problem to immature academic.

By approaching the research from this direction - a pragmatic rather than a purely academic direction - “I” created dissonance when “I” came to formalise my academic identity in that “I” was approaching the research as a managerial problem to solve, not an area of interest to research. The craft of field work was a an area of great learning for me , with my initial naive approach engendering a negative response. This incident at the beginning of the research caused me to reflect on my field work approach and reflect on fundamentals of the etiquette of field work. It led me to be much more circumspect when observing in the field as the research progressed (Van Maanen, 1988 p : 80).

Being an insider researching “at home” on a problem where “I” had previously taken a managerialist stance also caused problems in my academic ability and identity. This was because “I” was still in a role identity which meant my field

⁶ Attributed to Maslow and also to Noel Burch. A widely used term in coaching and training, see for example, <http://processcoaching.com/fourstages.htm>

was all around me (Alvesson, 2010 p : 156-174) . “I” did not need to travel very far to observe my ‘tribe’. “I” as researcher and worker just went to work each day. Initially the “field” was the team that “I” worked in, and where “I” carried out a pilot study. “I” was “at home”. The more general observations were carried out across the rest of the organisation- “the familiar”(Alvesson, 2010 p: 159-167).

“I” had also to take into account the many friendships and working relationships that “I” already had in place(Coffey, 2000 p : 39-58, p : 105). (Coffey, 1999pp : 39-58 : p 105, Coffey, 2000). However, many of these friends and working relationships proved to be extremely valuable sources of information as the research progressed(Coffey, 2000 p : 39-58). This was because of the perceived and actual difficulty in maintaining academic distance and objectivity from my informants, as expressed by Kirke, 2003⁷ and the group behaviours that “I” was observing. It was at this time that “I” developed a new set of identities that I have called *Cognitive identities*. This refers to my capacity and need to self reflect at all times and to understand which identity, role or academic “I” am thinking and “being “ in at any one time (Leary, 2003 p : 3). An example of this is shown when attending meetings. “I” attend meetings in my role capacity as a formal group member, taking part in the content of the meeting. “I” also take part as an academic observer, taking field notes on how groups behave in those confined and ritualised circumstances, observing the structure and interactions. It is very easy to forget which Identity “I” am in at times, observer or participant, and it is easy to not see actions that inform the research because “I” am “in” the meeting

⁷ <https://dspace.lib.cranfield.ac.uk/bitstream/1826/1054/1/Kirke%20PhD.pdf>

The transience of legitimisation of identity also became salient. At the stage, for example, when my line manager did not support my research “I” encountered the problem of the lack of legitimisation of my research because “I” was questioned on why “I” was “at work” when in my Outlook ^(TM) Calendar “I” was “on leave”. “I” in my role identity had to explain that “I” as an academic was carrying out interviews on the same site whilst “I” as a Civil servant was on leave (Burke, 2007 : p 27).

The completion of the interviews in December 2010 became a very dramatic transition point in my academic identity. With data buzzing round my head and on a high “I” completed notes for an initial themes briefing⁸ to those who represented the Institutional support for the research. “I” took this to one of my trusted informants to validate the initial findings. What was initially to be a thirty minute meeting turned into a two and a half hour discussion, punctuated by my friend going to meet his immediate senior officer. On his return “I” was able to develop a model from the data and in the process of achieving that my academic identity matured by another step.

During the conversation he gave me an anecdote during which, we both, at the same time put our fingers down on the sketched out proto model and said “that's where it is”. In my academic identity “I” felt vindicated. The model developed from the data could be applied to areas and behaviours that “I” as both a worker and researcher had not directly witnessed. This marked another phase in the “becoming” of my academic identity.

From this point, where “I” as researcher had carried out the first test of the model that had been developed from the data “I” “became” more situated in my academic identity. This was informed and reinforced by comments made

⁸ The Power of commitment Vs the shadow of bureaucracy. Internal Briefing.

separately by two of my informants; that it was good to get an outside view of what the organisation does as “my” organisation can be very insular and inward looking. This statement located me, as viewed by others inside the organisation as an outsider.

Depending on the support of different line managers and notwithstanding the trajectory of legitimisation and de legitimisation of my research identity “I” found myself managing the research trajectory by “flexing” time to carry out the research, or just carrying it out as part of my normal work because it was of benefit both to myself and my organisation. “I” called this a “pragmademic” approach because It recognises the pragmatic nature of my role identity in the organisation - recognising that this is not purely a research project but is addressing an organisational conundrum that allows and enables me to apply academic rigour and discipline to what remains an intractable business problem.

During the research an organisational identity change was forced on everyone in three affiliated organisations with the creation of one larger organisation. This new construct merged the previously separate identities of the three into one new single organisation⁹.

The effect of this on my role identity was that “I” was now responsible for work in the totality of the new organisation. With this “I” had to span three cultures. My “at home” culture, perceived by its members to be to be fast moving, low bureaucracy, described as a vernacular term within the culture as being very “tribal” (Kirke, 2007a) but dynamic; Support organisation perceived by its members to be slow moving but solid, high bureaucracy, and very tribal

⁹ Two agencies and one support organisation

and Technology agency, perceived by its members to be output driven and agile.

On reflection “I” now realise that as my field of study expanded the managerial element of the research expanded at what seemed to be an exponential rate. What did not expand as quickly was my academic ability to recognise this and maintain academic distance as the field grew.

During this period my academic identity began to inform my role identity at a much higher level than “I” had previously experienced. “I” as a researcher was much more reflective than “I” as a worker, as a worker “I” was too engaged with “the day job” to be truly critical and cognisant of the effects of identity and it was only by giving myself permission to be “a researcher” that “I” realised in and through my academic identity that “I” as both a researcher and worker had become much more of an outsider to the organisation that “I” was working in, belonged to and was studying.

This was another transition point and this “becoming” of my academic identity took the place of a weakening role identity. “I” realised that “I” was much more comfortable in my academic identity due to the dissonance between my role identity and my academic identity, even though my academic identity was de legitimised at this point. This was compounded by the antagonism that was shown towards my research by some members of my “at home” organisation. This antagonism flowed over into my role identity; “I” sought refuge and meaning in and through my academic identity. Also “I” realised that “I” was in transition from two identities, that of my role and that of an academic, towards one where “I” was both.

While the time that “I” in my role identity spent in that particular part of the Civil Service would make a very interesting autoethnographic study, that paper will rest for another time. Suffice to say that at that time “I” as a researcher became more of an insider, carrying out an ethnographic study at home while struggling to stay on the “right” side of the boundary of being an academic or being a manager (Ybema, 2009c p:103) This was, in my terms, my reflexive ability to understand and use appropriately my own cognitive identities and the salience of each at any particular point in time.

“I” became a subversive observer due to the presence of my hostile line manager, whose opposition forced me into this position.

through sitting at my desk and writing observations in emails and sending them to myself at regular intervals during the day. In this way it looked as though “I” was in my role identity “working” all of the time while not actually exercising my academic identity.

How did this affect me in terms of Identity? – “I” experienced dissonance in my academic identity. This made field work difficult during the day and also made the supporting reading and sense making during non work time very difficult.

Research carries an emotional loading. If we are committed researchers we engage with our research on many levels, and this was one time when “I” recognised that an emotional identity was salient (Coffey, 2000 p : 158). It came to me as I walked back to the office on the cusp of my significant identity transition from de-legitimised academic identity to fully legitimised and converged academic and role identity “I” felt a great weight go from my shoulders, “I” could move on to another team although “I” did not know which

one, and observe the behaviours of a different group as first of all an outsider, but in time becoming and insider with that group.

Conclusion

These experiences have demonstrated that identities have salience, transience and value during a research project. Each of these attributes can become salient at any time during the research. “I” have also described how carrying out research as an insider “at home” can cause identity dissonance between the researcher’s different identities. “I” as combined researcher and worker have shown how in a closed highly self-identified organisation carrying out research can challenge individuals who hold power over the researcher and how this can affect the research both positively and negatively. This paper also shows the value and risks of taking an autoethnographic approach to the study of identity and its effects in organisations when the researcher’s primary organizational identity is as an insider and not as a researcher. This paper also shows how the theoretical framework of social identity is applied to an individual, “I” and how “I” have been affected by the consequences and action that arise from the construct of “social identity” during the period of the research.

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