

Narrative Identity Work: Imaginary and Symbolic Stances Toward Underlying Lack

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Abstract

Identity work has increasingly been defined narratively, focusing on how individuals draw on discourses to create, sustain and transform preferred versions of the self (Svenningsson and Alvesson, 2003). Organizational scholars focus on understanding how narratives of the self are constructed and how identities emerge as fragile accomplishments that may be aimed at identity stability but often are uncertain and in flux (Brown and Coupland, 2015). Especially, the idea of identity insecurity has received increasing attention as an important dimension of identity work, which offers insights about how identities are worked on as well as regulated in organizational contexts (Knights and Clarke, 2014). Identity work seems to be marked by a continuous struggle (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002) in which organizational members seek to negotiate such insecurities, attempting, on the one hand, to construct preferred versions of the self (Kornberger and Brown, 2007: 500), while, on the other, navigating multiple and often contradictory discourses about who they are, how others see them and who they should be in a given context (e.g. Clarke, Brown and Hope Hailey, 2009).

In this paper, I offer some reflections about how such complexities may be researched using narrative methodologies that are informed by a psychoanalytic, specifically Lacanian perspective (Lacan, 1977a;b; 1988 a;b). The latter provides a more fine-grained approach to studying identity narratives, especially in view of the insecurities that mark them and the contradictory positions subjects take in drawing on different discourses to narrate the self. Specifically, this approach affords the opportunity to explore not only how selves are constructed

in narratives but also how such constructions frequently fail and, importantly, how such failures are responded to (e.g. Driver, forthcoming).

From a psychoanalytic perspective, identity work is always unsettled as it straddles a number of conflicting orders. There is the order of the real (Lacan, 1988b: 210) or that which we might really desire or seek to articulate but that we are always cut off from as we can only express ourselves through language or what Lacan calls the symbolic order (Lacan, 1988b: 210). The latter encompasses our social order and all the linguistic conventions by which we communicate (Lacan, 1977b: 245). None of this expresses what we really want. Hence, we experience anxiety that the ego defends against by making believe that we can still get at the real. This then enmeshes us in what Lacan calls the imaginary order (Lacan, 1988b: 177) in which we can articulate a self that knows who it is and can obtain what it wants. This is the order of common speech and, what we might refer to as, routine identity narration, in which we can cover over any underlying lack. Yet, if one listens more closely to such ordinary identity narratives, it becomes apparent that we get routinely bogged down by our inability to say exactly what we wish to say as evidenced by numerous tensions, contradictions and other ambiguous rhetorical creations that unsettle our imaginary constructions and reiterate fundamental lack (Benvenuto and Kennedy, 1986: 13). Rather than articulating who we really are, we instead reiterate misrecognition, alienation and otherness and not our own but others' desires, or what Lacan calls the Other (Lacan, 1977b: 214).

Perhaps surprisingly the solution for all of this, from a Lacanian perspective, is not that we somehow rid ourselves of the imaginary and learn to get to what is real, which remains an impossibility (Muller and Richardson, 1982: 373). The question then becomes how to deal with such disruptions and what position to take toward underlying lack, such as imaginary versus

symbolic responses (Vanheule et al., 2003). On the imaginary side, when we experience disruptions of the imaginary, we see this as a personal problem which we try to solve by working ever harder to overcome it making us susceptible to promises made by and in organizations that we can obtain the enjoyment we fantasize about (Hoedemaekers, 2009: 190). On the symbolic side, the same experience is seen as a structural problem pointing to empowering alternatives (Vanheule et al., 2003: 335). This means, it becomes possible to work with structural lack and take different positions toward it (Vanheule et al., 2003: 336) opening up a wider view of life (Vanheule et al., 2003: 334) as a process of becoming (Fink, 2004: 63) even if the enjoyment we fantasize about it not attained.

The implication of this for research on narrative identity work is that it becomes possible to explore identity stability and insecurity as well as power relations in organizations from completely different vantage points. Specifically, we can explore stability as imaginary constructions of the self and insecurity as the surfacing of inevitable lack. Moreover, we can take this further and examine different positions taken toward this lack, such as imaginary versus symbolic responses. In turn, this provides a more complex and nuanced understanding of how identities are narrated and how this in turn makes us more or less vulnerable to organizational control. I will attempt to illustrate this using excerpts from my own empirical research (Driver, forthcoming). For instance, we can look at a narrative in which someone describes who they are and what they want and first examine this as an imaginary self-construction in which unconscious desire and lack are covered over.

My job is more than just my job. It is my life, who I am...Even when I am at home I am at work...Working with some of my colleagues makes my job difficult because of a power struggle and lack of respect, which can make the atmosphere somewhat hostile. I just go back to my students when this happens, I do it for them and it is okay because that is who I am and that is my purpose...I see myself as a loving, caring, encouraging and sometimes stern parent to hundreds of students...I am identified by it in the community

as well. I am the professor...I live my job in my whole life...That is important to me because I am honored to have the job and it shows off my hard work...It helps build respect...I do it because it makes me happy (31).

In this narrative excerpt, we see the construction of an imaginary self, the happy and fulfilled professor, disrupted by various ambiguities, omissions, contradictions around feeling disrespected. This lack is not acknowledged and the narrator instead covers this over and repairs the imaginary self seemingly stuck in an imaginary order where he can obtain what he really wants. This also implies that the narrator has very little distance especially to the more dysfunctional aspects of his work and has to take them on as personal problems. He has to work ever harder to maintain the illusion that by making his job his whole life he can find what he unconsciously desires, namely the missing real.

On the other hand, we can find narratives in which individuals acknowledge contradictions and underlying lack but take a more symbolic stance toward this by depersonalizing it as a structural condition. That is, they do not believe it is a personal failing to experience lack but rather something that cannot be avoided and that also serves to distance the self from discourses that promise otherwise.

There are challenges in my workplace that I have had to learn to navigate...Our Executive Director, for example, is very difficult to deal with...she puts things off until they become critical and then gets nasty while we try to rush it. Then there are lots of unspoken expectations about how much time we have to spend at work...Two people have already quit because they couldn't deal with her moodiness...All in all, it's still a good job and I strive to do it well. But I have had to learn not to take things personally and that frustration is part of dealing with other people. I try not to get mad about it. After all, they would not call it "work" if it was all fun (56).

In this narrative we see that the narrator constructing an imaginary self around having a good job and doing it well, but here the disruptions of such a construction are not covered over. As the narrator acknowledges some of the contradictory or dysfunctional aspects of her working

self, we see that she does not cover them over but rather underlines them as a structural issue that is part of what work is about. In this sense, the narrator distances herself from promises that her employer may make about the happiness or fulfillment that her job can offer and she is more empowered to craft a self that is not necessarily aligned with dominant discourses in her organization.

While this provides only a brief illustration of the approach I am outlining, the point is to explore narrative identity work as a much more complex interplay of stability and insecurity and, therefore, to obtain a different perspective on the lived experience of individuals and how identity work unfolds over time. It also offers a different perspective on examining how narrative identity work illuminates relations of power in organizations. It suggests that both agency and subjection may be mapped on to struggles with self and unconscious desire and therefore work in and through the narrative construction of the self. Put simply, the narration of identity is, in some way always already implicated in relations of power, as individuals seek to realize self and desire in and through work thereby drawing on available discourses in ways that render them more or less empowered.

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