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Identity Work across Boundaries in a Digital World

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Abstract: In this paper we examine the identity work involved in negotiating work-life boundaries and the implications new digital media may have for this. We used an innovative combination of video diaries and follow-up interviews with fifteen social entrepreneurs to provide detailed and reflexive insights into participants' lived experiences. In this paper, we present some preliminary analysis, which indicates the tension between community- and family-oriented identities for the social entrepreneurs, and the implications of this for on-line identity management. Our main aims from the session are to elicit discussion both of the development of the underlying theoretical framework and the data collection technique.

Track: Identity

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1 Identity and work-life boundaries

In the view of work-life literature, our lives are made up of different social roles that can come into conflict, hence we create physical, temporal and psychological boundaries between them (Clark, 2000). However, having created these boundaries, we then have to transition across them (Ashforth et al, 2000). While we have developed rituals and practices to help this transition, such as dressing for work, this process is helped or hindered by the ‘permeability’ of the boundaries (Nippert-Eng, 2006). Research has emphasised individual preferences for either keeping different parts of our lives separate (segmentation) or for eschewing boundaries and preferring role integration (e.g. Golden and Giesler, 2007). A number of studies have added detail to this conceptualisation by distinguishing specific ‘boundary management tactics’ (e.g. Sturges, 2012).

In this paper, and following Cohen et al’s (2009) emphasis on the dynamic nature of identity boundaries, we focus specifically on the identity work involved in negotiating work-life boundaries. Our identity claims are always made with respect to some particular context (Ybema et al, 2009), and in light of our positioning in various meta-narratives (for example how mothers should be). From this perspective, we may ask ourselves: What tensions are revealed as we manage such identity claims across boundaries? How do we negotiate these identity claims particularly as we move between these different audiences and situations?

2 Digital identities and work-life boundaries

Digital technologies may create particular problems for identity management and new contexts for identity work as we service a variety of identities across different media (Papacharissi, 2011). Digital technology potentially creates additional boundaries (e.g. different social media platforms) and produces new problems for maintaining boundaries. Ollier-Malaterre et al (2013) suggest that social media can create problems for the dynamic management of self-presentation as when we are on-line ‘disclosure and interactions cannot be easily tailored to dyadic interactions and roles are often enacted simultaneously’ (p.650). Thus we may be attempting to position self with a range of audiences who are simultaneously present but with whom we have different identity relations. Indeed, social media potentially blurs the line between what is considered public and private.

We wish to consider the specific performance requirements raised by moving between various on-line and physical selves. Previous research on micro-transitions has tended to draw on fairly lengthy transition periods (e.g. the commute, Ashforth et al, 2000) but digital technologies may make these transitions more like very rapid ‘switches’.. If identity is situated and negotiated with others, what tensions are raised when this has to be accomplished across rapidly changing contexts or simultaneously?

In the study presented here, our focus is on analysing individuals’ visual and spoken narratives to gain insight into the identity work involved in micro-transitions (switches) within and between the physical and digital worlds.

3 Social entrepreneurs

We base this study on the transitional identity work of social entrepreneurs (SEs). Simply put, SEs ‘employ market-based methods to improve social problems’ (Grimes et al, 2012: 460), although this definition masks a rather contested term e.g. see Arent, 2013). Theoretically this group are of specific interest in relation to the issue of transitional identity

work because their work/life boundaries are potentially highly permeable. Often they are pursuing a social impact agenda in their work to which they may feel very committed, and they may work closely with their own social network in pursuing their work goals, as well as making extensive use of digital media to garner support for their activities.

4 Method

SEs were recruited to the study via a range of methods (e.g. personal contacts and direct emails to social enterprise networks); 15 SEs have participated in the study at the time of writing.

We used an innovative combination of video diaries and interviews (Henry and Feters, 2012) to explore the issue of transitional identity work. Each SE and kept a video diary of any 'switching' they noted across different aspects of their lives for a period of one week. Although shown some examples of video clips, SEs were left to make their own decisions as to what constituted a 'switch' for them. At the end of the week, participants were debriefed and returned the video recordings. Participants were then invited to attend an hour long recorded interview. The aim of the interview was partly to discuss some of the video excerpts collected, but also to embed these discussions in a more in-depth understanding of the participants' lives through exploring their backgrounds and life commitments.

Such a methodological strategy provides a detailed insight into the lives of our social entrepreneurs which we feel is best captured by narrative analysis (Andrews et al, 2013). Here we are combining the SEs' life stories (the meaning SE has for them and their experiences as SEs) with their specific stories of managing multiple identities and identity transitions triggered by or encapsulated in the video excerpts. Our data therefore form multi-layered narratives. This method itself raises many interesting identity issues. In particular, reviewing the video excerpts within the interview elicits identity work on behalf of the participants as self-reflexivity is triggered by reviewing their own narratives, and they strive to both present a narrative of their 'self' as social entrepreneurs and account for the 'self' presented in the video to the interviewer.

5 Preliminary Analysis

We are still at the early stages of analysing these data. The challenge for our project is to retain the narrative and personal quality of our participants' narratives, while relating this to broader social positioning and meta-narratives. In this developmental paper, we try out some methods of analysis and presentation, seeking feedback on how these could best be developed. Here we have space to present only some indicative data (one case example).. Our example here is indicative of the wider sample.

David

The aim of David's social enterprise is to facilitate digital inclusion, providing affordable broadband services and technology support to a rural community. He is a father and works at home, in the community his enterprise is servicing. David remarked in his interview that "we say we're a community based organization [so] I think some of the customers expect there to be that sort of blurring almost... when you go about [in the community] people will talk to you about work".

This theme of the blurring between work and family life is explored further in his recounting of an event around a co-operative he had been working with:

“one of the members left and started a really acrimonious campaign against the other people who were left, online, blogging all the time, making lots of accusations..... because of that I think it made me think twice about stuff that I posted online because it made me quite sensitive to the fact that I can post something that seems perfectly, you know, normal but then potentially it could be construed by someone who wants to paint what I’m doing in a bad light ... It’s given me quite a nuanced view of it.. and from a personal point of view... I don’t like the thought of putting out a lot of personal information about my family and what I’m having for tea and everything .. just in case it is used by someone against me at some point in the future”.

Some social enterprises (as here) may draw their legitimacy from being embedded in the local community and such positioning may encourage the blurring of boundaries between personal and work worlds. However, here, David emphasises the difficult identity work that ensues as positioning himself as open to the community also exposes self to a range of audiences. Tension is created between being embedded in the community and experiencing threats to self. From an identity work perspective, identity is a dialogic concept (Beech, 2008) and an on-line identity is subject to many constructions from many audiences. This story provides illustration of Ollier-Malaterre et al’s (2013) theoretical concern with ‘effective’ on-line identity management. However their emphasis on skilled performances here raises the spectre of paralysis, as David tries to anticipate all potential audiences and future readings of ‘self’.

One video played during the interview involved David talking about making dinner on his non-work family day (Friday). Reviewing this video stimulated a discussion around what triggered switching between activities and roles. Commenting that it is the children’s routines that trigger switches, David went on to say

“ I think the interesting thing is though that occasionally I’ll look at emails in the middle of that period with the kids, normally on my phone..... I think ‘oh well you know the chips are going to be another five minutes in the oven and [the children] are quite happy ... so I’ll just check the emails, see what’s come in’. And then you get something which is maybe a bit snotty and .. again puts you in a bad mood.... Then you think .. do I respond to this? What do I do? And then before you know it, the chips are burning, the kids are shouting because they have detected that you’re not, sort of, in the same space... you’re present but they’ve got a sixth sense for, sort of, seeing when you’re not actually there for them. So I’m trying to stop doing that but .. it’s very difficult because ...[I’m] wanting to see if I’ve got a response to something [on the smartphone] .. I think it comes back to being a social entrepreneur.. because the projects that we do .. I really believe in as well.. we’re not just doing it for the money... I’m quite passionate about [it] ..”

From this account, David performs identities of Dad - which here is largely enacted as ‘being there for them’ - and Social Entrepreneur - which may be enacted as ‘being passionate about the work’. The switching here is self-instigated, since the dad identity has been established by being there in the kitchen with the children. Through digital means, performing social entrepreneur can be enacted contemporaneously. However, ‘being there’ is not confined to a physical space and ‘being passionate’ encompasses being angry. The children are no longer playing their part in creating competent Dad and the digital audience has proven to be unreliable for competent SE. So the potentially untroubled dual performance is threatened

and David here is caught in a tension between his desired positionings as ‘caring father’ and ‘caring entrepreneur’, and unable to effectively perform either.

6 Discussion Points and Further Development

At this preliminary stage of analysis, our data already begin to complicate ideas of segmentation, integration and boundary management through highlighting the difficult identity work involved in managing our identities for different audiences, both on- and off-line, and with different purposes in mind.

At the conference, we would like the opportunity to discuss and hence develop two aspects to these data:

- What theoretical concepts can best inform our understanding of rapid shifts between off-line and on-line identities? What insights can identity work offer here?
- How can we best benefit from the multi-layered narrative data gathered, how this can best be presented?

We would also like to take the opportunity to reflect on using these particular methods and engage in a reflexive debate about video diaries.

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