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Sub-theme 18

Identity and Change: How “Who we are” Influences How we drive or Cope with the  
Unexpected

**‘Organizational misfits and positive identity construction: Practitioner-  
academics as agents of change’**

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## **‘Organizational misfits and positive identity construction: Practitioner-academics as agents of change’**

### **Introduction**

Individuals who make career transitions from one professional domain to another often face considerable challenge in adapting to new role demands and (re)constructing their professional identities (Hoyer & Steyaert, 2015; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Nicholson, 1984). Especially among veteran professionals who bring with them prior knowledge, work norms and well-established identities to the new work context, the initial experience of misfit and work-identity integrity violation can be stressful and uncomfortable (Beyer & Hannah, 2002; Gardiner, 2016; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006). A body of literature has examined how these individuals undertake identity work to negotiate, revise and alter their identities so as to achieve better fit between their professional selves and their work contexts (Conroy & O’Leary-Kelly, 2013; Ibarra, 1999; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Watson, 2008). It highlights the outcome of the identity process in eliminating tension and misfit, enabling career actors to secure legitimacy and become effective in their new role or environment. Although Nicholson’s (1984) seminal article on work role transition theory recognizes the profound effects of such transitions on both the individuals and their organizations, much of the literature has focused on the outcomes of transitions for individual career actors. Responses to identity threat arising from misfit have often been framed in terms of attempts to minimize their negative consequences and maladaptive identity-related outcomes at the individual level. Less attention has been paid to the organizational outcomes of career actors’ efforts to overcome misfits and construct positive work-related identities.

In contrast, this study examines how positive identity construction among ‘organizational misfits’ whose identities are contested leads to change in organizational practices. The concept of ‘organizational misfits’ refers to individuals whose career trajectories and work norms deviate from the prototypical patterns in their organizations (Kleinbaum, 2012; Kristof, 1996; Voelpel, Leibold, & Tekie, 2006). The experience of misfit during the crossing of career and work role boundaries can be intense and enduring, and is a common source of identity threat that triggers responses in the quest to construct positive identities (Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010; Petriglieri, 2011). The analytical framework adopted in this paper builds on an emerging strand of research that views identity work as a form of embedded agency that leads to organizational and institutional change (Creed, DeJordy, & Lok, 2010; Creed, Scully, & Austin, 2002; Glynn, 2008; Horton & de Araujo Wanderley, 2016; Rao, Monin, & Durand, 2003; Vogel, Rodell, & Lynch, 2016). It also draws on the insight of an established sociological tradition that highlights the role of misfits or marginal actors as agents of change (Coser, 1962; Hughes, 1949; Merton, 1972; D. Meyerson & Tompkins, 2007; D. E. Meyerson & Scully, 1995; Simmel, 1950). The study postulates that individuals’ efforts to buffer the experience of misfit by constructing positive professional identities in career transitions can bring about change-oriented agency and contribute to bottom-up organizational change. Social psychologists have long recognised that people have a tendency to maintain and enhance a positive conception of themselves in the work domain (Dutton et

al., 2010; Gecas, 1982). This self-esteem motive functions not only to protect the self against social rejection or exclusion but also prompts individuals to create ‘opportunity structures’ or contexts that maintain or increase positive evaluations of the self (Cast & Burke, 2002; Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995; Swann Jr, 1990). By highlighting positive identity construction as a core mechanism driving the action of organizational misfits, this study seeks to contribute to our understanding of the organizational and structural consequences of micro-level identity work. The identity perspective also enriches the sociological/structural explanation of why misfits or outsiders are predisposed to be change-oriented agents.

### **The empirical study**

The empirical study looks at a group of experienced practitioners who had made career changes to become academics: they are referred to as ‘practitioner-academics’. These people can be described as ‘organizational misfits’ in two respects. First, their career trajectories deviate from the prototypical academic careers and thus may be viewed as lacking in legitimacy by their academic peers. Illegitimate or non-conforming members of social groups are often penalized and occupy marginal positions if they persist (Kleinbaum, 2012). And second, their prior occupational socialization and work experience in the practitioner world necessarily affects socialization in the academic context (Beyer & Hannah, 2002; Louis, 1980; Nicholson, 1984). Research has shown that experienced newcomers encounter significant entry transition barriers to becoming fully legitimate members of new communities of practice (Gardiner, 2016; Wenger, 1998). The transition from the world of practice to academia can be particularly difficult and riddled with tension owing to the pervasive research-practice divide and contrasting knowledge practices and *modus operandi* of the two communities (Blenkinsopp & Stalker, 2004; Carton & Ungureanu, 2017; Lam, 2007; Rynes, Bartunek, & Daft, 2001). Practitioner-academics thus serve as archetypal examples of ‘organizational misfits’ for the purpose of this study. The study examines how the tactics that they use to overcome the negative experience of misfit and construct positive professional identities bring about changes in the knowledge and work practices of their host work contexts and beyond.

The empirical evidence is based on 40 individual interviews with practitioner-academics in arts, humanities and social sciences from several UK research universities. The interviewees were experienced practitioners who had joined academia mostly in their mid-careers with some making the transition in their late-careers. They were identified by searching the webpages of the relevant departments and examining closely the CVs of individuals. The empirical investigation focuses on their responses to identity threat during the transition journey, and the actions undertaken to construct positive professional selves. The majority had been in academia for some time (5-15 years) at the time of the study, and some gave follow-up interviews a few years after the first interviews. This temporal dimension allows the tracking of the individuals’ transition experience over time in addition to the retrospective accounts given. The analysis shows how their identity work tactics disrupt the established knowledge hierarchy in academia, and lead to the legitimation of new modes of knowledge production (e.g. audio-visual doctoral programmes in media arts) and development of

atypical 'hybrid' career tracks (e.g. 'professor of practice' in management and other social science disciplines).

### **Preliminary findings**

The majority of the practitioner-academics interviewed reported experiencing initial work-identity integrity violation (Pratt et al 2006), the discomfort of status loss and devaluation of the experience accumulated in their previous practitioner careers. Some felt professionally downgraded in the beginning and were adamant that they had to start at the bottom of the career hierarchy. Others found themselves 'infantilized' by their academic colleagues because of their inability to theorize or articulate their ideas in academic language. The experience of misfit and identity threat arouses social motives, particularly the desire to validate one's position as a legitimate role entrant (Ibarra and Barbulescu 2010). Hall (1971) argues that acquiring a sense of self-esteem and work competence is critical to stepping into new roles and identities throughout one's career. The analysis identifies two different identity work strategies pursued by the practitioner-academics for gaining legitimacy and constructing positive professional selves: a) 'identity restructuring' through integration and differentiation in order to reduce or overcome organizational misfit; and b) a 'positive distinctiveness' strategy to protect their practitioner identities and exploit their 'misfit' as a resource. The evidence suggests that the majority of the mid-career entrants who aspire to become fully-fledged academics adopt the former whereas many of the veteran late-career entrants pursue the latter.

#### *Identity restructuring strategy: Negotiating and challenging knowledge practices*

Identity restructuring is an agentic process of adaptive identity development through which individuals alter their identities in order to achieve a better fit between their self-conceptions and external demands (Dutton et al., 2010; Petriglieri, 2011). The analysis shows that those practitioner-academics who aspire to become 'proper academics' actively learned academic work practices and modes of knowledge creation, and sought to 'customize' (Pratt et al 2006) their identities to fit academic role demands. In the interviews, some saw themselves as mid-way in the transition 'toward becoming an academic'. Among those who had been in academia for some time, their academic identities became more salient. Some proclaimed themselves as 'academics' in the context of their employment; others declared that they were *not* practitioners anymore. However, the interviews also suggest that their apparent dis-identification with their past practitioner selves is not always accompanied by unambiguous identification with the present. Probing deeper into the narratives in the interviews reveals a more ambivalent picture of simultaneous identification (integration) and dis-identification (differentiation), and frequent oscillation between their past practitioner and present academic selves. For example, one who had been in academia for over 10 years continued to see himself as a misfit, describing himself as 'a sort of slightly weird marginal academic' because he was not a theoretician. Another revealed that he was 'perpetually being somewhere in between the two worlds'. These statements are indicative of an ambiguous condition of

identity integration and differentiation – they identify themselves as partial but not full members of the academic community.

For the majority, identity restructuring entails overlaying an academic identity onto the practitioner one in a ‘nested duality’, characterized by a changeful and ambivalent relationship (Brewer, 1999). The relative prominence of either identity may vary according to the situational contexts or social motives activated. It enables the individuals to reduce the negative experience of being organizational misfits while striving to achieve optimal balance in (re)constructing their professional selves in the host work environment. This approach to positive identity construction is what Brewer (1991) describes as ‘on being the same and different at the same time’ (Brewer 1991). It is an identity hybridization strategy that gives individuals the psychological freedom and cognitive resources not only to alter themselves internally but also act as agents of change externally. Through negotiating and reconciling the contrasting knowledge practices associated with their hybrid identities, the practitioner-academics were able to shape and bring about changes in their work contexts. Some of the changes were subtle, ‘small wins’ (Weick, 1984) accomplished through subversive tactics and innovative recomposition of academic and practitioner ways of working and knowing. For example, many were critical of the academic language games and deliberately avoided using academic jargon in their writing in order to make their work accessible to practitioners. This ‘deliberate ignorance’ (McGoey, 2012) is a rebuke of the academic language style and an attempt to subvert the cooptive power of insider language. Some of the practitioner-academics, notably in performing/media arts, became skilful linguistic creators by developing hybrid languages in their work. For example, one recounted how she created a ‘meta-language’ that combines ‘music, dance and text’ in order to build bridges between the academic and practitioner worlds.

Beyond the individual, isolated incidents of non-conforming and innovative practices in day-to-day work, concerted actions were undertaken by some of the more experienced practitioner-academics to challenge the established knowledge and career hierarchy in academia and assert control over the definition of what constitutes ‘legitimate’ and ‘valuable’ knowledge. There are two notable examples. The first is the creation and subsequent diffusion of an ‘audio-visual PhD programme in Media Arts – one that integrates audio-visual components with academic writing in the research process and output. The interviews and documentary evidence suggest that this was an outcome of the active campaigning by a group of practitioner-academics who formed a ‘Practice Committee’ to promote practice work and non-textual forms of knowledge over a number of years, and eventually succeeded in institutionalising the programme, within their university and elsewhere. The second example is the incremental legitimation of an atypical ‘practice-oriented’ career path in several social science disciplines at one of the universities looked at in this study. A small number of practitioner-academics, who felt marginalized within the conventional career, was the initial driving force behind this. The process began with their interest-driven action to seek an alternative career track and job title that reflected their value and distinctiveness as practitioner-academics. Their appointment as ‘professors of practice’, initially treated as *ad hoc* special arrangements in two departments, subsequently led to wider acceptance of the practice career track within the University.

### *Positive distinctiveness strategy: Job crafting and advocacy*

Positive distinctiveness is an identity differentiation strategy aiming at protecting one's distinctive identity and creating a positive social meaning for that identity (Dutton et al., 2010; Petriglieri, 2011; Roberts, 2005). It seeks to communicate and affirm the notion that difference or misfit is valuable (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002). Many of the veteran practitioners who joined academia in their late-careers pursue this strategy for gaining acceptance as 'organizational misfits'. Common to these individuals is the dominance of their practitioner identities which serve as anchors in their adaptation to academic roles. Few aspired to become fully-fledged academics and the majority sought to establish themselves by using a combination of teaching and quasi-academic roles, without subjecting themselves to the full demands of academic membership that include research. As they accumulated experience over time, some engaged in job crafting (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001) by enlarging their quasi-academic roles to incorporate brokering activities to facilitate interaction and knowledge exchange between their academic and practitioner colleagues. Many recognized the increased importance of the 'knowledge transfer' agenda in academia and saw this as an opportunity to undertake an activity that is perceived as valuable so as to gain credibility. For example, one set up a policy-oriented research group to serve as a 'portal' for knowledge exchange and saw this as an import avenue for 'embedding' himself in the academic department.

Another strategy of 'positive distinctiveness' involves 'advocacy' whereby individuals deploy their identities to advance the interests and enhance the collective self-esteem of their identity groups (Creed & Scully, 2000). Many of practitioner-academics interviewed remained psychologically close to their 'practice colleagues' and frequently acted as their 'representatives' in negotiating for resources and support. Some expressed concern about the 'low status' of practice people amongst academics and the difficulties they had encountered in research and promotion. One recounted how, over the years in her role as Head of Department, she tried hard to integrate the practice people and 'do everything to help them maintain their practice'. Another spoke about how he created 'a sympathetic space' for practitioners in order to 'get their confidence' to engage with academics. At times, these individuals act as 'gatekeepers' to facilitate the entry of practitioner experts into academia. All these are indicative of their attempts to elevate the collective self-esteem of their identity group from which they derive theirs. Advocacy activities are both expressive and instrumental as they involve claiming and signally one's social identity while attempting to foster a positive value of that identity group by influencing others' perceptions and effecting change in their favour (Creed & Scully, 2000). In sum, these practitioners-academics use their 'misfit' as a resource for transforming identity challenges into opportunities for positive identity construction and self-expansion. Their actions not only create a positive sense of self that resonates with others but also have the potential to facilitate cooperation between members from the academic and practitioner communities. Brokerage creates opportunities for relationship building, and advocacy enhances the attraction of practitioners as an 'outsider' minority group within academia and helps to create more equal relationships.

## Summary and conclusion

The experience of misfit is commonly associated with negative outcomes for both individuals and their organizations. This study has shown that individuals' efforts in constructing positive work-related identities can overcome the negative consequences of misfit and lead to change-oriented agency. Misfits can be pro-active 'co-creators' of their work environment (Vogel et al., 2016). While strategies for positive identity construction are personal, they have wider organizational and structural consequences. The analysis presented above shows how identity work tactics can disrupt established organizational practices and bring about bottom-up change through micro-level activities and 'small wins' (Weick, 1984) that serve as building blocks.

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