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*Creating the interviewer: identity work  
in the management research process*

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**ABSTRACT** This article examines identity dynamics in the qualitative research interview within the context of management research. It is argued that the identity of the interviewer is actively constructed through the interview process, and that the interview itself is a place where identity work takes place. Using a range of examples from the author's own experience, the key factors that impact upon the mutual construction of identity, and the purposes of those constructions, are outlined. It is argued that identity work functions to decrease the ambiguity that surrounds the research interview.

**KEYWORDS:** *identity work, interview, management research*

### *Introduction*

The interview is the key research tool for those who use qualitative methods. Within the social sciences generally the interview has had a long history, and it is not difficult to see why. The interview can be used in many different formats and has been categorized in numerous different ways. For example, interviews can be structured, semi-structured or unstructured (King, 1994); or can take a particular theme, for example life histories (Musson, 1998); critical incidents (Chell, 1998); or the generation of personal constructs (Cassell et al., 2000). Mason (2002) suggests that the popularity of the interview method among qualitative researchers is striking and, given the prevalence of the interview within social science research, it is not surprising that there are many tips and guidance for the potential interviewer. From the range of texts available we can learn about such issues as how to develop rapport, enable our interviewees to feel comfortable enough to talk to us about sensitive data, or, alternatively, stop them from going off the point. More technically as social science students we learn about the technicalities of the

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interview situation ranging from the nature of closed versus open-ended questions to the importance of regularly renewing the batteries in our tape recorders.

More recently however there has been an increased focus on the interview as an interactive process where meaning is co-constructed (e.g. Denzin, 2001; Holstein and Gubrium, 1997). Within this framework the interview is seen as an arena where both interviewer and interviewee are actively constructing and interpreting the process, potentially in different ways. This article focuses on an aspect of that process: the creation of interviewer identity. The article is located within the area of management research. Management research has a broad focus, with an underlying theme being the processes by which management occurs in organizations. Unlike other areas of social science where there has been a long-term history of epistemological debates, and an increased use of qualitative methods, these methods are still considerably under-represented in the key outputs of the field (Buehring et al., 2003).

The article begins with a consideration of the different roles of the interviewer within the different schools of management research. I then argue that the identity of the interviewer (and indeed the interviewee) is actively constructed through the interview process. Through a range of examples from my own research, I aim to demonstrate the significance that this identity construction has for the interview generally. In focusing mainly on the interviewer, I am not neglecting the significance of the interviewee. Rather, in the spirit of Johnson and Duberley's (2000) call for greater reflexivity in management research, this chapter has emerged as a result of a researcher reflecting on her role in the various interviews she has conducted.

### *Positioning the interviewer in different epistemological approaches*

It is difficult to discuss the role of the researcher without some critique of epistemological perspective and the paradigms that underlie that perspective. Clearly the role of the interviewer is different given the epistemological approach used, and different types of interviews are used within a variety of epistemological approaches. This is something rarely considered within the literature, where the interview is often treated as an epistemologically neutral device for data collection where technical expertise is the most important issue. However, the interview itself as a process means something different given the epistemological assumptions held by the researcher. Management research is often characterized as lacking paradigmatic development in a Kuhnian sense (Kuhn, 1970) because of its theoretical and methodological diversity (e.g. Pfeffer, 1993, 1995; Van Maanen, 1995). Guba and Lincoln (1994) identify four paradigmatic positions: positivism; post-positivism; critical theory and constructivism. These can be seen as four generic schools of management thought which have been widely debated and are thought to

influence most substantive areas of management research (e.g. Alvesson and Deetz, 2000; Alvesson and Wilmott, 1996; Hancock and Tyler, 2001). These schools of thought and sets of attendant assumptions about human behaviour, epistemology and ontology lead to a different set of methodological commitments. Within a positivist paradigm the interviewer is the neutral collector of data. The researcher is in the role of the expert fact finder and hypothesis tester. From this objectivist epistemological stance they will ask the interviewee questions and will have no impact on the interview process, as a result of using the 'right' methodological procedures to avoid contamination. Interviewees are the object of our scientific curiosity and respond accordingly.

The lack of recognition of subjectivity by positivist researchers has led to the development of post-positivist stances where researchers have focused upon interpreting the meanings that individuals ascribe to particular situations. Here the researcher is likely to test and reflect upon their own inferences to ensure that they are making the correct interpretation of the interviewee's views. However, the ontological assumptions underlying these kinds of approaches are still based on a realist ontology and an objectivist epistemology. Reflection here is about testing and evaluating the researchers' own inferences by an appeal to the 'directly observable' (e.g. Ross and Roberts, 1994; Torbert, 1999) so that any account will correspond with the interviewee's own subjectivity. The researcher is still looking for the 'right answer', but recognizing the subjectivity within the situation. Many qualitative researchers conduct their interviews within this tradition. The reliability and validity checks that derive from positivist approaches are still appropriate within this framework and can provide the credibility needed for research to look truly 'scientific' (Symon et al., 2000).

From a critical theory perspective, the role of the interviewer is somewhat different. Critical theorists are concerned to preserve critique of the status quo and simultaneously liberate people from asymmetrical power relations, dependencies and constraints. This agenda is expressed by the epistemic standard of critical theory – Habermas' (1972, 1974) 'ideal-speech situation' where rational consensus is induced only when consensus derives from argument and analysis embedded in democratic social relations without the resort to coercion, distortion or duplicity. An interviewer from this perspective has the deliberate aim of empowering the interviewee through the interview process, with a view to facilitating some kind of change.

The perspective I adopt here is that of constructivism. Social constructivism is not a new phenomenon. While Burr (1995: 10) identifies Berger and Luckman's work (1967) as a pivotal influence upon the social sciences, it would seem that social constructivism has had a longer history in the natural sciences. Here social constructivism was initially expressed by Heisenberg's (1958) 'uncertainty principle': that it is impossible to study something without influencing what is seen. Therefore, what a scientist observes is not

independent of the process of observing but an outcome of the scientists' methodological interaction with, and conceptual constitution of, his/her objects of knowledge. In the same way, the product of an interview situation is the outcome of an interviewer's own construction of their world and the given interview situation. During the 1970s and 1980s, social constructivists popularized the view that the positivist ideal of a neutral observer was an unattainable ideal – what counts as warranted knowledge, truth and reason are always conditioned by the socio-historic context of the scientist. Far from articulating any scientific truth, any scientist's account will be a local social construction. This means that we need to be reflexive as part of the research process. As Symon et al. (2000) state:

Social constructionists believe that reality is a social construction. From this perspective, as researchers and practitioners, we can only gather different accounts of reality. These accounts can therefore only be represented through our own interpretation, so we are in effect creating another account. We cannot therefore be 'objective', and, instead, should be reflexively aware of our own subjectivity. (p. 460)

This approach clearly has implications for how we see the role of the interviewer. In particular I want to argue that as part of the interview the interviewer and the interviewee are in the process of identity construction.

Social constructivist approaches to identity draw generally on Foucault's work (1977, 1981) about power and subjectivity. In this context identity is seen as a product of competing discourses that in turn reflect power relations within a particular social context. A key Foucauldian concept is the notion that individuals draw on a range of competing discourses in order to account for their own behaviours within a given situation. The argument here is that within an interview situation both the interviewer and the interviewee are put into a situation where they must account for themselves, by drawing on the range of available discourses. Essentially they are doing 'identity work' (Goffman, 1971) as part of the interviewing process. I will now go on to examine this process with reference to my own experiences as a researcher.

### *Constructing diverse identities*

In reflecting on the research projects I have been involved with in the past, it is apparent that a number of different identities have been co-created for me through the research process. In order to highlight the constructed nature of identity in the interview I will give some examples, before drawing some conclusions. In my experience a whole range of factors has come into play as part of my identity construction. I would argue that the salient demographic factors that play a part are that I am female, have a northern England accent and am qualified professionally as an occupational psychologist, all of which cast a light on how I interpret the nature of research questions and the world

around me generally. They also have an impact on how I am interpreted by interviewees, although of course in most cases I can only guess the content of those interpretations.

### MY PHD RESEARCH

During the mid 1980s my PhD research was jointly funded by a local city council which at that time was perceived generally as very radical in the context of local government initiatives, and very antagonistic to central government. The council had recently set up a new project designed to ensure that unwaged people within the city would have access to IT skills. This was at a time when the PC was just taking off, and there was a general concern that the population would be divided into the information rich and the information poor (Nowotny, 1982). My role was as an action researcher on the project. The research was conducted in unemployment and community centres and my role was as an advocate for the users of the project, i.e. those not traditionally listened to. This was informed (I would say now, but would have described it differently then) by a critical theory perspective. The aim was to empower others, and that I would be an advocate for their interests.

Like many other action researchers before me I was seduced by the action available rather than the constraints of academic research. Between me, the project team and the users of the project, we constructed my identity as 'Evaluator' of the project. I spent a lot of time working on the project as a participant observer and became more at home sitting in community centres drinking tea than I was at the University. At the University I was one of many PhD students in a very research active psychology department. I was, however, the only one conducting qualitative research, which was largely seen as a risky and unscientific way to go about doing psychological research at that time. Indeed many psychology academics would argue it still is. Therefore my supervisor and I constructed the notion that I was different from other students, I was being financed by the city council and therefore, as he said, could use any methods I wanted as long as they were happy.

During the project, due to my insecurities about writing a PhD deviating from the positivist norm, when I conducted interviews with project users I actually asked them explicitly about what they thought the impact of the evaluation was on the project. I was keen to establish some audit trail and therefore account for my own actions. It was interesting that the majority of responses to this question referred to my role as the action researcher. This role was perceived by users in a number of ways – as a go-between: 'Well you're a spokesperson aren't you, anything that needs to be known about the project, you'll let them know, so that's a good thing, isn't it?'; as a form of control: 'Well it's important to evaluate, it's no good going along at the same level, you've got to get better, and if you are an independent person saying "Oh what did you do?" then we're not slacking all the time. I mean we could sit here to our heart's content, but as long as you know that somebody is going

to evaluate it then you do the best you can'; and as a general fixer: 'If something is going wrong, then hopefully you can say, "Well if you steer it a bit this way it will be alright". I think you're pretty good at doing things like that, maybe it's your University background, I don't know'. From other data collection methods too it was apparent that the whole discourse around evaluation was one that nearly all project users, workers and managers drew upon.

The co-construction of my identity as 'The Evaluator' decreased the ambiguity of my role on the project for both the project users and me. It created a role for me that all felt comfortable with. It also provided some guidelines for how people within the project could interact with me. I was not an official project worker, but still someone who was perceived as having the project's interests at heart. This experience taught me the important lesson that the researcher is a key part of the research process and that the positivist ideal of the independent researcher is unattainable. It is rare for a researcher to get such direct feedback on their role, and the impact it has on the research process. Clearly in a two-year action research project this is possible, but generally we have less time to do identity work in individual interview situations. The next example highlights this point.

#### THE PUBLISHING STUDY

About 10 years later I now considered myself an accomplished researcher, with an interest in research about gender and diversity issues. With a colleague I interviewed 60 men and women in the publishing industry in a project about managing diversity financed by a collective of very senior women in publishing. We did the project on a consultancy basis and they deliberately employed us because of our qualitative stance. The interviewees were mainly very articulate and confident men and women in management or senior management positions. During the interviewing period I was eight months' pregnant and this seemed to have a significant impact on how the interviewees constructed my identity. It was of ongoing fascination to me how I was treated in a different way from that I had experienced previously in my professional life, I was now positioned differently as a result of being placed within an ongoing discourse about pregnancy. A male interviewee actually told me that he had been suspicious about taking part in the interviews because of their controversial subject matter, but when I had walked into the room he had felt a lot better. In my whale-like state I clearly had become a very unthreatening equal opportunities researcher, and therefore someone it was safe to confide in.

While on this project the interviewees seemed to construct me as a jobbing researcher; I clearly had little long-term interest in the project as I was going to have a baby. The assumption was always that this was my first baby (if I had had other children then surely I would have been at home with them). At the time I remember surprising myself about how easily I passively accepted the

assumptions of others about my motivation for doing the work. On reflection, I really couldn't be bothered to do any constructive identity work, or challenge their assumptions. This tied in with my clear physiological needs at the time – all I really wanted to do was to go back home and put my feet up.

There have been many accounts of how assumptions are made about individuals in the workplace based on stereotypes about personal characteristics such as age, sex, ethnicity, class, etc. The impact of pregnancy on a woman's identity in the workplace has been noted by a number of researchers. Sheppard (1989) argues that pregnancy is a highly sexualized status that calls attention to a woman's sexuality and reproductive uniqueness, while also revealing that some aspects of women's experience, such as giving birth, are incompatible with organizational life. Bailey (1999) again talks about how pregnant women in the workplace are a sometimes unwelcome display of sexuality and fertility. Based on her research she argues that women are often 'excused' from aspects of their identity during pregnancy, opting instead for other transitory aspects, which are still within the same regime of subjectification. Discourses around pregnancy were clearly significant in the construction of my identity by the participants in that piece of research. Given the sensitive nature of the topic that formed the basis of the interviews, those discourses functioned to position me as a relatively safe researcher who could be confided in.

#### MANUFACTURING STUDIES

During the last six years, most of my research work has been conducted in manufacturing settings and I have interviewed exclusively men. As Lawthorn (1997) suggests, there is a lot of advice in the feminist research methodology literature about how to interview women, but very little written about women interviewing men, where clearly the power dynamics are different. The identity of the researcher in this context is almost painfully defined by an overwhelming sense of difference. As an interviewer you are interviewing a man, in an environment where there are no women. Clearly women interviewers need to conduct some form of emotional labour in these situations. There were a number of interesting discourses that I and the interviewees drew upon to construct a view about what I was there for, what I was like and why they should talk to me (apart from getting a break from the production line while being paid at training rates). Linked in to discourses of gender and being different was an ongoing discourse of safety. Examples of this were the underlying implication that there was something dangerous about my being in this situation. The manufacturing environment was perceived as dirty and certainly unsuitable for someone like me (that is a woman), and I and another female colleague were often warned, usually in a humorous way, of the potential dangers that lay ahead. This ranged from the warning that we shouldn't go into the toilets in any circumstances (apparently they were very dirty and would offend our sensibilities), to the comment that it was a good job

that we had male colleagues there to look after us (the implication being that it wouldn't be a good idea to be left alone with all these men). Although the safety discourse clearly positioned us as different, my interpretation was that it filled an important purpose. Drawing on that discourse was a way of openly acknowledging that we were different, and that the discomfort associated with that difference needed some recognition. In practice my position as a researcher made me feel quite safe. I was reminded of the bizarre situations a researcher can find herself in when one evening I was interviewing members of the night shift in a furniture factory. The only place they had where I could interview quietly was in the showroom. I suddenly did a double-take when I realized I sat chatting to this burly man I had just met for the first time about his work, late at night in a darkened room that contained 20 beautifully made-up double beds. This example demonstrates the pervasiveness of the researcher role. The defining attribute of my identity in that context was that I was a researcher; in other areas of my life I may have chosen not to put myself in that kind of situation! During this project my colleagues and I wrote an article about some of the field roles dilemmas we had faced in our experiences as researchers in the manufacturing management field (Johnson et al., 1999). One of the particular dilemmas that emerge in this context is that the interviewer is clearly dependent on the interviewee in order to collect high quality data. Therefore, we may actively engage in the construction of an identity that we would not necessarily choose for ourselves in any other circumstance. Certainly I and my female colleague felt that we would tolerate certain behaviours as an interviewer in this environment which we would challenge if they occurred elsewhere in our professional lives. But perhaps our male colleagues felt the same.

#### INTERVIEWING HEROES

It was during this project that the significance of the interview in the identity construction process first struck me. More recently I was involved in a large project where I was interviewing managing directors of small and medium-sized firms about their change management issues. Given the status of the interviewees, and the fact they were all located within manufacturing companies, it is perhaps not surprising that all those I interviewed were male. The analysis of the interview data went through a number of cycles. Initially the data were coded and analysed according to a template (King, 1998), with the initial template devised from the interview schedule. The template was then developed through a number of iterations. From the final template an interpretation of the data was produced which addressed the specific research questions of what kinds of changes were introduced, and the experiences of those changes. This was written into a report which clearly satisfied the funding body.

When the report was finished, however, I felt that we had not done the data justice. While conducting the interviews and analysing the data, what

emerged as interesting to me as a researcher was the way in which the individual interviewees talked about their role in the change process, and their individual role in the organization generally, in particular the discourses that individuals drew upon in order to describe and account for their roles as agents of change. Specifically I was interested in how individuals were creating their own understandings of the change process through the interview situation, and the impact this had on how they accounted for their role in those change processes. To answer this kind of question, where an individual is seen to construct meaning through the process of talk, a different kind of data analysis is required. I therefore went back to the data to analyse the discourses the interviewees used and how they accounted for their role as change agents thereby creating, in some cases, the image of themselves as organizational heroes.

Within this research, however, there was an additional power dynamic at work informing the discourses they drew upon. On the one hand these interviewees were telling me their stories and constructing themselves almost as heroes who had transformed their companies. In this context my role as a researcher was to listen admiringly. But additional to that I had another role. As the project manager of the research project, I was in the position to offer these people a valuable amount of free consultancy in this area through the expertise of the research team. The project was funded on the basis that we would support companies like these. Given that they were constructing themselves as heroes, and I had access to precious resources, in order for both the interviewee and me to maintain credibility and status we were mutually constructing ourselves as experts, and drawing upon expert discourse, but in very different areas. This identity felt very different from the previous manufacturing interviews where my identity had clearly been that of a female academic. In this context both the interviewer and interviewee were striving to equalize the power relationship. It was only on reflecting upon this at a later stage, and through discussing it with other colleagues who were also conducting qualitative interviews, that I realized the significance of how we account for ourselves through the interview process – hence this article.

#### *Implications and conclusions*

Throughout my examples I have argued that both the interviewer and interviewee are doing 'identity work' as part of the interview process. This is an active psychological process that fulfils an important purpose. We use identity as a tool to present ourselves in a way that is appropriate to the interview process, managing impressions of those factors we have some control over – for example, our attitude and responses to the interviewee – and accommodating those we have no control over – for example, our age, gender or ethnicity. As Thompson and McHugh (2002) suggest:

Identity work is conscious and unconscious, individual and collective, competitive and collaborative. It is a vehicle of self-expression and enactment, and at the same time binds us to systems of ideological self-legitimation, through which we accede to systems of control, both internal and external. (p. 354)

A key part of this identity work is about managing impressions and accounting for ourselves. By drawing on the range of discourses available, within the interview situation we can be constructed in a variety of diverse ways. These constructions are clearly affected by a number of interviewer characteristics, and also issues such as the stakeholders and purpose of the research.

A number of researchers have highlighted the ways in which identity work is done in the context where striving for a positive identity is difficult or ambiguous. For example, Park (2002) outlines how voluntarily childless individuals engage in identity work to reject what is seen as a discreditable identity: that of being voluntarily childless. In a similar vein, Alvesson (1998) highlights how in the highly contested and ambiguous context of advertising work, an emphasis on workplace sexuality is related to identity work in men. I would argue that the function of identity work within the interview context is to decrease the ambiguity of the interview situation. Gerson and Horowitz (2002) suggest that 'an interview study involves a series of discrete but demanding forays into the lives of strangers' (2002: 209). Not surprisingly then, some management of the self in this situation is necessary.

This approach has implications for how we see and understand the nature and purpose of the interview as a research tool. In traditional approaches to interviewing, the purpose of the interview is to fact-find or gather information. However, Holstein and Gubrium (1997) argue that the interview is an active process:

Both parties to the interview are necessarily and ineluctably *active*. Meaning is not merely elicited by apt questioning, nor simply transported through respondent replies; it is actively and communicatively assembled in the interview encounter. (p. 114)

The implications of seeing interviewing as an active process within this constructivist framework is that the interview is actually an interpretive process, the aim of which is to jointly, and actively, construct meaning. In acknowledging this, other authors have suggested that the whole interview is a performance – as Denzin suggests, 'Interviews are performance texts' (2001: 27). Understanding how people do identity work in the interview situation requires an analysis of process as well as content. This is an integral part of a constructivist perspective where the function of discourse use is addressed as well as the content. Bearing this in mind, an interesting issue is the extent to which an interviewer can plan how they are going to position

themselves within an interview. Can we write a particular script for ourselves, and create a specific identity of choice when embarking on an interview? This is an intriguing idea, but in practice it obscures the interactive nature of the identity work process. Although the interviewer may wish to be interpreted in a certain way, the interviewee may have a different perspective. Therefore, prediction of precisely how identity will be constructed in a future interview may be difficult.

Another question of interest is the extent to which interviewers are aware of identity work when in an interview situation. Can we make sense of those processes while we are located within them? Or does it require a reflexive eye afterwards to enable us to analyse the identity work processes that were occurring? This article has clearly resulted from the latter. An analysis of the processes by which identity is constructed through the use of a particular data collection technique provides us with further cues as to how people conduct identity work. Such an analysis can only enhance the quest for increasing researcher reflexivity in the fields of management and social science research.

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