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## Community pharmacy through Covid-19: exploring self-identity and discretionary labour during a pandemic

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### Extended Abstract

**Broad research area:** HRM/ Organisational Behaviour/ Organisation Studies

**3-5 key words:** Autoethnography, Identity Community Pharmacy, Discretionary Labour, Commitment

This paper explores the construction and affirmation of self-concept during COVID-19 and the resulting by-products of discretionary labour and commitment that inadvertently aid the pursuit of managerial objectives. This study develops the understanding around the construction of *preferred identities*, which Brown *et al* (2021) conceive as “normative self-narratives that specify who people want to be, and to be seen to be, and which serve self-meaning and impression management functions” (p. 823) during a time when this was challenged by the nature of and fallout from a global pandemic. The unintended outcome of this need to reaffirm ones sense of self, was that the researcher felt obliged to work additional unpaid hours to support the team in the pharmacy, to exert additional discretionary effort in order to provide the best possible level of service to the patients (or customers) of the pharmacy, and also felt compelled to stay within the organisation and help as much as possible despite working conditions being relatively poor and the need to balance the pharmacy work with dedicated PhD time. For the organisation, however, this was greatly beneficial as it meant that from their perspective, they had a highly committed worker who was going *above and beyond* for patients which boosted productivity, improved patient experiences, and contributed to improving the overall reputation of the pharmacy.

Identity work is often considered to be a daily undertaking; however, Alvesson and Willmott (2002) suggest that it is often triggered by specific experiences or events which result in “a rupture in our sense of self, or at least a minimal amount of self-doubt, typically contingent upon a mix of psychological existential worry and skepticism, or inconsistencies faced in encounters with others” (p. 626). Many academics have explored these triggers which can be work-role transitions (Ibarra and Barbulescu

2010), or other instances where an individual suspects that they are not who they thought they were (Costas and Fleming 2009). Faced with these experiences or events, individuals engage in identity work in an effort to affirm a coherent and positive sense of self (Blenkinsopp and Stalker, 2004; Sveningsson and Larsson, 2006; Clarke *et al.*, 2009; Dutton *et al.*, 2010) which helps to guard against the unnerving possibility of one's life as random, accidental, and unmotivated (Linde 1993).

This paper represents an autoethnographic exploration of identity work which was triggered by the threat posed by nationally imposed lockdowns and the suspension of 'meaningful' work activity during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic. Upon the announcement of the first national lockdown the researcher struggled to grapple with the idea of working from home, in isolation for a prolonged period of time and the threat that this posed to their mental health due to losing the sense of purpose, and social interaction that came with being both an active PhD student and a teaching assistant. In an attempt to affirm self-concept and preferred identity (Brown *et al.* 2021), and to maintain a sense of purpose and meaning over time the researcher responded to a 'call for support' which was posted on social media by a friend and previous manager, that the researcher had worked for at a large-multiple pharmacy a few years prior, who was desperate for additional support in her current workplace due to the surge in demand for pharmacy services coupled with staff illness and staff absent from work as they were required to shield themselves. This provided both the opportunity for the researcher to support the community during a challenging period, find purpose and structure in a time of great uncertainty and also to engage in developing an autoethnographic account (or personal narrative) of work (Ellis 1991) in an independent community pharmacy for six months during the early stages Covid-19 pandemic in England (from the end of March 2020 until end of September 2020).

This 'call for support' provided the opportunity to engage in what may be termed a 'conservative autoethnography' (Wall 2006) by utilising a similar approach to that of Duncan (2004) in their study of the design of hypermedia educational resources where the main data source was the keeping of a reflective journal over a 1-year period which consisted of handwritten entries created twice weekly and supporting this with supplementary documents such as emails, memos, letters, sketches, computer screen images, and notes. Wall (2006) state that the approach taken in this study could be termed as 'conservative autoethnography' due to the methodological rigour employed throughout the project by Duncan (2004) who states that the autoethnographic "research tradition does more than just tell stories. It provides reports that are scholarly and justifiable interpretations . . . [that] do not consist solely of the researcher's opinions but are also supported by other data that can confirm or triangulate those opinions. Methods of collecting data include participant observation, reflective writing, interviewing, and gathering documents and artifacts" (p. 5). This research is also similar to that of Holt (2001) who used their practical background as a Graduate Teaching Assistant in a university to generate questions and implications for the future development of the role and used a two-year reflective logbook as the primary data source for the research project. The wider thesis, which this paper is a subset of, utilises document analysis and interviewing alongside the autoethnographic, or personal narrative in an attempt to improve the reliability of the data presented.

This paper therefore contributes to the study on identity work, specifically the construction of preferred identities (Brown *et al.* 2021) in response to a perceived threat, as well as providing a narrative on the experience of working within an independent community pharmacy during the early part of the Covid-19 pandemic. The analysis of the researcher's personal experience in this paper to the diversity of extant

literature on identity can provide insights into “motivations, emotions, imagination, subjectivity, and action in ways less available from other sources” (Laslett 1999, p. 392) and therefore make a valuable contribution to the field.