Identity Kit: Writing Identity into the Scripts of Anxiety.

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Introduction

In a paper which ought to be compulsory reading for all those who write of identity, Brubaker and Cooper (2000) write:

> The argument of this article is that the social sciences and humanities have surrendered to the word ``identity''; that this has both intellectual and political costs; and that we can do better. ``Identity,'' we argue, tends to mean too much (when understood in a strong sense), too little (when understood in a weak sense), or nothing at all (because of its sheer ambiguity).We take stock of the conceptual and theoretical work ``identity'' is supposed to do and suggest that this work might be done better by other terms, less ambiguous, and unencumbered by the reifying connotations of ``identity.'' We argue that the prevailing constructivist stance on identity - the attempt to ``soften'' the term, to acquit it of the charge of ``essentialism'' by stipulating

> that identities are constructed, fluid, and multiple - leaves us without a rationale for talking about ``identities" at all and ill-equipped to examine the ``hard" dynamics and essentialist claims of contemporary identity politics. ``Soft" constructivism allows putative ``identities" to proliferate. But as they proliferate, the term loses its analytical purchase. If identity is everywhere, it is nowhere. If it is fluid, how can we understand the ways in which self-understandings may harden, congeal, and crystallize? If it is constructed, how can we understand the sometimes coercive force of external identifications? If it is multiple, how do we understand the terrible singularity that is often striven for - and sometimes realized - by politicians seeking to transform mere categories into unitary and exclusive groups?

See also Bendle (2002)

This paper is a preliminary exploration of the same issues from a different angle: that of how the proponents of 'soft identity' relate their deliberation to ethnographic material. In fact not many do so, the majority having reasoned themselves into a state of empirical paralysis on the question of the theory-dependence of data (Marsden and Townley, 1996). This being the case, it is to the credit of Thomas and Linstead (2002) – the paper arbitrarily chosen for this exercise – that they at least make the attempt.

For reasons which will be discussed later, Thomas and Linstead respond to the debate on the standing of UK middle managers by seeking to recast it as one on the processes by which their identities are formed and reformed. To this end they present extracts from four interviews with middle managers. Though brief, these are sensitively presented, vivid, and moving fro those who are prepared to be moved. Here is as fair a summary of one of them as I can manage:

Formerly a middle manager in charge of 20 people, Richard Brown has recently been redesignated as 'team leader' in the course of a de-layering exercise. He speaks of the 'huge culture shock' of losing the status of middle manager, describing this as 'losing his job' and everything he'd worked for over a 27 year career with the same employer. Where once he

expected to work for that employer until retirement, his present feelings of insecurity are compounded by his financial commitments and the lack of alternative opportunities for a man of forty-something should he be made redundant. As a result of these anxieties, he finds that he has lost the confidence to make quick decisions. His one point of security, so he tells himself, is that he possesses an experience-based expertise which is still in demand.

Interpretations

Richard's story could not be clearer. It is one of stress, insecurity and overwork . In Thomas and Linstead's own words, these are the '*lived experiences of those who live it'* (p. 76 italics in original), and the authors declare their intention to understand 'the phenomenon' through these experiences (ibid). Their social constructionist methodology, they maintain, 'aim[s] to represent the actor's construction of their lived experiences, so as to give them a voice in the research process and to maintain context'. This approach, they say, 'recasts the manager in the research process as the "practical author" [ibid. citation omitted]'.

Notwithstanding these declarations of intent - to respect the accounts of their subjects and even to involve them in the process of authorship - the concerns articulated in Thomas and Linstead's account of those accounts, their 'construction of the constructions of the actors studied' as they put it (p. 77), differ radically from the originals. In place of the plainly expressed worries over job security, changing and ambiguous task specifications and work intensification, Thomas and Linstead elect to write instead of the processes by which 'a middle manager's identity is constituted and reconstituted, created and contested, by the prevailing discourses' (p. 75). Since none of the interviewees speak of their own 'self-identity' and nor do they use forms of words

which can be unambiguously so construed[1], this means that Thomas and Linstead's 'social text', far from allowing their interviewees to speak as they find, is actually the product of scanning their utterances not for their overt meaning but for symptoms of a process, the existence of which the authors have convinced themselves in advance. Interpretive procedures of this kind call to mind R.D. Laing's critique of psychoanalytic practice in *The Divided Self*. Laing's claim was that the apparently disorganized speech of 'schizophrenic ' subjects could be understood as covert attempts to speak, in symbolic language, of the social oppressions to which they had been subjected. In reading these utterances as symptomatic, Laing argued, psychiatric practice was complicit in the suppression of this element of rationality in the speech of its subjects, and consequently in the disempowerment which had produced the symptoms in the first place.

Nowadays Laing's anti psychiatry is no more than a footnote to the history of mental disorder, but his point has a continued and more general relevance. As Alvin Gouldner (1970) memorably put it 'to commit a social science' is to objectify the discourse of the other. Notwithstanding the struggles of anthropology with its crisis of representation (e.g. Taylor, 1999), it is a tendency endemic to the professionalizing project of the social sciences, and one can see why this should be the case: if the social scientist can add nothing to the lay interpretation of the discourses with which they engage, of what does their expertise consist? The presumption of a right to interpret is of long-standing. In Elizabeth Bott 's otherwise admirable Family and Social Network (1937), there occurs this declaration of intent:

> when an individual talks about class he [sic] is trying to say something, in symbolic form, about his experiences of power and prestige in his actual membership groups and social relationships both past and present'.

[1] It may be objected that this is an unrealistic ask. It is not. In Harding (2003) an ex-nurse speaks of becoming a different person on promotion to a managerial post. See also Martin Parker's *Becoming Manager*.

Notice how the possibility that 'an individual' might have something pertinent to say about the wider social order is ruled out as a precondition of the social scientific treatment of the text. To their credit, Thomas and Linstead do not go this far. They do not say that Richard's account of his own demotion is no more than a symbolic representation of a threat to his identity. They acknowledge its reality but maintain, nevertheless, that its major *significance* lies in its repercussions for Richard's identity, or rather, as we will see in a moment, for the processes by which that identity is formed and re-formed. Since the interviewees do not, and perhaps cannot, tell of this process, it must be constructed by the authors in the course of their commentary.

It is to Thomas and Linstead's credit that they are aware that this is what they are doing – some of the time at any rate. Where many proponents of strong-form social constructionism declare it as epistemology but treat it only as ontology, Thomas and Linstead are more consistent and thoroughgoing. For them it is both ontology and epistemology. The accounts of socially constructed entities which they offer are themselves declared to be socially constructed - by themselves in the proximate instance, but also on the basis of a theoretical commons collectively constructed by the community of researchers to which they belong and to which they declare allegiance in their pattern of citations. Within that community, their readings of their interviews will doubtless seem unproblematic and to the extent that the journal in which their article was published, *Organization*, has become one of its house organs, perhaps that is the limit of their aspiration. Otherwise it is reasonable for a comparative outsider to ask how they go about reading the processes of identity from interviews which do not, as the English language is used in the wider community, speak of such a process.

More Interpretations

Their first, and perhaps their strongest case is Richard Brown (supra). In Thomas and Linstead's commentary Richard's experiences and feelings are transcribed into the language of identity. His loss of the title and position of 'manager' is described as 'a major identity crisis', one which he is only able to negotiate by holding onto a self understanding as a technical expert (p. 79-80). A loss of title and position, however, is a change of identity only in its institutional sense (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006, Ch. 3)). It is a change in circumstance which an earlier generation of theorists would have described in the language of role theory, with its repercussions for the self-awareness of the individual concerned deferred for further consideration. That earlier vocabulary, particularly in the hands of Goffman (1969), allowed for a whole range of nuanced relationships between a role, the presentations of self within the expectations which define that role, and the enduring sense of self, the strategist as it were, behind those presentations of self. In the vocabulary of soft identity all of these distinctions, together with the analyses they make possible, are collapsed into an amorphous rhetoric of vaguely existential significance in which 'sense of self', 'presentation of self' and 'organizational identity' are presented as synonymous (p. 88).

When Richard does speak of his state of mind rather than changes in his organizational role, moreover, his talk is not of identity as such, but of the 'shock' occasioned by his loss of position, of a loss of confidence, and of worries about his future as a forty something with financial commitments and two teenage children. These are major psychological burdens and Thomas and Linstead report them with due sensitivity and respect, but they are not the same thing as 'a major identity crisis' and nor need they be symptomatic of one. Richard's worries over the future are a perfectly rational extrapolation from the demotion which he has already

suffered and are also a likely source of the confidence-sapping fear that a wrong decision might cost him his job. Any repercussions which they may have for his self-identity need to be evidenced, not assumed.

If anything, in fact , Richard's sense of deprivation rather counts against the theory of 'soft identity' espoused by Thomas and Linstead. If, as they contend, identity is 'precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we think or speak' (p. 75, reference omitted), it is hard to see why Richard has not unproblematically adjusted to his new circumstances, or as Thomas and Linstead might prefer it, why his identity has not been reconstituted by the discourses through which those circumstances have been constructed and apprehended. The very fact that he is finding it so hard to come to terms with those changed circumstances, suggests that he is experiencing a considerable dissonance between his sense of who he is and the situation in which he finds himself. Identity in its internal sense, in other words, seems to be rather more resistant to discursive reconstitution than Thomas and Linstead would have us believe. That this may be so, raises the extremely difficult question of what might make the difference between resistance and adjustment, to say nothing of all the degrees in between. At the macro level, it was this question of variations in susceptibility to socializing influences – a broad distinction between inner directed and other-directed characters – which was the subject of the late David Reisman's *Lonely Crowd*.

There are also problems with Thomas and Linstead's interpretation of their interview material as symptomizing the *processes* of identity change, supposedly the centrepiece of what they have to say. As Richard's interview proceeds, they say that 'he begins to draw on his technical background as a secure point of reference in understanding who he is in the organization'. As before, 'understanding who he is' is not in Richard's discourse and 'drawing on' is a process

which occurs during the interview itself, not in the course of Richard's reaction to his changed status. What he actually says is 'My anchor, I suppose, is that I'm still an expert at what I do.' (p. 79) and 'I know I can fall back on my specialist role, where I started . .' (p. 81). The sense here is that of expertise as an instrumentality, a kind of possession which will protect him in the event of further organizational upheavals. There is no evidence that it is a form of words through which Richard has come to see himself as a different person.

Leaving that to one side for the moment, to say that Richard 'draw[s] on his technical background as a secure point of reference . . ' only tells us something about the processes of identity formation and change on the assumption that Richard's motive for so reconstructing his own identity, conscious or unconscious, is to attain the aforesaid 'secure point of reference'. What is implicit here is a rational action theory of identity formation based on the tacit assumption that human beings display a general tendency to seek a sense of security - 'the immediate existential concerns of both managers and workers to create and sustain a sense of order in which identity is "secure"' , as Knights and Willmott put it in another formulation of the same idea, (1985, p. 33). This is an essentialism no different in principle from Maslow's posit of needs for security and belonging, albeit one displaced from the realm of the concrete to that of the discursive. As well as contradicting Linstead and Thomas' (and Knights and Willmott's) disavowalsof essentialism (p. 12), such an interpretation also suggests a degree of agency in the formation of one's own identity which is at odds with the manner in which Thomas and Linstead theorize the discursive constitution of the subject.

Rejecting the 'suggest[ion] that individuals merely pick off an identity from a shopping-list of discourses – consciously selecting and manipulating from a 'menu' of discursive resources [reference omitted]' (p. 75), they locate agency in discourse itself, arguing that 'some discourses

have more persuasive power than others do in different contexts and in different times' [ibid, citation omitted]. This is a formulation which begs the question of the determinants of this 'persuasive power', and, in particular, of how far that depends on the proclivities of the subjects in question. To the extent that it does so depend, in fact, individual agency is reimported back into the theory, albeit in the passive form of a susceptibility rather that an active one of choice. Additionally, the idea of agentic discourse also raises problems of operationalisation which Thomas and Linstead do not consider. If the persuasive power of discourse is to figure in accounts of identity, how is that power to be apprehended and indexed other than retrospectively from its effectsesence? The circularity is obvious.

There are, finally, problems both with the operationalisation of 'discourse' and with the analytic work it is required to perform. For Thomas and Linstead, it is fundamental that individual identities – and pretty well everything else - are constructed through discourse. In line with this presupposition, Richard's references to his own expertise in the above quotation are described as instances of 'drawing on a discourse', in this case, one of expertise (p. 88). The implication of this is that even so much as a mention of expertise, or of any other human quality or capability, amounts to 'drawing on a discourse' and is, on that account, consequential for the identity of the speaker. But what happens when the subject of conversation changes, *ex hypothesi* 'constituting' another identity? Does the previous identity simply disappear, implying that human identity is wiped clean moment by moment by its current focus of attention? Or are we to assume that the fact that identity is 'constituted and reconstituted created and contested by the prevailing discourse' (p. 75) does not preclude the sedimentation of past discourses – as is implied by Mead's (1934) generalized other, for example - in which case what is the basis for ruling out the

possibility that some people's identities are not 'precarious, contradictory and in process' (ibid) at all?

Social Origins of Social Theory

Having considered the extent to which Thomas and Linstead are successful in interpreting their data in their preferred manner, it is pertinent to ask why they might wish to do so. A first answer, the one offered the authors themselves, is that the debate to which their research is addressed, that on the current state of UK middle management, has been hitherto couched in terms which do not admit of a resolution. Previous empirical studies, they say, 'have left us with a 'contradictory, confusing and inconclusive picture' in which 'pessimistic' reports of demoralization, insecurity and widespread redundancy are contradicted by findings of organizational entrepreneurship, involvement in strategy, reinvented careers and the like. Simply piling more and 'better' data into this controversy, they maintain, is futile, because both the 'middle' and the 'management' of middle management are social constructs, and from this fact it follows that ' there will never be a true or accurate answer to the question of "what is happening to middle management"' (p. 73). Lay readers, one might observe, would find neither contradiction nor controversy in the idea that different studies of middle managers find that different things are happening to them: middle management is an extremely broad category covering many different kinds of work in many different situations. Thomas and Linstead do not follow this line of reasoning. They believe, rather, that the states of socially constructed entities (though not the processes by which those states are reached) is incapable of specification *in principle*. As they put it 'it is a misconception to think that such issues are "solvable".

Lurking behind this leap of logic, there is a movement from a disillusioned absolutism to an absolutized relativism which is very characteristic of post-structuralist thought. It is a mindset which reacts to the discovery that accounts of the social world cannot ultimately be ‘true or accurate’ with a kind of epistemological sulk, a petulant rejection of the idea that research can produce anything other than its own social constructs – and Thomas and Linstead, as we have seen, actually say as much.. There is no sense that the world might be messier than is allowed for in the binary opposition between positivism and idealism, that what is at issue in social research is a *construal* of reality (Sayer, 2004) rather than a root-and-branch construction of it and that such construals are to be judged pragmaticallys. As it is Thomas and Linstead opt for the social constructionist side of their (socially constructed) dichotomy, declaring their aim to be a ‘knowledge generated about the *state* of management, including that of middle management, [which] is a social and linguistic construct for the reader, the researcher and the manager in the creation of the social text.’ (p. 74, italics added. The reason will appear shortly).

By way of making a start, they propose a threefold revision of the original research question, namely ‘what is happening to middle management’. Objecting to the passivity and structural determination implied by ‘happening to’ they insist that middle management must be considered as agents in constructing their own situation (p. 73). And drawing on their process ontology, they argue that one can speak meaningfully only of the processes of social construction rather than the state of what has been socially constructed (p. 75). Evidently this edict is a hard one to observe since it is contradicted on the previous page (supra). Thus far it appears to be the managers' situation which is to be treated as socially constructed. Apart from their title and a sub-heading, ‘identity’ has not yet made its appearance in Thomas and Linstead's text, let alone been justified as a revision of the research question. It is during their declaration of their intention to study

processes rather than states , that the term first crops up in their main text, and it is mentioned there almost as an aside: ‘In adopting a social constructionist epistemology, essentialist notions of *identity* are rejected . . .’ (italics added). So it is that identity enters the research question by way of a side entrance, without explanation or justification, as if it were obvious – as it probably is to Thomas and Linstead – that identity is a reasonable substitute for – and , indeed, an improvement on, ‘what is happening to . .’ It is simply taken for granted from that point onwards that the subject matter will be ‘*how* middle managers construct their identity any given moment’ (p. 87, italics in original).

Now Thomas and Linstead are perfectly entitled to their choice of subject matter. However, they present their choice as a constructive response to the impossibility of making any general and definite statement about the current situation of middle managers. Let us examine their reasoning on this point in the order of its exposition.

It is perfectly reasonable, firstly, to argue that simply piling more data into a controversy between ‘positive and ‘negative views of the fate of middle management’ is fruitless, if only because doing so will not eradicate the support for either position. Rather than abandoning the question of ‘what is happening to . ‘ as incapable of resolution, however, it is surely more reasonable to suggest that the positive and negative aspects are part of a larger picture. Some middle managers are losing their jobs, others find themselves subject to work intensification and insecurity whilst still others are picked out for promotion and in their newly enhanced role as organizational entrepreneurs make good careers out of inflicting the aforesaid conditions on their erstwhile colleagues. This is crudely put, of course, and it may be untrue or only partially true, but it is at least worth considering as an alternative to abandoning the question altogether.

Linstead and Thomas' contention that one cannot make definite statements about the situation of middle managers because such a statement would involve socially constructed entities also raises a more general philosophical point. The impossibility of specifying the states of social constructed entities would appear to apply to just about everything in which the social scientist might take an interest. And if that is the case, one has to ask how it is possible to know that these entities change, let alone say something about the processes by which they do so. In fact Thomas and Linstead's view of social construction cannot even be coherently stated since social constructionism itself is a social construct.

Thomas and Linstead's advocacy of their approach also rests on a quasi-moral objection to the implication of structural determinism and agentic passivity implied by the research question 'what is happening to middle management.' Yet their theorization depicts managers as equally passive in the formation of their own identities. They specifically disallow the notion that managers are able to 'pick and chose' from the available discursive materials. Instead agency in the process of identity formation is located within discourse itself, in the form of variations in persuasive power. Unless this variation is read as a covert smuggling of agency back into the subject, this is a simple substitution of discursive for structural determination.

There are also problems in using the warrant of social constructionism to take up a moral position which insist on the agency of the subjects of research. At first sight declarations of this kind have an emancipatory ring to them. In the case of coercive regimes, however, they can easily end up as accusations that the oppressed are complicit in their own subjugation. On this point Thomas and Linstead (p. 76) quote Keith Grint (1995: 66)as follows:

> In effect managers choose to represent their actions as constrained by virulent external forces that threaten to crush them at every turn – but they could have chosen otherwise.

In fact Grint had in mind here the involvement of managers in the oppression of their subordinates, in which case their is a certain plausibility to the accusation of complicity. Thomas and Linstead, however, are quoting it in a study of the managers' own employment situation, in which context the insistence on agency looks like a callousness which is quite at odds with the general tone of their research. Concerning his demotion, for example, how could Richard have 'chosen otherwise'

A further possible reason why Thomas and Linstead opt to interpret their data in terms of identity processes - an obvious one, but not on that account irrelevant - is that they are conforming to a sub cultural norm, and a fairly coercive one at that. Notwithstanding their laudable intention to respect the lay authorship of their interviewees, the pressures of sociological professionalism mandate a demonstration of added value: that there should be a non-trivial '[re]construction of the constructions of the actors studied' as Thomas and Linstead put it (p.). Over the past two decades, the qualitative tendency in organization studies has seen the development, standardization and routinization (in that order) of a particular form of that [re]construction. In reaction to a 'mainstream' which is described – and frequently caricatured - as positivist, functionalist and a-political/technicist, there has arisen a theoretical discourse, the major terms of which are strong-form social constructionism, agentic discourse and 'soft identity' – a complex of ideas which Brubaker and Cooper (2000) have called 'clichéd constructionism'. To this Thomas and Linstead add a touch of individuality in the form of a preference for an ontology of process over one of states, this on the say-so of Robert Chia in the first instance and behind him, that of A.N Whithead. In journals where an excursus on these lines has become the norm and touchstone of theoretical sophistication, it is unlikely indeed that a straight reportage of the situation and state of mind of four middle managers would be considered for publication. None

of this, of course, should be taken in the least as implying that Thomas and Linstead do not genuinely subscribe to their theory as it is expounded .

Theoretical isomorphism however, can only be part of the answer. In the ordinary way, norms constitute some sort of accommodation to the situation of those who subscribe to them and one must attend to this if one is fully to understand their persuasive power. Why, then (once more) do Thomas and Linstead write of the processes of identity rather than the anxieties and pressures of which their interviewees speak? The question of why social scientists espouse the theories they do was raised by Alvin Gouldner in the later chapters of the *Coming Crisis* (1970) in which he introduced the idea of reflexive sociology. Observing that social theory is always underdetermined by the relevant evidence, Gouldner suggested that the attractions of a particular theory lie in its resonance with certain deeply-held background assumptions rooted in the biographies of its adherents. In a move which outraged the American sociological establishment, he effectively inverted Bott's dictum to read

> 'When a social scientist creates or adopts a social theory, they [sic] are trying to tell us in symbolic form of their experiences of their actual membership groups and social relationships both past and present'.

On that basis, Gouldner sketched a mordant and rather conjectural sociology of social theory, the flavour of which is captured in the following quotation:

> Like other academics, the Academic Sociologist, learns from the routine experience of his dependency within the university that he can strike terror only in the hearts of the very young – and now they want to strip him of even that privilege – but that he himself is the gelded servant of the very system of which he is, presumably, the vaunted star. He has thus learnt with an intuitive conviction that "society shapes men [sic.]" because he lives it every day: it is his autobiography objectified. (1970: 441)

Gouldner's observations would appear apply in spades to the theory of the discursively constituted subject. As far as I am aware it is not only entirely lacking in empirical support; it is

not even clear what would count as such support, not least because the entities of which it speaks – discourse, subjectivity, identity – are so ill-specified. Insofar as this is the case, it follows that the hold of this theory on its adherents rests entirely on its intuitive appeal. Since the intelligent layperson, I suspect, would find this theory profoundly *counter*-intuitive, this prompts Gouldner's question: that of what it is in the specific background and situation of the academic social scientists, that accounts for its appeal

Part of the answer, but only a negative part, may lie in this very disparity. The valorisation of originality in academic life, instatiated in the pressure to 'say something new' as a condition of publication, can all-too-easily degenerate into a form of theoretical avant gardeism. Like the avant garde artist, the 'advanced' social theorist finds personal confirmation in the capacity of their work to challenge their students and provoke or baffle outsiders. As Ellis (1989: 151) remarks of deconstruction:

> Essential to its appeal – not a by-product, as is the case where a substantial intellectual innovation has taken place – is the sense of belonging to an intellectual elite, of having left behind the naiveté of the crowd, of operating on a more sophisticated intellectual plane than the crowd

A positive part of the answer may lie in the discourse-saturated background of the academic social scientist. By the time of their first publishable research, these individuals are likely to have spent at least twenty years in full-time education, very little of in practices (such as the acquisition of crafts skills) which might resist what one says or thinks about them and a correspondingly greater proportion of it within an *umwelt* wherein discourse encounters only more discourse. As the individual progresses through such a system, they find they have less and less in common with those friends and acquaintances who are not part of it, so that 'discourse-

world' if I may be permitted the term, approximates more and more to a total institution. The implications for the career academic's susceptibility to the notion of discursive constitution, as applied both to the subjects of their research and to the situations in which they find themselves are obvious and I will not spell them here, not least because this line of argument is somewhat speculative at yet.

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