My doctoral research is around how a building adapts over time, using the library building at the University of Reading as the site of study. I have been influenced by Anne-marie Mol’s (2002) praxiographic approach, unpacking how atherosclerosis comes into being in the practices enacted in the hospital. While Mol’s study was based on observations of the practices as they happened (in the present), Geertje Mak (2012) employs Mol’s praxiographic approach to nineteenth century medical case-histories of hermaphrodites to tease out different enactments of deciding the sex. In my research, focus on enactments affords to study the physical building within the practices involving it. By comparing temporally distant enactments, adaptations of the physical building can be teased out. The study draws on wide variety of data: building design and organizational archives, observations of activities in the building, interviews with current and retired members of staff, shadowing students and staff, observing building refurbishment project meetings and university committee meetings.

I use this building in my everyday life. This would make the fieldwork seem like an easy task. However, negotiating my identity became a complex process. The student-university relationship has proved crucial in gaining access to various pieces of information. Beyond this is the interplay of my past (including my occupational history), my present (including the research goals and interests driving me through the building) and my future possibilities (including managing career paths and what I want my relationship with the library and its actors to become).

Having previously worked as a project management consultant for the university and having trained as an architect, I felt that I entered the field not with absolute strangeness, but with a certain familiarity. While the familiarity has been helpful for first entry into the organization and gaining a certain level of access, my research forced me to ‘shake off’ this familiarity to engender sufficient inquisitiveness.

This familiarity has also posed methodological quandaries, which required reflection on my sense of self. I have had to negotiate various identities during my encounters and interactions in the library (and with the constellations of actors, archives, and artefacts beyond the building). Here I plot my self-in-process in my various instantiations as ex-project manager, client obliged consultant, (just a) student, ‘that PhD student’, an extra in a meeting room, and a tourist attraction on the itinerary of library tour!

I examine a pivotal moment, or rather event, which marked a change in the relationships with my library-based research participants, and in how I conceptualised my role in the library. I was approached to create an exhibition for the 50th anniversary celebration event of the building. It was a unique opportunity, because for the first time I was let loose in the staff areas, working on my exhibition for days. The exhibition also revealed to my acquaintances what I was actually
working on. The (perceived) suspicions surrounding my presence and participation in the library spaces shifted as my working in the library became visible and demonstrative.

In this paper, I reflect on my shifting sense of self, clashes of identity, and tensions between my different roles in the library during a year's fieldwork, drawing extensively on my field notes and voice diaries. The data collected and its quality are shown to be dependent on the identity of the researcher as perceived by those in the field. The research process has also revealed how active participation in the community being observed shifts researcher’s identity and brings research subjects into close involvement with the research.

References