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Studying the Reflexively Constructed Identity: A Narrative View on Individuals in Organizations

by

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Abstract

In this article we will argue for studying identity creation through narrations in purpose of getting better understanding for the importance of the reflexivity in identity creation processes.

Individual identities cannot be reduced to formal or institutionalized identities stable over time; life should rather be seen as an ongoing process of identity creation where articulation and reflexion upon life episodes and the pattern of episodes form the individual identity. Two ‘cases’ from an ongoing study on individual identity creation are described in order to exemplify how analyses of this phenomenon can be made through obtaining narratives of individuals on their life history by means of recurrent, in-depth interviews. The article concludes by a discussion on how institutional identities affect the interview interaction, the use of retrospective accounts, and ethical considerations when studying individuals’ narratives and identity creation.

1. Shaping the Individual Identity: Reflexive Identity Creation

The identity creation of the individual can be perceived as a process of self-reflexion that arises as individuals move through time and space, through different organizational and institutional environments. This reflexively constructed identity unfolds in the conscious interaction between the self and its social context, and can be recognized as a step towards theoretical renewal of identity theory (cf. Jenkins, 1996; Nord & Fox, 1996). According to this view, the individual identity is not fixed once and for all after achieving a certain degree of maturity, but continually socially constructed and subject to contradictions, revisions and change through reflexions throughout the life-span of the individual (cf. Hall, 1992; Nkomo & Cox, 1996). Identity creation is in this way also the continuous handling of the tension caused by adapting to the norms of the social context while also maintaining an individual uniqueness vis-à-vis this social context (Festinger, 1954; Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Tajfel, 1972; Turner, 1987; Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Giddens, 1991; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1994; Whetten & Gregersen, 1995).

Consequently, identity creation is constructed both inwardly and outwardly through the person’s own reflexions and transformations of categories and typifications constituted by institutional discourses. The individual is not only someone that exists as a definition by others but also as a self-defined person with a free will and possibilities of choosing direction. In everyday life we

are routinized participants, but as soon we take a step backwards and begin to observe what happens in a wider perspective, occasions for reflexions occur.

A modern definition of identity must thus reflect both the unique personal dimensions of biography and the dialectical pluralism and tensions of modern life (Weigert et al., 1986). It should recognize the characteristic features of the individual's present situation and the links to the multi-faceted institutional context. Among researchers the modernist understanding of identity as coherent and consistent is currently the subject of considerable debate (Gergen, 1991; Giddens, 1991; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1994). The debate is equally relevant on both individual and collective levels (i.e. groups, organizations or societies).

Simplified, it seems reasonable to say that this debate involves 'essentialists' on the one hand, and 'constructionists' on the other. The essentialist perspective assumes that groups as well as individuals are bearers of a unique character coherent in time and space. The constructionist perspective (which is the perspective employed in this study) claims that since the individual's understanding of her/himself is a product of interaction with significant others, it cannot be said that identity emanates only from within the person and is stable throughout life. Modern organizational literature gives greater emphasis to context and less to the essence of the individual, and stresses the need for new theoretical views, not least on how individuals in organizations shape their work lives (Nord & Fox, 1996).

In contemporary societies the available modes of identity creation expand and change rapidly. The individual interacts with so many organizational and societal discourses that fragmentation is difficult to avoid (Gergen, 1991). In a differentiated culture, opportunities occur that creates possibilities for different lifestyles (Asplund, 1992; Alvesson & Deetz, 1996). As society becomes more fragmented and virtual (discourse is disembedded from any world reference - cf. Giddens, 1991) the common identity stabilizing forces disappears (Berger et al., 1974). Such a position suggests the possibility of considerable freedom and widespread opportunity for individuals to interface with different discourses. On the other hand, it also implies an insecurity that can lead to normalization strategies in which people lend themselves to superficial organizational ideologies through the enactment of corporate careers and cultures.

Therefore, it is important to go beyond single organizational ideologies and individual careers

and recognize peoples' deeper values about life and their ongoing interactions in different settings. Focusing on the process of interaction underlines the reciprocal dependency between the self and the environment and pays, for that reason, attention to something beyond totally subjective self-fulfillment.

Taylor (1989) asserts that:

“Our normal understanding of self-realization presupposes that some things are important beyond the self, that there are some goods or purposes the furthering of which has significance for us and which hence can provide the significance a fulfilling life needs. A total and fully consistent subjectivism would tend towards emptiness: nothing would count as a fulfillment in a world in which literally nothing was important but self-fulfillment. What is more, the primacy of self-fulfillment reproduces and reinforces some of the same negative consequences as instrumentalism” (Taylor, 1989. p 507).

Against this background we stress the need to obscure the deeper ontological character of identity creation through self-reflexivity. We argue that a more rigorous defense for reflexive theorizing can be achieved by addressing these ontological assumptions and by explicitly articulating alternative sets of ontological prerequisites for identity creation (e.g. the view of human beings, grounded assumptions of life). Giddens, for example, describes in a reflexive manner the importance of ontological assumptions when he discusses what he labels ontological security; “to be ontologically secure is to be confident in the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography” (Giddens, 1991, p 53). Hence, we need to understand the life-history of the individual and how individuals keep a particular narrative going, not only how she/he perceives her/his identity at any particular moment. Only then can we understand the multifaceted nature of identity creating processes constituted by both its ‘becoming’ and its ‘being’, and thereby explore the ontological dimensions of the phenomenon (Chia, 1996).

To summarize; this more profound form of identity creation rooted in individuals' biographies and incorporating the tensions of modern life we label reflexive identity creation. By the word

reflexive we emphasize that people are something more than traditional institutionalized identities like for instance a woman/man or a doctor. We mean that reflexive identity creation can be seen as a tacit pattern in every human being constructed through interaction with others (cf. Jenkins, 1996). This reflexive identity creation can also be described as a bridge between the self-identity and the social identity stressing the continual redefinitions associated with identity creation. However, it is important to notice that reflexive identity creation is not something totally unconscious or something that can only be unmasked in a psychoanalytical way; it is an ongoing process creating a meaningful pattern that combines a person's articulated and unarticulated experiences of life.

In this article we have used two cases from a study conducted during the last two years, as examples of how these narrations with reflexions can be used as ground for describing different ways of creating identity in empirical research. In the last section of the article, we will give some methodological reflections about these narratives as a way to understand identity creation, but also discuss problems with this kind of approach within organizational research.

2. Using the narrative approach - a reflexive construction of identity

In most modern research on individuals and organizations, the importance of the language as a medium for information about reality is highlighted in one way or another. In this paper, our ambition is to discuss narrative approaches where the language is seen as the main medium through which individuals convey his/her interpretations of reality (cf Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992). Linguistical approaches in which the language is viewed as a complex system in itself are thus excluded; our discussion is rather directed towards the language as it is used to convey stories made by individuals. This implies analyses of how individuals describe their daily life, how different phenomena are described, and the different meanings and levels of importance attached to central concepts (cf also Foucault, 1972).

In the analyses described below, we use this approach in analyzing the identities of individuals. The ambition is to go beyond formal positions (like accountant, manager or professor) and institutionalized identities (like swede, catholic or woman) in order to understand latent patterns in how individuals perceive themselves in relation to work and organizations and how these

patterns unfold over time. An analysis free from such guiding presuppositions seems more promising in articulating the reflexive identity creation of an individual (as defined in the previous section). In these cases, we start by obtaining the individuals' own narrations on their journey through work life, narrations that we see as a basic way for an individual to construct and reflect upon his/her experience. This does not imply that formal positions and/or institutionalized identities are unimportant, but if they are important in the respective cases, they must emerge from the narrations rather than being imposed on them from the beginning.

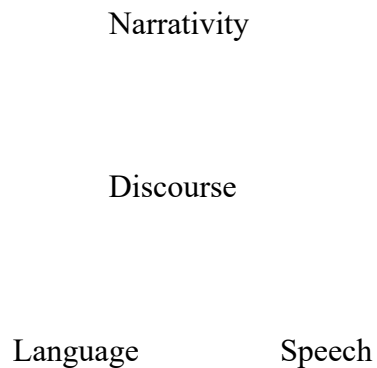
During the last decade, the narrative approach has been taken far beyond its origins within the field of literary analysis, where the philosophical foundations were laid in the works of Alasdair MacIntyre (1981/1996). In this tradition it is emphasized that individuals are exposed to numerous different, sometimes contradictory and competing, discourses, and thus that the need for arriving at personal views on reality through self-reflexion is on the increase. The narratives on the personal journeys through work life can thus fill a sense-making function for both individuals and their social contexts; putting together more or less articulated experiences into a coherent narrative is a way to clarify how the individual relates to his/her environment in the long run. One might say that the narrations fill a pragmatic function insofar the individuals try to organize their life stories by finding reasons for their actions in different situations, and a sensemaking function when different episodes are to be explained out of some sort of meaningful philosophy or value (Czarniawska, 1997). A CEO that refers to a number of difficult situations as the critical incidents in her career is constructing a pragmatic narrative when explaining the different situations, and a sensemaking one when/if these situations can be related to some underlying line of thinking (like, for example, a managerial philosophy).

In the book 'A Grammar of Motives', the literary critic Burke (1969) analyzes the construction of narratives by focusing on the contents of them and their dramatization. As the five central concepts in his analysis, Burke uses act (i.e. what persons do), scene (in what context the act takes place), agent (who is the acting person), agency (how is the act performed) and purpose (the intended meaning of the act). Besides analyzing what acts take place on the scene and by whom, Burke's approach also takes into account the plot relating the different acts to each other by attributing meaning and symbolic value to them. We have used the conceptual model of Burke (with some minor adjustments) in order to analyze how narratives of individuals concerning their

journey through work life are constructed. Consequently, we have analyzed the dramatic character of the stories described through the lens of Burkes pentad. A situation can be described as dramatic when the pentad become unbalanced as for example when the actor performs an action that does not fit the scene or when there are multiple goals in the play (cf. Steyaert & Bouwen, 1997).

In these narrations we could thus identify reflexive descriptions of episodes such as single positions, projects or decisions. All individuals in our study were able to identify such episodes in their lives and explain their behavior in them in a way that connected themselves to their social contexts. The differences between the individuals appeared when reflecting upon the connections between the episodes and the long-term development implied by such connections. The pragmatic functions of the narratives were thus obvious, and the individuals were usually aware that their interplay with the environment in different episodes could not be reduced to formal positions or informal social roles. Instead, the explanations usually formed a pattern on a more unarticulated level, a pattern expressing deeply rooted values in the individuals. Some of these patterns appeared as more coherent over time, which we termed integrated identity creation. Others exhibited narrations where the pattern connecting different episodes and contexts appeared more ambiguous and inconsistent, in other words multi-identity creation. 'Inside' each episode these individuals developed a coherent sequence of function, role and identity, but when undergoing transitions into new episodes these sequences were left behind and a new sequence of identity creation appeared. Some individuals almost made a point of the fact that they had different functions, roles and identities in different social contexts (Lindgren & Packendorff, 1997); instead of having one clear profession these individuals saw themselves as multi-professionals. Their narratives were 'packaged' in the sense that each episode was described as a single 'parcel' with its own wrapping and its own content. The individuals exhibiting an integrated identity creation, on the other hand, were less preoccupied with detailed descriptions of the various parcels. Instead, they focused on what was common between the different episodes during their work life, emphasizing the overall pattern as the level where consistency and coherence must be found. Even though this difference to some extent can be attributed to different personal styles of narrating (emanating from their various social contexts), we are of the opinion that it reflects different individual modes of identity creation.

Different styles of narrations can also be linked to divergent ways of communication. Schrag (1997) point out the importance to distinguish between language, speech, discourse and narrativity. He sees the discourse as something located between the constitutive elements of speech and language and the wider contextual and holistic intertexture of narratives (see figure 1).



Figur 1: Connections between narrativity, discourse, speech and language

(Schrag, 1997, p 21)

We mean that the narratives can be seen as a way of contextualising discourses, but also as a way to create distance to institutionalized discourses in a reflexive manner. Through the individuals' narrations we could identify tensions between narrations and institutional discourses exemplified with unbalances in the pentad. Therefore, it is necessary to declare that single narratives are something different than discourses. Even if studied individuals' identity creation is constituted by discourses, the discourses do not determine their narratives and identity creation totally (cf. Benhabib, 1992). Instead, we stress the importance of creating ontological awareness in relation to different discourses through narrations. Discourses stands in danger of being pulverized into abstracted, atomistic, static and elemental units. When we move to narratives we proceed to a broader context.

However, from the individual perspective the narratives also can turn to fiction and the borderline between fantasies and visions can be thin. Nevertheless, when we stress reflexive identity creation we demarcate the border to storytelling as fiction. Our studies underline reflexive awareness through looking backward and forward and travelling outward and inward. The backside of increasing self-awareness is anyhow that this capability also can be used for imaging oneself in a positive light beyond reality. Critical questions and contacts in the respondent's networks rendered us to see beyond these facades of self-deceptions and fantasies and often we instead got surprised over how open-ended they could treat their critical incidents (as for example divorces).

In practice, the ambition to reach an understanding of the identity creation of the individuals implied a somewhat unstructured interview situation. At the first occasion, the individuals were just asked for their spontaneous story on their journey through work life. Questions asked at this stage were mainly aimed at clarifications of details in their stories. In the subsequent interviews, different themes from our theoretical preconceptions and the first narrations were introduced in order to make the individuals to articulate reflexions and clarify lines of thought. Examples of such themes were their view on work as related to life in general, their view on themselves and others, their view on participating in organizations and changing organizations, their view on where the border between themselves and their context should be drawn, and so forth. They were also exposed to a tentative formulation of their identities, which were used as point of departure for further reflections on their identities. This process lasted for about a year with each interviewee, implying four to six longer meetings and exchange of written material.

3. Two of our cases analyzed

In this part we describe two shorter examples of narrations and some of our analyzes concerning these narrations. However, we would like to stress that this is only short excerpts from the series of analyzes we have done. We use these examples merely as ways of showing some principles of analyzing.

3.1 Leonard - a pragmatic negotiator

Leonard started off by saying that he did not really want to talk about himself. He briefly touched upon the upbringing that led to his rapid professional progression immediately after graduation from a School of Business and Economics. He saw himself as part of a rational system - the Swedish civil service tradition - where his personality was not of great significance. The dominance of the outer scenery, in terms of functional descriptions, over his inner reflections was particularly marked at the beginning of the narrative.

Leonard had already become a manager at 29 years of age and had worked in different managerial roles in public administration until a change in government arose. He then received various job offers, including postings overseas, but the family thought this out of the question with there being four children of different ages. Instead, he was offered a job on a project. When this had been concluded, he was asked whether he was interested in a management position for a research funding body with international connections. Leonard accepted the offer and established himself well, but after a short time he was offered a new post. The offer was prompted by a further change in government. Although he enjoyed his new work at this time, he yielded to the prevailing praxis in public administration: “if you are called up by... it is rather more than being simply called up. It is not exactly an order, but it is not far off it either.” Nevertheless, on completing this assignment he reported that he would have gladly returned to his former job, but a superior wished to the contrary. Leonard therefore remained in the post for two further years. This episode exemplifies the tension between his own will and the scene, he sacrifices himself in the service for the public administration and act as a loyal collaborator within the system even if his own will is restrained. For that reason, he packages different work situations in parcels and do not express any need for integrating those parcels.

In the narrative covering the latter parts of his career he described more clearly his will and wishes. At the same time, his descriptions of the content of individual positions became less detailed. In one section of the narrative, he expressed thoughts about possible overseas postings to his superiors. In time, this resulted in him obtaining his first overseas posting, which was subsequently augmented by a series of further assignments. He thought the “game of human interaction” was an exciting aspect of this work as were the various cultural dimensions of negotiating. He was also fascinated by the challenges associated with finding navigable paths in

contexts where all possible avenues ahead appear to be closed off. Leonard also liked achieving favorable negotiating outcomes. In these posts he thought he was able both to apply his multi-professional experience and find an outlet for his personal qualities. We mean that he in this part of the narrative express a more balanced situation concerning Burkes pentad and that the intrigue lively concentrates on the battles of negotiations and his reached results.

On completing his overseas posting, he was offered work in private industry back in Sweden. At this time, he had also been offered a job that was similar to his previous work, but he thought that work in the private sector appeared altogether more exciting and challenging. Leonard stated that the adjustment to his way of doing things on this occasion became much more marked compared with prior transfers between his various civil service postings both within the country and abroad. He was forced to reflect more upon his own attitudes and related that his experiences were marked a great deal by his time in the various activities of public administration. This activity occurred in a largely written culture with extensive routines for the documentation of different items of business. He thought that his experience to date in industry embraced a clearer emphasis on the value each individual, not least himself, brought to the company. How was our existence as a company motivated, and how did each individual in the firm contributes to its added value?

Reflexions

This introductory narrative pays attention to outer courses of events that reflect Leonard's travel through working life. He stresses the outer scenery and his voice seems to be weak compared with his superiors at least in the beginning of his narrative. We get the impression that he in this part of the narrative function as a civil servant or 'ombudsperson' notwithstanding what organization he happens to work for. He is in duty for the sake of the Swedish civil service and for that reason he makes an offer for the system. He gets orders and he executes orders and do not think over the cultural embeddedness of his action. We can identify multiple goals in the play and this part of the narrative constitutes a direction towards multi-identity creation.

However, further along in the narrative he expresses more developed inner reflexions. He declares more lively his will and his wishes, wish also results in moves across national borders in line with his own proposal. As a Swedish representative abroad, he enact a role as a negotiator sensitive to cultural diversity. He combines his pragmatic orientation developed in previously

appointments with personal qualities necessary for international negotiations and shapes an identity of a pragmatic negotiator. This part of the narrative constitutes an orientation towards a more integrated identity creation, even if his value orientation seems to be rationalistic and goal-oriented in a narrow sense. This rational orientation can be exemplified with his feelings concerning his moves from country to country. He thinks that the shifts between public administration and private industry, described in the end of the narrative, more adjusted his way of acting than shifts between postings in different countries. His task-orientation seems to dominate his way of narrating and emphasizes for that reason his pragmatic working life orientation. Consequently, another observation is that Leonard keeps his working and private lives apart in his narrating. Identity creation at work is something separated from identity creation privately.

3.2 Diana - an educator of the people

In the introduction of her narrative, Diana gave considerable attention to memories of her youth. She thought this was important in understanding the development of subsequent events. Diana had to move house early on because of her parents' change of teaching posts. Her place of residence between the ages of seven and fourteen was seen as a fixed reference point in her childhood: "it was like growing up in Bullerbyn"

She also saw her childhood as being enriching and fashioning her character given the close proximity of all in the locality and the democratic upbringing that this enabled. A job in the cultural sector was Diana's aim. She obtained a BA in the humanities (ethnology, social anthropology and art) and then took a media course. She saw herself as a 'super-humanist' compared to the others with whom she was taking the media course. She secured her first job with a media company as the most highly educated co-worker. This she thought was seen as a threat by many of her male colleagues. She also had difficulty reconciling herself with the company jargon and the assumed expressions used by those in that particular environment. This experience is referred to again later in the narrative when she is working as a travel courier at a typical tourist resort. She experienced the environment as artificial and constructed for shorter stays involving sun, bathing and good food. Here, also, Diana had difficulties in acclimatizing

herself and she related that she developed stomach catarrh for the first time in her life. This episode is an example of a situation that forced her self-reflexion. She does not fit into the scene and she starts to search for new occasions.

She became increasingly conscious of the significance of the environment and therefore actively sought a new resort with a greater cultural milieu within the aegis of the travel company and eventually ended up in Italy. This was an easy choice to make because of a vivid description of the location by a popular teacher and the fact that she had visited Italy many times previously. She learned Italian and took on a much more committed involvement in the cultural life. She saw the town as a “real town with a real life”. In Italy she also met her great passion, married, and gave birth to a daughter. They lived together for four years, but she saw the cultural differences as increasingly difficult to overcome: “Yes, sometime I’ll write a book ... inferno is a relevant description of what I’ve been through”. They divorced and she moved, together with her daughter, home to Sweden and her parents. Eventually she obtained a teaching post and started to enjoy her new profession. Against this background she decided to further her university education in order to achieve formal teaching status. On succeeding with this, she sought a teaching post, but finding work at that time was not easy. She therefore accepted the offer by a person from a media company who wanted to employ her. The company offered good terms and Diana took the opportunity, but with the thought in her mind that she could always return to teaching if she turned out to be unhappy. She became very content, however; the firm expanded and Diana took on increasing responsibility and became the MD.

After a few years, Diana began to feel that she was being subjected to a great deal of unfair criticism and started to consider alternate development paths. She thus sought a managerial position in the culture sector in another town. She felt struck by an advertisement in which an unconventional manager was sought at the same time as she saw prospects of realizing her ambitions of raising peoples’ cultural awareness. But at the time she was also afflicted by a fearful sense of dread when she took the job. She had quite recently bought a house and her daughter enjoyed life both at the house and with her friends. But Diana moved with her daughter to the new town and fulfilled a promise to get a dog. She then faced many difficult years and carried out a reorganization with the aim of achieving greater efficiency and a higher degree of outward orientation. Considerable work was required in embedding the new organization

politically. In this part of the narrative we can identify her agony concerning organizational shifts and we can also see how her feelings for the daughter spontaneously weaves into the narrative. The definition of the scene is extended from working life to private life and seems to include much puzzling between the sectors in order to find a navigable path.

When the reorganization was complete, a timely approach was made by a politician in her home town about a managerial post in the culture sector. The offer came at the right time since neither she nor her daughter liked the town where they were then living. She worked hard with her ambitions in the culture area, but felt that all the effort was not worthwhile. “I felt I had worked terribly hard and I never understood why another manager in the council administration should have a considerably higher salary...” Even though she had enthusiasm for the job as such and developed visions in the culture arena, she nevertheless felt exploited. On learning of an expression of interest from the personnel section of one of the region’s largest media companies after three years, she immediately took up the challenge. The terms turned out to be favorable and she thus took the job. However, she had the same feeling about the job as always: an initial period of anxiety and regret. But now she had the possibility of working creatively with culture and media, often on a national basis.

Reflexions

The tensions between working life and private life become more obvious in Diana’s narration. She seems also more sensitive for different cultural contexts and how these contexts influence her well-being. The narrative expose quick changes and simultaneous shifts between scenes and openness for describing her inner feelings. The intrigue builds on reflexions on discontinuities in her outer and inner journey and call for integrating perspectives for her identity creation but not in a too narrow sense. We think her passion for refinement and work with raising peoples’ cultural awareness is one expression of this search. She searches for a cultural context and a platform for education beyond the artificial that constitute a more authentic feeling. This passionate attitude shapes an ideological profile that constitutes a strong conviction that aligns her identity creation towards a more integrated mode of identity creation.

3.3 Brief analysis and comparison

These short descriptions of two cases have been used to symbolize different ways of identity creation as we have interpreted their stories. Leonard keeps his working and private lives apart; for him, identity creation at work is something different than identity creation privately. We can label at least the first part of the story as multi-identity creation in the guise of a professional civil servant tradition. Leonard's life story is "packaged" into separate "parcels", and integration between them seems to be unnecessary or at least uninteresting. Confronted with this part of the narrative, his reflexion is not to integrate but to refine the descriptions of each identity.

Diana's symbolize another way of narrating her life; she put different sectors of life together and give the impression of, despite a sometimes chaotic outer scenery, a more integrative mode of inner identity creation in a idealistic direction. Throughout her life, she has been advancing a basic set of cultural values. She seeks for a ground pattern (cultural values) that in some way combine her working-life with her private life. This is examples of results (as we also have found in our eight other stories) that pointed towards differences in identity creation between two groups; multi-identity creation and integrated identity creation.

4. Evaluation and discussion of our narrative approach

Since the aim of the study and the empirical method implied that we should try to uncover the basic values of individuals through making them reflect upon their own narratives, it seems natural for us to reflect upon how functional the method has been. Even though narrative approaches have existed for some years now within organization theory, each research effort has its own contextual uniqueness that the researchers must reflect upon by themselves and try to convey to colleagues. Here, we have chosen to reflect upon three important issues in data collection and -analysis; the influence of institutional identities, the use of retrospective accounts, and the question of research ethics when studying individuals.

4.1 Institutionalized identities in interaction

Even though one main ambition of the study was to go beyond institutionalized identities in the analysis of the individuals, these institutionalized identities affected our interaction with the interviewees (in fact, the implication of the word ‘institutionalized’ is that it affects all human interaction whether we want it or not). Different interviewees responded differently to the fact that we had the professional role of academic researchers, for example. In the same vein, the notion of gender differences affected the interaction in various ways.

The first two individuals in our main study (not Leonard and Diana) were a man and a woman, both about 50 years old. They behaved quite differently when asked for their narratives; the woman was outspoken concerning personal matters while the man were more cautious. Even though the cautious attitude is most understandable, it appeared during subsequent interviews with other interviewees that these differences between men and women persisted. Most men ‘packaged’ their narratives in a logic fashion in the way that work life were seen as separate from life in general, while the women gave more detailed and vivid accounts on how work had been related to other things in life (like marriage, children, buying houses etc.). It should be noted, however, that the recurrent interviews aimed at reflexions on the narratives implied an increased familiarity between us and the interviewees, which made also the men more outspoken and reflexive on the relations between their professional and private lives.

The notion of gender differences among the interviewees also implies that there could exist corresponding differences among researchers that affects the interaction. Our own experience is that such differences exist, and that they affect not only the interview interaction but also the interpretation of narratives and the theoretical analysis. We both participated in the initial sessions with all interviewees, and wrote interview transcripts and preliminary reflexions as soon as possible after the interviews. Some of the subsequent interviews were made by one of us alone. Even though these occasions do not exhibit any coherent pattern, we have the experience that the interview interaction became more informal when we spoke alone with persons of the same sex. When Monica spoke alone to the women, the connections between work life and private life became even more obvious. When Nils spoke alone to the men, formerly untold ‘secrets’ on work life and careers were revealed. There are, of course, both pros and cons by achieving an informal interaction; among the pros we find the increased spontaneity and

openness, among the cons we find the lack of structure endangering accurate accounts.

These differences became quite manifest at one occasion when Nils had conducted the previous interview with a woman himself and we both participated in the next one. While Nils experienced the latter interaction as unstructured and messy as compared to the previous one, Monica felt that the interaction had been focused on information that would be very valuable to us. Through our continuing dialogue we have also identified differences in our way of packaging knowledge and our way of identifying important interaction patterns. We can summarize these differences in stressing the importance of oscillation between to see the meaningful pattern in the everyday details or in the philosophic connections.

We are of the opinion that the influences of institutional identities in interview interaction can hardly be avoided, but that they can be handled through awareness of their existence. By being two researchers, we have been able to discuss each interview in detail with a common frame of reference, which has enabled us to see more nuances in the narratives but also the possibilities of diverging interpretations of them. By also confronting our (sometimes diverging) interpretations with the reactions of the interviewees, our understanding has been enhanced. Understanding different perspectives and views is important, but it is even more important to understand where they diverge and where they converge in order to grasp the whole pattern behind the narratives (cf Helenius, 1990).

4.2 Retrospective accounts as descriptions of long-term development

Using retrospective accounts can be problematic in the sense that individuals change their view on things over time and tend to re-formulate their memories of past. The question of how the 'true' picture actually looks and the extent to which interviewees 'lie' to us, is one that we have met repeatedly in discussions with other researchers. We have not, however, experienced more difficulties in this study than what is common in most qualitative research within the social sciences. It should be noted that some interviewees told us things in the initial narratives that were later modified or altered during the subsequent sessions, and we also misunderstood things that had to be sorted out afterwards. In this sense, the use of recurring interviews served as a sort of 'reliability check'.

In one case, the male interviewee spoke only about his work during the first interview, highlighting the different episodes of his professional career. Afterwards, Monica assumed that 'he must have a housewife back home taking care of basic services and nursing the children'. During the subsequent interview, we raised this issue, and it appeared that his wife actually had a more demanding and high-ranking position and that he had to assume responsibility for their house and children. When asked about why this information had not been revealed the first time, he answered that he had interpreted the situation as if the interview should focus on his professional life only. Moreover, he thought that since the interview were focused on him as an individual, family integrity should be preserved.

In general, the problem of retrospective accounts is that it is impossible to tell exactly what happened at different occasions, and we are of course exposed to that also. But our main interest in analyzing the narratives is to assess how the interviewees has made sense of their life and to what degree such sensemaking exist. The series of interviews is further intended to enhance that process of reflexive sensemaking in order to describe the individual's identity creation over time. Even though the study is retrospective in the sense that data on past occasions form the narratives analyzed, it is a window study (Czarniawska, 1997) in the sense that it is the mode of creation of the narrative during the interview sessions that is the most interesting aspect of it.

4.3 Ethical considerations

In this kind of research, ethical considerations imply to balance between the demands of integrity from the interviewees on the one hand, and the demands on reliable and trustworthy accounts posed by the research society. In the study reported here, most interviewees were quite famous within their respective professional fields and had sometimes quite shocking stories to tell. We tried to handle this 'balance act' by anonymizing all 'cases' even though it was only one of them that made such a demand. Beside using this as an ethical principle, we felt by ourselves that there was a serious risk that the interviewees regretted their participation in the study when confronted with their narratives in written form. This implied that we left out the most 'sensational' parts of the narratives; since we were not of the opinion that these arts were needed for our analysis and conceptual development.

We have also encouraged the interviewees to read the narratives and our analyses and to give us comments. In retrospect, the extent to which they accepted our analysis of their identity creation were astonishing; in one case, an interviewee is actually using our conceptual apparatus in the interviews and lectures she gives. Most interviewees were also of the opinion that it had been important to them to articulate their life narrative and their thoughts on various aspects of life. This reflective treatment of their history also implied that they changed their view on certain things in the past. By articulating all such aspects of the interview process to both ourselves, the interviewees and our readers, we feel that sufficient ethical considerations have been made.

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