Abstract

This paper examines how individuals learn and adapt by exploring their self-identity and self-knowledge. My interest in this research area occurred over a nine-year period, beginning with a seven-year empirical study of individual commitment of business people to environmentally friendly practices and then two years of reflection and review on how these emerging views can influence meaning-making and professional development. These explorations led to a deepening of understanding of the stable (fixed) and becoming (fluid) elements of self-identity. One outcome of the research is a series of questions that assist educators to reshape management education and leadership development by better facilitating individual meaning-making, openness to change, and motivation.
Stable and becoming selves: A theoretical and practical framework for reshaping management education and leadership development

Opening

The aim of this paper is to offer a framework that explores the micro-processes of self-identity and self-knowledge and how these understandings can help stimulate individual commitment, learning and change. The origins of this paper began in 2007 when data emerged from an empirical doctoral study of individual commitment (Rylatt 2012). There, the focus of attention was on how 31 individuals made meaning in regard to their commitment to environmentally friendly practices in industry. Although the specific context of the doctoral study involved motivation and commitment to environmentally friendly practices, my interest was aroused on issues pertaining to self-identity and self-knowledge. Notably, how does self-identity appear to be influential in the process of meaning-making and commitment? This focus fuelled further exploration and research in the doctoral study and in the subsequent years. To set the scene for the upcoming discussion, foundational literature is now articulated.

Foundation literature

In this literature review I concentrate on scholarly advice on self-identity and self-knowledge which informs individual meaning-making, motivation and commitment. The advice emanates from a number of disciplines including sociology, management and organisational studies, and psychology.

It is suggested by a number of sociologists that individual identity is constituted largely as a result of how individuals see themselves in respect to others (Baumeister 1998) and how a sense of self guides the sensemaking of those with whom we interact (Markus, Smith & Moreland 1985; Swann 1987). These reflections are representative of social constructionists (Berger & Luckmann 1967; Gergen 2009; Holstein & Gubrium 2000), who argue that the development of identity involves embodied interaction and the creation and dismantling of meaning over time. It is assumed that individuals have different accounts based on their experience, even when they share the same event or episode, as their meanings are
constructed differently. One of the early pioneers of study of self-identity in this field was Giddens, who described self-identity as highly reflexive process involving a variety of perspectives, including:

What to do? How to act? Who to be? These are focal questions for everyone living in circumstances of late modernity – and ones which on some level or another all of us answer, either discursively or through day-to-day social behaviour. (1991:70)

In management and organisation studies, self-identity is constituted and re-constituted through on-going processes of ‘self-doubt’ and self-openness that continually demand choice making and interpretation (Alvesson & Spicer 2012; Carroll & Levy 2008). Identity is heavily influenced by experiences within changing contexts. People form, repair, maintain, strengthen, or revise their social construction in response to change (Alvesson, Ashcraft & Thomas 2008; Sveningsson & Alvesson 2003). Identity is therefore perceived as a meaning-making process (Park 2010) in the development of human purpose, self-efficacy for action, value and justification of self, and self-image as a worthy individual. Vandewalle (2012) argues that greater understanding is needed of how a fixed and growth mindset of self influences the level and nature of learning agility (DeRue, Ashford & Myers 2012).

Many writers have asserted natural interconnections between individual commitment, sensemaking and identity (Gautam, Dick & Wagner 2004; Maitlis & Christianson 2014; Maitlis & Sonenshein 2010; Ravasi & Schultz 2006; Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld 2005), yet there is no empirical evidence to justify these claims. Klein, Molloy and Brinsfield (2012:138) propose that commitment is a psychological state involving processes of awareness and choice-making, where ‘commitment is dynamic and entirely socially constructed within the person (i.e. it emanates from one’s unique perception and interpretation of one’s situation)’.
Depending on the nature of meaning-making, these determinations can lead to either contribution or resistance to what is emerging. Wieland (2010) claims that these constructions between one’s perception of self and the external world (Watson 2009) generate tensions as individuals seek understanding of who they are in relation to the world around them.

According to Alvesson (2010:211), people demonstrate different qualities of subjectivity and destruction, which can lead to degrees of ‘insecurity, fluidity and ambiguity’ versus a degree of ‘coherence, robustness and integration of self-identity’. Obodaru (2012) states that setting standards for self and others is a central catalyst for self-awareness of levels of achievement, social acceptability and distinctiveness in a given cultural context.

In making the philosophical position clear it should be noted that some scholars (Albert & Whetten 1985; Erikson 1959) have argued that identity is relatively enduring, whereas others stress the more adaptive and evolving qualities of identity (Burner 2002; Gioia, Schultz & Corley 2000; Pullen 2006). In the latter case, individuals are seen as ‘evolving beings’ constantly questioning their beliefs and testing assumptions, then re-considering their hopes and fears for the future as conditions undergo change over time. Ibarra and Petriglieri suggest that when people are engaged in identity play, they may ‘rehearse a variety of possible selves, without necessarily seeking to adopt any of them on a permanent basis’ (2010:17). Shaping and building identity generate tensions, which are indicative of individuals trying to make sense of their existence. Beech (2010) argues that identities are constructed and deconstructed over time through the three processes of experimentation, reflection and recognition.

In the psychological literature, Markus and Nurius (1986) established a three-decade tradition of exploring the self-knowledge and motivations constructs which are associated with ‘possible selves’ theory. They assert that the ‘possible self’ is determined from three central questions. These questions are: What would you like to become? What are you afraid of becoming? and finally, What could you become? Markus and Nurius defined 150 possibilities of self, comprising six categories (1) general descriptors (e.g. intelligent), (2) physical (e.g.
good looking), (3) life style (e.g. alcohol dependent), (4) general abilities (e.g. able to cook),
(5) occupational alternatives (e.g. taxi driver) and (6) opinions of others (e.g. loved by
others). In more recent research (Barreto & Frazier 2012) found that self-knowledge of
possible selves has a major influence on how people make meaning of their lives. These
determinations of ‘possible selves’ theory appear be embraced in number of applications
including mentoring (Fletcher 2007), life planning, goal setting and motivation (Oyserman

So to summarise, the literature review from sociology, organisation and management and
psychology supports on-going need for research on self-concept, self-identity and self-
knowledge and how these explorations can reshape thinking on meaning-making, change and
learning. I therefore argue that this research interest is highly relevant to the fields of
management education and leadership development. This paper now details the methodology
used to explore this area of interest.

Methodological Approach

The methodological approach used to develop thinking in this paper included two phases. The
first phase involved the completion of doctoral study undertaken from 2005 to 2012. The
second phase included processes of critical thinking (Paul & Elder 2012), reflection (Mills
1959) and reflexivity (D'Cruz, Gillingham & Melendez 2007; Humphreys 2005) in 2013 and
The latter explorations were primarily undertaken in the role of a consultant and academic in
my working life and by consistently examining and revising my emerging conceptual
assertions in daily life. Personal practices of daily meditation and use of reflective journal
assisted the on-going development of thought. These two phases of exploration led to a
deepening of understanding of the micro-processes of ‘stability’ and ‘becoming’ with
individual self-identity.
The aim of the empirical study was to examine the nature of commitment over time of 31 individuals, over a 12-month period. The individuals studied were employed within organisations where they had been tasked with making improvements to the nature and scope of environmentally friendly practices. Various organisational types were sampled from a government-sponsored environmental program that included private and public sector organisations, non-government organisations, professional associations, industry groups, third party organisations such as consultants, as well as local government. The private sector industries included recreation and gaming, manufacturing and high technology.

The research in the doctoral study embraced a processual approach to change (Dawson 2003; Pettigrew 1997). The processual perspective was seen as providing a means to analyse how scripts, stories and discursive exchanges influenced or informed commitment. Buchanan and Dawson (2007) cite empirical studies that can demonstrate that individuals provide different versions of the same event or change, creating research narratives that are ‘multi-authored’. Similarly, individuals can be observed telling and scripting stories (Dawson & Buchanan 2005; Dawson, Farmer & Thompson 2011) to justify their performance (Clausen & Olsen 2000; Ng & De Cock 2002) in their roles.

The emerging views of each individual were captured during semi-structured interviews. The prime focus of interest was their personal accounts of their discoveries and commitments to the implementation of environmentally friendly practices. This qualitative approach (Denzin & Lincoln 2005) permitted the capture of rich narratives on meaning and on relationship to change. An important part of the study involved re-interviewing 20 individuals 12 months after their first interviews. These return interviews facilitated discussion and observation of changes as they unfolded. In some cases, secondary data was also provided pertaining to organisational history, policy and plans. The capture of data enabled an investigation of the longitudinal influences of change through the analysis of individuals’ meaning-making.
The methodological approach was heavily influenced by work in the social sciences on developing theory from empirical case studies (Eisenhardt & Graebner 2007; Flyvbjerg 2006), which cemented the research focus on individual commitment informed by the social, political and cultural context within which people work. The data collected was associated with an Australian Research (ARC) Grant. The data selection method came from examining text from 775 pages of interview transcripts and 150 pages of journal observations drawn from ethnographic observations and associated explorations of theory. Each interview, lasting around 60 minutes, was recorded and subsequently transcribed from the digital recording. The data management tool NVivo (Bazeley & Jackson 2013) was used to assist analysis. In adhering to the methodological approach, theoretical propositions were generated by drawing on more meaningful conclusions about the nature of the concepts being discussed.

**Findings**

One of the explorations that arose from the doctoral study was an improved understanding of the micro-processes of self-identity, including the theoretical co-existence of stable and becoming selves in how people make meaning. To help capture highlight the discourses of stable and becoming selves, consider the accounts of Janet, one of the individuals studied within the research. She was a senior official in the recreation and gaming industry. Her accounts at the beginning of this research study reflect a long-held (stable) view that commitment to environmentally friendly practice was a moral obligation. Twelve months later, her level of enthusiasm had shifted in response to her surprise that industry acceptance of these initiatives was very positive. Janet’s first accounts in at the beginning of the research, provided some understanding of the nature of her commitment:

*I haven’t been doing it in the last 5 minutes, it’s sort of second nature to me for a while.*

*I suppose having lived through personal examples and what have you – but you save a buck and you feel good about it and you think you are just doing a small part to reduce the footprint and um, then.*
Janet’s accounts 12 months later:

So you are doing it at an interesting time aren’t you? Because just in the last, since we spoke, the whole topic about caring for the environment and people taking personal responsibility – I mean you know it’s a bit of a fad at the moment and what have you – but in the last 12 months it’s just so mainstream and it’s really hit people at a personal level. You know and I think that business can’t ignore that fact. They are being pushed by the consumer very very much. And that’s increased substantially since we spoke last year, hasn’t it? Um, well I’ve, the thing that surprised me most was I guess to get um, 155–60 delegates at our eco clubs conference – I was very confident we could get more than 100, but what did surprise me was the number that came from rural NSW into the city. And so it’s incumbent on us as an organisation to look for every opportunity and angle to ensure that clubs succeed in what they do.

Janet’s accounts and my observation of her in interviews indicated some interesting changes in her commitment over time. These changes were in part in a response to different interpretations based on new and unfolding phenomena. Her statements reflect that the co-existence of the fragments of both stability and becoming had some influence on her meaning-making for some time before the study was undertaken. Each of these factors led to an act of commitment that involved the protection of her ‘stable self’ reflected by her ongoing dedication to environmental stewardship. Equally, she was willing to experiment with innovations that steered her into new directions which she might not have considered in the past. The “becoming self” appeared to be driven by her openness to experiment with new frontiers of personal exploration. As a result, the possibility was created for her to become and evolve, with a new and expanded form of self-identity.

Janet’s was not an isolated case in the study; others in the study presented data that indicated changes in their commitment. Among the other individuals in the study there were many expressions of self-identity and the possible existence of stability and becoming within the 12-month period of focused attention of this research. Here are accounts from other individuals in this study, which also indicate the possible co-existence of stability and becoming.
Tony – Facilities manager in recreation and gaming business, indicating a transition from self-interest to being socially motivated (first interview)

Yeah. Well when you’re a teenager I don’t think you think of anything other than yourself, so um you know that would’ve been the case – probably yeah in the last 10 years I’ve been thinking a little bit more about it – certainly in the last 4 years it’s been a focus so...

Zandy – Production operator responsible for environmental improvements in a manufacturing plant, expressing some understandings of her need to learn new skills in her job (first and only interview)

Oh no – I’ve always done an area of environmental and safety and quality assurance in my previous company. And um, my role on this side – when I started with this company I started as a safety manager – from then on I went onto compliance system manager which then looks at all the compliance issues in our area – on our site with regards to safety, environmental and um, OHS and quality assurance. And then obviously the environment side was a bit lacking behind compared to our other area and that’s where now I came into that particular role just to solely deal with the environment side and try and bring the environmental up to the same level as the others...

My doctoral research thus stimulated a research interest in the concept that individuals may see the world from either one or both of these ontologies, one being a ‘stable’ self and the other the ‘becoming’ self. These two selves co-exist within the micro-processes of the individual social construction which influences commitment and motivation over time. Depending on the situation and the nature of these iterative exchanges, emotional and cognitive reactions can be spawned, leading to an array of stable and becoming discourses. As a consequence of these iterative exchanges, individuals are constantly forming and dismantling internal organising systems to make sense of their world at a point of time.

Empirical data also suggests that affirming a sense of self also reinforces one’s personal identity, but individuals achieve this in a myriad of ways. Tensions of ‘existence’ or ‘being’ generate a multiplicity of fragmented selves that seek to gain, claim, and maintain clarity and/or confidence over time.

Self-identity can create an impression of a static and unmovable object; yet the data yielded a view that participants experienced a coexistence of stable and becoming selves that generated a variety of tensions associated with these exchanges. This research focused a magnifying
glass on the ‘messiness’ that at times generated dilemmas, contradictions and paradoxes. The creative tension of ‘messy selves’ was exhibited in many ways in the observation of individual commitment over time. The data on personal identity provided an interesting and unique avenue through which to explore change. Participants who disclosed information pertaining to change over time often used personal identity as a means of expressing their making of meaning. They also used talk to communicate the transitions associated with a questioning of new identities. For example, Keith, a senior manager in a boutique bathroom appliance manufacturer, pointed out the range of ‘selves’ in action, each in its own way contributing to this social construction of self. In his accounts a number of inner voices, critics and expectations are revealed. In his first interview Keith said:

"Ah yeah. Because you know I was one of those people that were overall worried about what the planet was going to look like when my kids grow up – but I never really cared about it to be honest with you. I never really took it that seriously. I never thought um, I never really thought the full picture sort of thing. Well now I probably do. I walk past lights and look at ‘em being on and that sort of thing. For two reasons, now I know how much money it’s costing us – but the other reason is, I’ve kind of started to develop this underlying um, concern about the environment or compassion about the environment. Um, that I never really had and that I never really looked for. I wouldn’t consider myself a tree hugger by a long shot, but I’m a hell of a lot greener than what I was."

Such perspectives of ‘messy selves’ are firmly centred on the tensions of emergence, where participants tried to anticipate and make sense of their plausible futures. The measure of the level of discomfort or inertia a person could accept or tolerate would depend on the answers to a series of questions such as: What level of disturbance and experimentation are you prepared to accept? How long can you sit with unpleasant emotions and feelings? What safeguards do you need to cope with any vulnerability and uncertainty that may unfold? What other factors or commitment are reducing your capacity to take action at this time?
Implications for theory and practice

The data captured from the doctoral study appears to be consistent with literature on identity and possible selves, where elements of fragmented and alternative selves as part of self-concept are addressed. Adding to the complexities of understanding is that individuals appear to make plausible assessments based on what is deemed possible at a given moment in time. Personal accounts presented data supporting the view that individuals juggle and make sense by trying to reconcile their various tensions in order to determine what is achievable and possible. These observations are consistent with many of the views in the sensemaking literature, where individuals are seen to use organizing frameworks to make sense of what is unfolding or emerging.

The stable and becoming selves include a polarised array of different perspectives as to what is possible and suitable at any point of time. The stable self is more protective of the status quo, whereas the becoming self is more receptive to experiment and to engaging in the possibility of the evolving self. A person deploying a ‘stable’ governing personal account is more cemented in the past and is less prone to let go and try something different. A strong preference for stability can also build acceptance of the status quo and inertia, as well as providing a means to disengage from unpleasant or undesired situations. When the ‘becoming self’ is more energised, a different set of standards and expectations is activated. That self appears to be more accepting and tolerant of the ambiguity and conflict associated with complexity. When people have a natural preference for becoming they do not like to wait for things to happen; they will take the initiative, stimulate or take action to better adapt to emerging circumstances. If people are more involved in ‘becoming’, they are less likely to accept the routines and rituals of the status quo and are more uncomfortable remaining unmoved or stuck on issues. Where possible, the becoming self will explore new avenues or possibilities to take control. For some participants, the relationship between self and context was viewed as a dynamic and emerging process. My study also points to the view that some individuals are more reflexive and as a result more aware of the influences that might sway
their resistance and receptivity to new commitments. For others, this potential remains largely hidden and unexplored. To make a commitment at any point of time requires many considerations before choosing what action to take. At times, facing new contexts served to heighten anxiety, fear and struggle, and in such times moving beyond the status quo took too much energy and time. At other times, participants could be more willing to commit to changing themselves. When individuals operated from an ontology of ‘becoming’ they could appear hard to read and unpredictable unless they justified themselves with narratives that clearly explained their language and motivations. People confined to the ‘stable self’ could be judged as inflexible and obstinate unless they explained their rationale for remaining consistent and unwavering.

In outlining the dimensions of ‘stable’ and ‘becoming’ selves it is interesting to note that much of the tension and paradox revolves around how individuals cope with ambiguity, confusion and messiness in messages and intentions. Some participants were more able to rationalise and make judgements when faced with lack of clarity and mixed messages while others found this nearly impossible to live with and needed to move on and take action to progress into another context or approach. It is important to acknowledge that confronting tensions and paradoxes need not result in an unpleasant experience; it can stimulate joy and anticipation as well as fear, anxiety or sadness. The reaction is heavily conditioned by the social construction and reflexivity of the individual. It should also be said that, for some people, reflexive explorations of self-identity and what action to take next were clearly not their priority. Stepping back and examining the discoveries of my doctoral study since its completion in late 2012 has enabled further refinements and iterations of my thinking.

Subsequent analysis has translated into a deeper understanding of the dynamics of ‘stability’ and ‘becoming’ and how these realisations can influence the nature of meaning-making, identity-formation and learning in a variety of fields including management education and leadership development. In Appendix One a series of questions is provided to facilitate understanding of self-identity and self-knowledge. For me, this contribution provides
educators and scholars in management education and leadership development an avenue to further examine practical and theoretical contributions. These questions in Appendix One are offered, not as prescriptive solutions or remedies to the challenges of management education and leadership development, but as an opportunity to stimulate on-going experiment and to innovate with learning design and delivery to assist personal and professional transformation and renewal.

Conclusion

I argue that a better understanding of the fragments and dynamics of meaning-making can help educators develop and enhance individual learning, motivation and commitment manifest in a variety of work settings. Doctoral research and subsequent reflexivity have led to an expanded view of self-identity comprising the co-existence of elements of ‘stability’ and the more fluid aspects of ‘becoming’. Examinations also yielded helpful interconnections between individual commitment, sensemaking and self-identity. As a result, these explorations built a deeper understanding of what drives meaning-making, learning and motivation at work and in life.

Appendix One – Questions for exploring self-identity and self-knowledge

Questions for the stable self

- What are my default behaviours and habits?
- What skills and strengths do I consistently choose to use?
- What key values do I wish to nurture and protect?
- What is my higher intent and moral compass in life?
- What will be the risks of undergoing change?
- What elements of my identity are sacred and non-negotiable?
- Which routines and existing obligations must be kept as I move forward?

Questions for the becoming self

- What would you like to become?
- What are you afraid of becoming?
• What could you become?
• What excites and frightens you about making fresh commitments?
• What is my calling in life?
• What strengths must be developed in order for me to progress?
• What do I need to do now to be stretched outside my comfort zone?
• What do I need to let go of and try differently?
• What weaknesses or avoidances must be addressed?
• How can I find others to help me evolve and grow?
• What new knowledge do I need to learn about in order to grow?
• What forms of courage do I need to draw on?
• If you were successful in making changes what would you see, hear or feel?

Further reflexive inquiry

• What energizes or de-energizes me?
• How do I calmly step back and consider what is unfolding to my identity?
• How do I best reconcile these tensions between stability and becoming?
• What happens when I notice the tension between stability and becoming?
• What expectations are creating unnecessary stress and anxiety?
• What are the benefits and consequences of taking no or some action?
• How do I reconcile that some things are unknown?
• What are the wins and losses of changing and learning?

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