

Abstract

The Change Recipient's Vantage Point: An Exploration Through the Lenses of Identity Threats, Autonomous Identities, and Identity Work

Rahul Sukumaran

'*Who am I?*' is a question that has and would continue to intrigue *homo sapiens* across temporal and spatial boundaries. The question of identity or the self-concept unveils itself as a deep 'mind-body-organizing' complex that is evoked and evolves in the lap of pervasive dominant discourses. In this regard, *chapter 1* introduces the dissertation and sets a background for the rest of the chapters to clarify and build upon. The contextual disposition at present, as described by Bauman (2013) in his seminal work, *Liquid Modernity*, describes in depth the fluidity of the present era; wherein, organizations are in flux, a constant state of change. The identities of its members, entangled with that of the organizations', become defined and salient by how one understands oneself at one's workplace where everything dwells in this continuous state of flux.

More importantly, in this dissertation, an attempt is made to delineate the extant understanding of identities in the context of change; from the mainstream as well as a skeptical standpoint. Along the lines of mainstream scholarship, change is conceptualized as an element that brings about uncertainty, but in a more visible or direct manner as it influences the everyday of life of organization and its members. On the contrary, the skeptical or the alternative school of thought, nudges one to re-examine and understand an alternate reality of how change manifests and how *subjects* are (re)produced in and around discourses that are powerful, paternalistic, precarious, yet operate with an invisible, (un)obfuscating temperament. Further to these two contrarian lines of argument, the dissertation continues on to delineate our understanding of the mainstream and critical scholarship on identity and change, through *chapters 2, 3 and 4*.

Beginning from a mainstream vantage, *Chapter 2*, builds and reviews the literature at the intersection of identity and organizational change scholarship. More specifically, the paper focuses on identity threats experienced by members of an organization who are subject to unexpected changes in their work environment. The members at the receiving end of organizational change have, largely, been given scant attention in the extant literature (Oreg, Bartunek, Lee, & Do, 2018). The chapter builds on how change events manifest as identity threats, putting organizational members into a state of insecurity within their work contexts. Consequentially, these insecurities spread throughout sub-groups within the organization and suspends the organization in a state of dilemma. Furthermore, a theoretical model is proposed, based on how these recipients of change respond to such identity threats; at the individual,

group and organizational levels.

Beyond this, *chapter 3* moves towards a rather skeptical vantage in understanding identities; especially, given the pervasive nature of a paternalistic discourse that narrates many organizational settings. In this regard, relations of power are (re)produced in the very organizing of structures that enables the process of (re)production of the worker (Foucault, 1982). The self that is claimed to be autonomous in the modernity of today's workplaces, which of course focuses on 'freedom', additional 'benefits' and 'adapting' to changes, simply become new tools of and for the 'machinery' to produce the supposedly autonomous self. In this paper, the (re)production of the identities is unveiled through the observation of an organizational setting; wherein discipline and security are deployed as subtle tools, invisibly operating through the pervasiveness of an (un)obfuscating discourse. Observation methods help in approaching such a setting, which comprises a combination of participant observation, unstructured interviews, the spoken word, informal meetings etc. Subsequently, theorization of the context attempts at understanding and capturing the subjectification process, all within an encapsulated space of subjugation of identities. Further along these lines of theorization, four typologies of the subject positions so (re)produced are developed and discussed, which are: *intellectual hamsters*; *anti-fragiles*; *pseudo-familials*; *paternal heirs*. The study appends the scholarship on identities, from a critical paternalistic order of reality.

Moving further along the lines of critical scholarship, *chapter 4* maintains a skeptical worldview of identities in organizational settings. The chapter is set in a discourse of technology as a savior, which presents itself as a problem-solution complex that encapsulates new forms of technology such as Artificial Intelligence, Machine Learning, Automation etc., which "promises" solutions to a gamut of everyday organizational or managerial problems. Viewing from an alternative, or rather skeptical lens, such "promises" could also emerge as a pejorative *techne*, as commented by Foucault (1988). Arguing further, the precariousness that prevails in present day organizational settings further engenders insecure selves (Collinson, 2003), who become an integral extension and also quite possibly a consequence of such pejorative *techne*. In the given setting, as one's identity emulates an insecure stance, encompassing existential, psychological, social and economic dimensions, identity work (Brown, 2018) becomes the pivot for in-depth analysis in this study. The chapter engages with an interpretive paradigm that roots itself in the social construction of reality, from a critical framing perspective (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Methodologically, the study engages in the process of reflexively interviewing (Arsel, 2017) management professionals in such pejorative, precarious settings, to understand how insecure selves carry out identity work. The theorization that emerges, in an abductive fashion, gives way to three *subject* positions, which are: *The abusive*; *the boundaryless*; *the purposeless*. To conclude with, the chapter closes with how these *subject* positions entail toxic work environments and dysfunctional leadership practices.

Finally, the dissertation concludes with *chapter 5*, which attempts at capturing the concluding remarks across chapters that embeds the theoretical insights drawn in the realm of identity scholarship, from the mainstream as well as the critical vantage points. More importantly, the chapter raises fundamental questions that govern most of the research world, its doers and followers, such as: '*why do we do research?*'; '*whom do we do research for?*' etc. Building from the foundations of a neo-liberalistic existence, arguments are drawn upon an intriguing question: '*why research needs to imply?*'. Moving further along the boundaries of this question, the chapter also tries to delineate plausible future directions for the dissertation work. Some of such directions include elements of literature and praxis around areas such as *agility, data dominant discourses, future of work, degrowth* and so on.

Further as one approaches the culmination point of the dissertation, what unfolds is the path of the '*I*', the very symbolism that depicts the researcher and the researched; wherein the '*I*' begins with the fundamental question of the self, the organizing and the other, through both the mainstream and skeptical vantages and brings about new light and interesting directions through this attempt at scholarship in the field of Management and Organization Studies.