The challenges of identity work: Developing Ricoeurian narrative identity in organisations

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abstract

In this paper we develop Paul Ricoeur's approach to 'narrative identity' to explore questions of complex and conflictual identity work in organisations. We read Ricoeur's self-reflexive conception of narrative mediating between two 'poles' of identity within his discussion of a threefold, hermeneutic process of mimesis involving prefiguration, configuration and refiguration. With reference to the film *Infernal Affairs* (2002)*,* deployed as an 'extreme case', we demonstrate how these ideas can aid understanding of identity work in challenging organisational contexts. We argue that a narrative approach is useful for understanding the processes involved in identity work in organisations, especially around occupational roles where employees' work requires them to act in ways that cause tension with their pre-existing sense of self. In doing so, we contribute to discussions of identity in organisational contexts and demonstrate the value of Ricoeur's ideas.

Introduction

Organisations can challenge our conceptions of ourselves, they can provoke us into reassessing our personal identities (Watson, 2008). They have been defined by their attempts to marshal the internal strivings of employees, presenting a range of roles we are expected to assume, adapting our manners and characteristics as appropriate (Kreiner et al., 2006). There is potential for conflict embedded in this adaptation as different senses of our character are presented for interpretation (Collinson, 2003). Such transitions or adjustments may therefore become a source of deep tension for workers and this paper seeks to explore the complex and conflictual identity work required.

Narrative identity approaches suggest a theoretical approach to this identity work, presenting a self-reflexive framework for an individual's conception of themselves and their interactions (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1995; Watson, 2009). Theories of narrative processes facilitate understanding of the identity work involved in organisations, encompassing multiplicity and ongoing versions and revisions of our selves (Brown, 1998). In this light, the philosophical work of Paul Ricoeur (1984; 1985; 1988; 1992) offers a fascinating contribution to discussions of identity in management and organisation studies. We explore the value of Ricoeur's ideas by discussing an extreme case of identity work in organisations, the cult Hong Kong film *Infernal Affairs* (2002),

directed by Wai-Keung Lau and Alan Mak.[1] Analysing the organisational context that drives the film, we integrate Ricoeur's self-reflexive conception of narrative as mediating between two 'poles' of identity with his discussion of a threefold, hermeneutic process of mimesis (prefiguration, configuration and refiguration). We demonstrate how these ideas can contribute to the vocabulary and theoretical discussions of identity work in challenging organisational contexts.

Identity and organisations

The relationship between our sense of ourselves and our work is complex (Glynn, 1998), not least when there are mismatches between this sense of who we are and the demands of our job role or organisation (Dukerich et al., 1998). This is not restricted to those engaged in 'dirty work' (Beech, 2008). Work and organisational life regularly present provocations to our conceptions of ourselves, to our personal identities. Some writers anticipate that individuals experiencing such mismatches will resolve the conflicts, for example through personal adjustment, forming a sub-culture with like-minded colleagues or exiting from the organisation (see Meyerson and Scully, 1995; Glynn, 1998; Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999). However, not all of these avenues are open to everyone, especially in times of economic uncertainty when resigning or not being a 'team player' could lead to unemployment. Many people may be trapped in situations where their personal values and sense of self conflict with the demands of their job.

Organisations are often defined by their presumptions and their attempts to marshal the 'internal striving' of individuals (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). These aims can come to interfere with the relationship between self-evaluation and self-concordance in pursuit of organisational goals, a relationship that forms an important element of job satisfaction (Judge et al., 2005). Organisations present a range of roles that an employee is expected to assume, adapting their manners and characteristics as appropriate. There is a potential conflict embedded in this adaptation as different senses of one's character are presented for interpretation. By prescribing and proscribing actions, ways of thinking and self-presenting, working life exerts influence over us (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2004). Adapting to new or changing organisational roles requires identity work, an adjustment as we understand our relation to our role and all that it entails. The demands of such transitions or adjustments may become a source of deep tension for workers required to act in ways that conflict with their pre-existing sense of self or values, provoking significant and complex professional image construction (Roberts, 2005) that could lead to a confused social identity (Hogg and Terry, 2000; Kreiner et al., 2006) and great insecurity (Collinson, 2003).

Researchers have drawn on workers' accounts or explanations of how they have come to be in certain occupations as a means of engaging with the complexities around identity (Hytti, 2005). These accounts seek to retain the complexity, or messiness, of

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1   (a) Please note that our paper contains plot-spoilers; (b) We discuss the film on its own terms and do not account for additional revelations about the characters that emerge in the prequel (Infernal Affairs 2) or sequel (Infernal Affairs 3). See Marchetti (2007) for a detailed discussion and analysis of the trilogy.

working lives, resisting any temptation to edit events in search of a cohesive or compact story of people's experiences (Steyaert, 2007). While these scenarios are acknowledged in the literature as being complex and stressful, limited attention has been paid to exploring the processes engaged in by people trapped by such situations. For these individuals, discrepancies between their actions at work and a sense of their selves more generally can have significant implications (Watson, 2008). This paper theorises the nature of identity processes that seek to address these tensions.

We are interested therefore in identity, and identity work, in process (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Beech, 2008). This reflects the changing nature of individuals who regularly (re)assess their sense of self (explicitly or implicitly) in response to their personal desires but also to the provocations and challenges of organisations (Ybema et al., 2009; see also Sims, 2003). Organisations provide spaces of heightened 'self-presentation and labelling by others, between achievement and ascription and between regulation and resistance' (Ybema et al., 2009: 301). It is the symbolically-charged nature of the organisational environment that has implications for the identity of the individual. It is an important aspect of the lived experience of organisations to understand the ways in which we reconcile conflicts within this heightened, hyper-sensitive context.

It is the processes involved in this temporary (and temporal) nature of a multi-faceted, (r)evolving identity that we explore in this paper. We want to move beyond static pictures of individual identity, that aspect of identity taken up in many studies examining a cross-section of an *ongoing* project of revision, negotiation, retreat and (re)invention. Identity is not an ever-fixed mark, it is something that has multiple face(t)s, constantly in process, referring back whilst projecting forwards, negotiating and adapting in the present and therefore 'articulated only in the *temporal* dimension of human existence' (Ricoeur, 1992: 114, our emphasis). We therefore offer a theoretical framework for exploring the types of conflict and the processes encountered in identity work in organisations, arguing for the particular value of a (Ricoeurian) narrative approach. Specifically, we will suggest that this approach is helpful in understanding the identity work of people who are stuck in occupational roles requiring actions that conflict with their pre-existing sense of self. First, we will therefore briefly outline the current debates surrounding narrative identity in the organisation studies literature.

Narrative identities

The 'narrative turn' in organisation studies witnessed in recent years has provided researchers with a means of gaining rich insights into complex topics (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000; Czarniawska, 1997; Cunliffe et al., 2004; Rhodes and Brown, 2005). The situated study of individual identity narratives in organisations has been explored by Brown (2006; Humphreys and Brown, 2002a; 2002b; 2008), revealing organisations as sites of multiple and, at times, competing narratives. Labels such as 'occupational identity' have been shown to mask the complex and composite nature of what they seek to describe, which can be revealed through reflexive narrative approaches (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1995) that engage with 'plurivocal native interpretations' (Brown, 1998: 36).

However, as an emerging field, there are differences to be found in the scope or emphasis associated with the concepts of 'narrative' and 'story' (Brown et al., 2008; Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010). For the purposes of clarity, in this paper we distinguish between narrative (a process) and story (the artefact produced by narrative processes). 'Narrative' is the way in which information is gathered, organised, interpreted and presented in the formation of stories. Narrative, in this sense, allows a refined understanding of complexity and the processes of change, a more 'concrete rendering of causality' (Tsoukas and Hatch, 2001: 998). 'Narrative' is generally considered specifically diegetic. This telling of our self-stories is particularly appropriate when considering self-reflexive, individual identity narrative processes.

Narrative identity approaches have been criticised under the banner of 'narrative imperialism' (Phelan, 2005), the suggestion that narrative theorists have expanded beyond their means, that they attempt to explain phenomena such as identity within too restrictive a set of concepts, thereby simplifying complex processes. In answer to such criticisms, Eakin (2006) conceptualises narrative identity as one (among other) mode(s) of self-identity. It is in this vein that we are concerned with narrative as a process through which identity work is engaged in producing multiple, synchronic stories of our lives and our conceptions of ourselves. This approach seeks to embrace fluidity and multiplicity (Ezzy, 1998; Rhodes and Brown, 2005), it encompasses the 'temporal, relational, and cultural, as well as institutional, material, and macro-structural' (Somers, 1994: 607), it is not concerned with a unitary, factual or dogmatic 'life story'. It is in this sense, as a form of organising information and interpretations, that we believe a Ricoeurian narrative approach can develop recent debates in the academic literature around the particular processes of identity work occurring in organisations where sustaining a unitary, and relatively fixed, sense of self may prove challenging.

Paul Ricoeur and narrative identity

The philosopher Paul Ricoeur pursued an 'uncompromising commitment to a conflict of perspectives' (Kearney, 2004: 8), developing a hermeneutic approach to the study of meanings and linguistic mediators in areas such as religion, ethics, time and the self. His conception of 'narrative identity' has encouraged citation as a potentially helpful aid to understanding identity in organisational contexts (Brown, 2001; Coupland, 2007). However, while these writers have suggested the potential of Ricoeur's ideas, we concur with their view that this potential has yet to be fully utilised. The value of Ricoeur's work is demonstrated in its development in terms of understanding authentic leadership (Sparrowe, 2005), entrepreneurship (Hamilton, 2006) and otherness in organisational change (Durand and Calori, 2006), but 'narrative identity' as a concept has received only limited critical attention in organisation studies (Jabri, 2004, 2009; Hamilton, 2006). This paper seeks to move this debate forwards by demonstrating the theoretical potential for a narrative identity approach to understanding identity work in organisations.

At the heart of Ricoeur's conception of narrative identity is a distinction between *ipse* and *idem* identity, that is between 'the self' and 'the same' (1992: 117-8). *Who* I am changes with time, the ways in which I act, perceive and interpret may alter from moment to moment (*ipse identity*). However, I remain the same person throughout my

life, the lone protagonist of my autobiography and, in this respect, there is a sense of sameness and unity to experience, memory and expectation (*idem identity*). In everyday life, how I act, what characteristics I exhibit, may vary a great deal, but there is a 'permanence-in-time' which means that I remain the same individual. Ricoeur (1988; 1991a) believed that the failure to distinguish between these two types of identity has obscured attempts to understand personal identity. It is this contrast that allows Ricoeur's approach to cope with the multiplicity inherent in our identities, where we act differently, present ourselves differently and conceive of ourselves differently, depending on need, context and goals. Individuals who experience life in an episodic, non-narrative way (Strawson, 2004) will nonetheless retain some form of sameness (excepting severe psychological damage or impairment). They will not entirely reinvent themselves afresh in every passing moment. Nor is identity fixed; the creation of our narrative identities is a process without end (Ricoeur, 1991b).

To sustain a consistent sense of unity in one's personal identity, self-reflexivity therefore produces two distinct 'poles'. Where the idem (same) and the ipse (self) identities overlap, Ricoeur emphasised his conception of character: 'the set of distinctive marks which permit the reidentification of a human individual as being the same' (1992: 119). That is, the cumulative, only gradually shifting aspect of identity that is derived from the acquired habits and identifications 'sedimented' over time to establish paradigmatic 'rules' for one's self. In contrast, keeping one's word reflects 'the extreme gap between the permanence of the self and that of the same' (1992: 118), that is, between the ipse and the idem. Keeping one's word is concerned with what is held on to voluntarily, providing the sense of 'self-constancy' that helps to overcome the tensions evoked from competing identifications and behaviours that form the spectrum of difference in the gap between ipse and idem. This does not suggest one coherent autobiography of one's life but a competing, overlapping, subsuming multitude of narrative voices that are gathered together by identity work.

It is in this gathering together that we suggest the narrative construction of a sense of oneself (or selves) is taken from 'the outside', as a self-reflexive, hermeneutic interpretation. To delineate the nature of this process, Ricoeur (1984) drew on St Augustine's conception of the 'threefold present' (the past, present and future experienced together in one moment) and Aristotle's mimesis (as imitative of action). Ricoeur proposed that $mimesis_1$ (prefiguration) creates certain expectations and frameworks for understanding based on prior experience. This new understanding is reached through $mimesis_2$ (configuration), in which events, actions or other phenomena are emplotted. This then informs future understanding, $mimesis_3$ (refiguration), producing a virtuous circle of hermeneutic discovery and adaptation. By developing mimesis from a starting point of the threefold present, Ricoeur allows for a mimetic process that encapsulates past and present, 'interweaving' both fictional and historical narrative modes, moving away from traditional mimetic replication and towards a diegetic, interpretive understanding.

Ricoeur does not explicitly enlist his three stages of mimesis to develop the conception of identity in *Oneself As Another*, but we will argue that an approach to narrative identity is developed when clearly understood in relation to this process. This provides a form of dynamic, polyadic reflexivity (Laitinen, 2002; 2007) that engages with shifting

external influences and opens up a narratively-mediated opportunity for a continually (re)negotiated plurality of meaning. For example, whereas Cunliffe et al. (2004) suggest that amendment to Ricoeur's conception of narrative is required to cope with the convergence of multiple, or polyadic, plots produced by memory and imagination, we suggest that Ricoeur's 'interweaved' (1985: 160) history and fiction through the process of configuration allows us to develop just this sense of a dynamic multiplicity. We will return to this proposal later in the paper.

A Ricoeurian approach develops earlier concepts of the contradictions inherent in complex, multi-faceted identity by enabling a unity of purpose and understanding to the self-concept (Ezzy, 1998). As Ezzy outlines, where Mead conceived of memories and anticipations perceived as objects that are organised by the individual to provide meaning, Ricoeur provides the process of configuration. By enacting a hermeneutic circle that engages making sense of events with the lived experience of the individual, a plot 'is not merely imposed but is produced by a complex moving back and forth between events and plot structure until both are fitted together' (Ezzy, 1998: 245). In making this link between narrative process and lived reality, whilst establishing a dialectical relationship at the heart of identity, Ricoeur's approach understands knowledge of oneself to be interpretive. It is this interpretation that seeks to provide stability in the face of conflict, complexity and uncertainty.

Following Ricoeur's (1991a) conception of self-knowledge as an act of interpretation, we propose an emphasis on the viewing of one's actions as though from the outside, that we perceive ourselves from the perspective of the other. Narrative processes produce what we will refer to as autrebiography (Coetzee, 1992). The autrebiography is the story of one's self as an other. For Coetzee this manifests in a series of semi-autobiographical novels[2] that represent a particular type of reflexivity as narrative that fictionalises whilst it draws on historical sources and devices, attempting to produce a particular type of (possibly heightened?) truth. We propose that all identity narratives bear some resemblance to this approach.

This paper therefore seeks to make a significant contribution to the development of Ricoeur's ideas in organisation studies by providing a broader narrative approach to identity work. It is this development of an approach to identity based on narrative processes, drawn from a reading of not only Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative* but also *Oneself As Another* and other (later) works, that has not yet been fully utilised in organisation studies (Coupland, 2007). In developing Ricoeur's ideas in an organisational context, we will demonstrate their value through the analysis of a heightened case of identity work engaged in by the two central protagonists in the film *Infernal Affairs*. We will briefly introduce this film before beginning our analysis of the function that narrative processes perform in identity work through discussion of prefiguration, configuration and refiguration.

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2   Most recently *Summertime* (2009).

Infernal affairs: 'I'm a cop!'

Set in present-day Hong Kong, *Infernal Affairs* pits two of Asia's biggest stars (Tony Leung Chiu-Wai[3] and Andy Lau[4]) in a deadly cat and mouse game of deception. The story follows Leung's role of Chen Wing Yan (Yan), a police officer who has spent his entire 10-year career undercover amidst Hong Kong's criminal fraternity, and Lau's role of Lau Kin Ming (Ming), a gang member who was placed in the Hong Kong Police Academy as a cadet and has since risen through the ranks. Having established the two protagonists in their respective roles, the drama gathers pace when both police and criminal organisations discover that they have each planted a mole in the other's operations. The race is on to unearth the respective moles. In the action that follows, we come to understand the difficulties experienced by both Yan and Ming in living out their undercover lives, as they attempt to reconcile their conflicting organisational roles with their sense of who they think they 'really are'. This is played-out amidst a tense battle between both the individual protagonists and their respective organisations, heightening the pressures on each of the central characters' identities.

Yan's undercover career requires him to participate in criminal activities such as extortion and gang violence, leading to multiple arrests. Alongside these activities, Yan passes information to SP Wong, one of only two people who know that he is a police officer (the other is the senior officer who recruited him). Throughout the film we observe Yan's difficulties in reconciling his sense of himself as a police officer with his association and involvement with criminal activity. Ming's experience is, initially at least, almost a mirror to that of Yan; he is a young criminal with a clean record selected by gang boss Sam to enter the police force as a way of protecting his operations from disruptions by law enforcement. As events unfold we watch Ming grapple with his job, trying to satisfy his gang boss while at the same time protect his own interests as his career takes off within the police force. These organisational environments create pressures, expectations and influences on individuals with implications for the employees in question and the organisation more widely.

Our choice of *Infernal Affairs* is both pragmatic and aesthetic. While other films have explored similar territory, such as Philip Davis' (1995) *I.D.*, *Infernal Affairs* plays out more clearly the identity tensions we are interested in.[5] Furthermore, *Infernal Affairs'* focus on the lives of Yan and Ming make it more suitable for our analysis than *Infernal Affairs 2* or *3*, which explore other themes and characters (see Marchetti, 2007). The film presents the tensions provoking identity work as a living hell, providing the film's title (Law, 2006). It reveals two protagonists responding to strong organisational pressures in different ways, exhibiting different aspects of narrative identity work.

In seeking to explore the value of Ricoeur's theoretical framework to the study of identity in organisations, we will use *Infernal Affairs* as an 'extreme case' of identity

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3   Star of films including *Happy Together*, *Hero*, *In The Mood For Love*, *2046* and *Lust, Caution*.

4   Star of films including *As Tears Go By*, *Days Of Being Wild* and *House Of Flying Daggers*.

5   We have chosen the original telling of the Infernal Affairs story rather than Martin Scorcese's remake (*The Departed*, 2006) somewhat arbitrarily, but find the former aesthetically more pleasing, with lead performances that contribute a greater sense of nuance to the identity issues under discussion.

work. This approach provides a greater visibility for the dynamic, complex processes involved (Eisenhardt, 1989; Kreiner et al., 2006) together with the crucial role of identity work within and outside the formally defined boundaries of the organisation (Watson, 2008). As such, the film provides a valuable opportunity for theoretical development (Yin, 2003). Our use of the film is not to suggest that its contents represent a valid empirical data set from which insights can be generalised; instead we use it as a springboard for developing a theoretical discussion of narrative identity work in organisational contexts (Spicer, 2001; Born et al., 2006; also see Phillips, 1995).

We can now explore how a Ricoeurian approach to narrative identity can help us to understand the identity work presented in the film and, in turn, the identity work processes experienced by those in occupational roles that require them to act in conflict with their pre-existing sense of self. We will do so by looking at the processes of prefiguration, configuration and refiguration in turn, discussing how they relate to identity work and the hermeneutic creation of autrebiographies, illustrating our arguments with examples from the film.

1. Prefiguration: Implicit frameworks for understanding

Mimesis$_1$ (prefiguration) is the knowledge arrived at through prior experience that provides a pre-narrative understanding. There are expectations of the self and of narrative conventions more generally, there is a semantic knowledge which is brought to bear on experience, a 'conceptual network' such that a sequence and causality can be conferred on events. Further, Ricoeur argues that there is an important symbolic element to prefiguration, that human action can be narrated (and 'read') because 'it is already articulated by signs, rules, and norms' (1984: 57). There are pre-narrative expectations of what, for example, a police career 'looks like', the type of form it will take. The same is true of a criminal career. It is these pre-understandings (together with broader narrative-convention understandings) that the character of Yan draws upon in constructing his identity narratives.

Pre-narrative understandings are traditions, the taken-for-granted forms to be found in new experience, the assumed way to make sense of events. In this sense they compose what has become sedimented in one's approach to understanding experience. However, Ricoeur (1991b) contrasts this with innovation. Not every new experience will lend itself to being understood in these forms and, while certain narrative 'rules' such as cause and effect, are likely to remain, innovation may be required in confronting new forms of understanding. In conflict-driven identity work, gaps or contradictions in prefigurative knowledge can cause problems.

The conflict with the accepted forms of police careers and behaviour is dramatically played out between Yan and his police handler on the roof of a skyscraper overlooking the sprawling cityscape and beautiful coastal backdrop. SP Wong warns Yan about the excesses of his gang-related behaviour and the frequency of his arrests. He asks Yan if he is going crazy, 'Have you forgotten you're a cop?', provoking Yan's retort that the behaviours required by his day-to-day circumstances cannot always be consistent with his 'real' identity as a police officer. Yan is exasperated:

> Yan: What do you want me to do? Remind myself daily I'm a cop? Shout, 'Drop your gun, I'm a cop', even while I'm dreaming?

It is made clear to us how rootless is Yan's sense of self. All that is providing a foundation is the undercover story and, as we will see, such stories are in flux and prone to review, they are not set in stone. He received no 'undercover training' and has no role models for how he should act or how he should interpret these actions. He is therefore required to almost constantly innovate identity narratives in response to these challenging circumstances. When trying to reconcile the paradoxes of his actions, Yan takes up multiple perspectives in constructing stories to explain these actions to himself as well as to his superior, whilst attempting to maintain a sense of his 'true' identity.

When not acting true to one's self-perception, however briefly, this alter(ed) ego pushes away from the prefigured understanding of the self. Yan's story of subterfuge, of lack of criminal intent, becomes more difficult as sources of support become less frequent and his involvement in criminal behaviour deepens. It is this accumulation of traits and habits that causes distress for Yan. In many organisational settings we can be asked to act 'out of character' for long periods of time, this is certainly the case for Yan who spends the majority of his time acting as a criminal. In his years undercover he has caused a great deal of suffering and, to the extent that these modes of behaviour have become sedimented, they have become virtually a 'normal' part of his character and his way of interacting with and interpreting the world. SP Wong's criticisms suggest he believes that Yan releases his frustrations through his violent acts and he certainly benefits from his thefts. Who is to say these acts are not 'real'?

Character and self-constancy (keeping one's word) are the two poles of identity that stand in a temporal, dynamically dialectical relationship to one another. This conception of the role of narrative in the dialectical processes relating ipse and idem identities has not yet been fully utilised in organisational research. Yan develops a (hi)story of his undercover operation to define his sense of self in opposition to many of his actions in the gang organisation. Morally he can refer to a sense of 'greater good', diegetically the criminal acts must be configured within a story of subterfuge and as lacking real intent. The act of seeking to reinforce one's sense of self, reasserting the story necessary to mediate the gap between idem and ipse identities, can be seen when one of Yan's senior officers dies. Having selected Yan for the undercover mission while at the Academy, he was one of only two officers to know about Yan's role (together with SP Wong). Yan, dressed in his Triad 'uniform' of all black with black leather jacket, salutes as the funeral cortege passes. Yan's actions convey a sense in which, despite his daily behaviours, he retains the identity of a cop.

2. Configuration: Emplotting autrebiographies

Where prefiguration establishes narrative expectations, configuration (mimesis$_2$) describes the process of emplotment which 'brings together factors as heterogeneous as agents, goals, means, interactions, circumstances, unexpected results' (Ricoeur, 1984: 65). In this way, Ming's actions, such as revealing information about the police's undercover operations to his gangster boss, are emplotted, taking up their position in the story of his career. The film suggests Ming's inner tensions arise through deciding which story is 'true' (i.e. which he subscribes to). Ricoeur argued that configuration

'opens up the kingdom of the *as if*' (1984: 64), it is here that narrative allows for experimentation, the development of new stories, the trying-on of new senses of the self.

To explore this ambiguity, the film observes Ming's relationship with his girlfriend. Mary wants to write a novel and she explains her latest idea to him:

> Mary: I can write about a man with 28 different personalities
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> Ming: Are you talking about me?
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> Mary: Be serious. Think about it. A man with 28 personalities. That means he starts acting the minute he wakes up. He doesn't know which one is the real him.
>
> Ming: Isn't it scary?
>
> Mary: Yes, very scary.

Configuration is the process by which we come to reshape our experiences, both from external and internal sources (Ezzy, 1998), as part of our personal narrative, it 'draws a meaningful story from a diversity of events or incidents' (Ricoeur, 1984: 65). If we briefly (and crudely) assume that Ming has 'multiple personalities', these can in fact be considered as competing narratives. Through emplotment, Ming 'confers an intelligible configuration on a heterogeneous collection composed of intentions, causes, and contingencies' (Ricoeur, 2005: 100), he creates interpretive stories through syntagmatic sequences mediating between concordance and discordance to produce a 'concordant discordance' (1984: 69-73). The first story, to simplify, is that in which he has a certain moral sense which has begun to assert itself, causing him to begin to try and uphold the values held by the police and fulfil the character suggested by his outward behaviour in this organisation. This is in contradiction to an alternative story in which he is keeping his word to the criminal gang and, ultimately, serving their interests.

Each act (such as bringing about the demise of his criminal boss, Sam) can be configured into each narrative, the prior actions of his past interpreted in terms of a projected future, in both terms as a form of career advancement. It is this process of emplotment that guides the complexities of (experimental) narrative formation. Moment by moment, Ming can choose which narrative he inhabits: talking to Sam by phone, he is a criminal, but as he turns to face his police colleagues, he smilingly takes up the role of a fellow officer. This follows a similar pattern to the symbolic weight of an item such as Ming's police badge, which he plays with at his office desk, before commencing his search for the mole, face up: police officer; face down: criminal mole.

Discussing her idea with Ming, and we assume not yet aware of his double-life, Mary ponders: 'Even though he is good, he's done bad things. How should it end?' The question prompts some introspection from Ming, although it is not made explicit whether he sees himself like the character in Mary's book, struggling between good and bad, or as someone who is quite comfortable with the path he has chosen. There is a clear prefigurational understanding of what makes a successful career, arresting criminals for law enforcement or uncovering police information for criminal gain

(principally, Yan's identity as the mole). Configuration is concerned with reconciling this prefigurational knowledge with experience, interpreted as historical or fictional.

Ricoeur argues that the two modes of history and fiction are interweaved, and this overlap and cross-referenced interpretation provides an important characteristic of the types of narrative identity work discussed in this paper. Historical narratives conform to particular (prefigurational) narrative forms and traditions in order to be understood, they are presented with some degree of fictionality to give them sense, to make them seem alive. Similarly, fictional narratives are presented with historical characteristics, events are presented as though they were historical for the narrator (Ricoeur, 1988: 190). For Ricoeur (*ibid.*: 192), 'human time' is refigured 'upon this overlapping, the quasi-historical moment changing places with the quasi-fictional moment of history'. We therefore suggest that our autrebiographies, our self-reflexive creation of stories from the perspective of the other, are composed of fictional histories and historical fictions.

The interweaving of historical and fictional modes in autrebiography is what we propose underlies the process of configuration (mimesis$_2$). That is, the process by which understanding is experimented with in terms of succession and causality is amended, updated and revised in line with the historical conventions bound up in the configurational act. What is to be gained by highlighting these aspects is the particular place they have within a narrative framework. As innovation is required in the process of identity work confronted with conflicting demands and job roles, the overlaying of history and fiction, the experimentation with different configurational structures and representations, allows us to attempt to reconcile the challenges to our sense of same-self (or, in a Ricoeurian sense, character). This is the process we find Ming engaged with in the film.

Externally, we see Ming explain and, internally, potentially configure his actions within these accepted narratives. He utilises his progress within the police force to apprehend dangerous criminals and win the support of his colleagues. At the same time, these actions can be explained to the criminal gang as a way of maintaining his cover. Thus, his actions take their place, configured within two competing stories presented to different audiences. While events and actions can be configured within either narrative, they are, ultimately, mutually exclusive and a decision will need to be made by Ming at some juncture. It is the tension around this decision that guides Ming's development throughout the film, reaching its dramatic conclusion in the film's final scenes.

3. RefiguRation: Reading ourselves

Finally, creating the hermeneutic circle of self-interpretation, there is a temporal element 'onto which narrative time grafts its configurations' (Ricoeur, 1984: 59). Ming's configuration of his position only makes sense within a temporal framework of past, present and future, it can only be understood when 'read' as part of a particular story. The configuration of his narrative identity appears to reach some form of stability when, fulfilling the duties of his role in the police force, Ming establishes an ambush that brings about the downfall of Sam and his gang. With his conception of himself apparently refigured (mimesis$_3$), Ming returns to the police station where he receives his police colleagues' applause and is given a cup of the department's best coffee to

indicate that he is now a member of the team. This helps to demonstrate the fluid, inconsistent and potentially paradoxical nature of identities in organisations.

Ricoeur's threefold mimesis suggests how such an analysis could be viewed hermeneutically. Ming has a pre-narrative understanding that informs his conception of his narrative identity within the 'space' of both the criminal organisation and the police force. Not only does this prefiguration inform one's understanding of how a narrative is configured and a sense of the need to 'progress' in a career as one's life moves forward, but our previous experiences suggest particular routines with which we need to conform. Following the innovative configuration's engagement with the challenges of the organisation, a narrative understanding is reached and the sense of oneself or of others is then *refigured* accordingly. It is at this point that we find 'the intersection…of the world configured [through emplotment] and the world wherein real action occurs' (Ricoeur, 1984: 71). The process of narrative *configuration* or emplotment becomes the central point in a hermeneutic circle of understanding and revision between action and the 'text', each informing and refining the other (Ricoeur, 1981, 1984).

In our Ricoeurian approach, we all remain the protagonists in our own autrebiographies: we are the central force in the narratives that are constructed out of our perception of our experiences and actions. But we are also their readers, learning and refining our understandings. These hermeneutic narrative interpretations can be suggested in several scenes in *Infernal Affairs* where Yan visits a psychiatrist, arranged for him by SP Wong, in response to the troubles he's experiencing after 10 years undercover. Yan tends to use these sessions to sleep, affording psychiatrist Dr Lee time to practise solitaire on her computer. However, as the 'treatment' progresses so does their relationship. As Yan prepares to leave following another hour's sleep he tells Dr Lee a secret, 'I'm a cop', to which Dr Lee, observing Yan's gangster clothing, smiles, joking: 'I'm a cop too'. In responding to the apparent absurdity of Yan's confession, Dr Lee reinforces a sense that his undercover cop narrative is a fiction, one that cannot compete with the weight of evidence that contradicts it. Yan's difficulties suggest that, viewing himself from the 'outside', he may be coming to a similar conclusion himself.

Refiguration informs future pre-narrative understanding, completing the interpretative intersection between action (experience) and text (narrative identity). It 'marks the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the hearer or reader…the world wherein real action occurs' (Ricoeur, 1984: 71). However, Ricoeur refutes any suggestion of a 'vicious circle' by suggesting a *spiralling* understanding, progressing to different 'altitudes' (*ibid.*: 72), refining meaning in a manner derived from his broader hermeneutic approach (Fisher, 1997). The creation (and revision) of narrative helps us to come to new understandings about ourselves and the challenges of our organisations. It is in this way that, submitting to a particular narrative, identity work provokes new action. This is the completion/beginning of the hermeneutic of identity work, the revision and creation of new understandings of the world and the self, the formation of new prefigured understandings.

It is through these processes that conflicts and tensions are mediated and new, accommodating narratives are hopefully authored that bring concordance to the tensions of discord. In an extreme sense, this intersection between the narrative process of the

individual and the extant world of action can be viewed as a moment of 'revelation' where understanding is reached (Tilley, 1997). Faced with contradictions and uncertain desires and demands, we are required to innovate new understandings or narrative compromises. We are concerned here with the everyday, minor epiphanies of identity work. Elements of this process are revealed in *Infernal Affairs*.

Following the death of SP Wong at the hands of gangsters who Ming has tipped-off, he looks for clues among the dead man's belongings, finding the cell phone previously used to contact the undercover police officer. Ming is therefore able to contact Yan, inviting him to the station in order to relieve him of his undercover mission. Yan takes up the offer and, when he is safely sat in police headquarters, Ming asks him what he wants in reward for his long service undercover. Yan's reply is deceptively simple:

> Yan: I just want an identity. I want to be a normal man.

However, continuing the cat and mouse mirroring throughout the film, while Yan is briefly left alone in the office, he discovers evidence indicating that Ming is the criminal mole in the police force. Returning to an empty room Ming realises that Yan has unearthed his own secret and so deletes the official record of Yan's identity as a police officer. By doing so, he has removed any historical trace of Yan's existence undercover. Yan's narrative identity, his identification of himself as a cop, now has no historical basis, no physical or trace relation to anything 'standing-for' the reality of his past. This extreme situation in the struggles of identity work in the organisation represents a break in the hermeneutic circle of Yan's autrebiography.

Authoring an autrebiography is, ultimately, a reading of oneself, an interpretation from the outside, and its sources can be varied, influential and potentially conflicting. It draws on both historical and fictional modes and an interweaving of the two together. Historical sources and accounts are drawn upon in the creation of identity narratives as facts that are juxtaposed and developed. These historical traces come to 'stand-for' (Ricoeur, 1988: 100) a sense of the 'real'. Such sources carry traces of reality but take their place within a narrative through the same devices as fictional elements. Fictional sources are also configured into the identity narrative(s) when they are 'tried out', tested within a narrative laboratory used to explore different interpretations and discover a sense of 'best fit' (Ricoeur, 1992). It is in the act of refiguration that historical and fictional modes are interweaved, that an act of reading or interpretation is deployed in creating the historical fiction/fictional history of an autrebiographical narrative.

For both Yan and Ming there is a key historical event that helps define or support their interpretation of their narrative identities: the assignment of their undercover missions. However, there are no historical traces of these events. How they come to interpret their subsequent behaviour and actions can now be configured in any number of ways and, as with many memories, what is history and what is fiction can quickly become unclear. Did Yan enjoy his cocaine use and the thrill of his criminal activities? If so, is he no longer a cop? Ming has created a fiction for his police colleagues that he has broken a criminal gang, but is there some truth to this fiction? It is within the organisations to which they belong that they can find support for their identity work. However, in the film, both protagonists live their lives outside of a settled organisational context and are short of reinforcements. Isolated in this way, as their identity claims become tenuous,

their narrative refigurations, removed from historical sources, are left to roam freely through unstable fictional experimentations and 'out of character' actions.

Conclusion

At the film's climax, Yan calls Ming to the rooftop where he had previously met his police superior, SP Wong. It is clear that Yan is not simply seeking to expose Ming's deceit as he has already provided evidence to Mary. When Ming seeks to strike a deal with Yan in return for his own freedom, he asks him again what he wants. Yan, unmoved, replies: 'I want my identity back'.

As the film illustrates, organisations frequently attempt to marshal the internal striving of individuals towards the organisation's ends. They present a range of roles an employee is expected to assume, adapting our manners and characteristics as required, provoking tensions when there are mismatches between our cherished sense of ourselves and the demands of our employers (Dukerich et al., 1998). Work and organisational life regularly present provocations to our conceptions of ourselves, to our personal identities; they are sites of frequent identity work where we attempt to moderate between the desires and demands of our internal and external influences. This paper has offered a theoretical framework for addressing the types of conflict and the processes involved in identity work in organisations, arguing for the particular value of a Ricoeurian narrative approach.

The detailed engagement with identity as process, facilitated by Ricoeur's ideas, reveals how identity work can be a conflict-ridden process in search of stability. This paper has shown the potential of a particular 'Ricoeurian' approach to these processes in which narrative performs an important mediating function in bringing concordance to discord between the ipse (self) and idem (same) identities. This function is one of self-reflexive, hermeneutic interpretation understood within a temporal framework of the remembered past, experienced present and anticipated future.

We have outlined the narrative processes through which identity work is conducted. Building on the foundations of accumulated, prefigured understandings, narratives are configured, drawing together different events, actions and characteristics into a coherent story. Moreover, through the epiphanies of autrebiographical insights, further actions are impacted upon as narrative understandings are refigured. Such an interpretative process, the creation of what we have referred to as autrebiographies, is particularly relevant in an organisational context where such potentially stark contrasts as one's personal self (Yan, committer of criminal acts) and organisational self (Yan, undercover police officer) may provoke significant challenges.

While we have sought to explicate Ricoeur's ideas through the extreme case of undercover police work and gangland violence, we believe that the theoretical approach we have proposed for understanding identity work has significant value for less dramatic occupational contexts. We might all recognise some aspects of our work that require us to behave in ways that conflict with our sense of self while at work. Responding to the conflicting evidence of our sense of identity, ongoing identity work

is required to formulate and sustain some believable and verifiable sense of who we are. Narrative identity work understood as a hermeneutic process of self-reflexive interpretation helps us to grasp the mediation occurring between the conflicting demands and thus the evidence of our own behaviour that we are faced with.

There is an important role for prefigured and refigured narrative knowledge, understood as a hermeneutic circle that provides almost constant revision, (re)writing and (re)reading of the narratives of the self in a spiral of reference and understanding between narrative and action, between the past, the present and the future. This creates an ongoing dialectic between self-constancy and the relatively fixed 'character' of the individual. It is character, in terms of the particular dispositions of the individual that provides a stubborn adherence to preconceived ideas of one's own identity and how one believes one should act. These insights might help practitioners to consider the significance of the very real difficulties encountered by staff in job roles that conflict with personal values, beliefs or other, less morally sensitive aspects of their sense of who they are.

The formation and sedimentation of the habits and traits that form character's dispositions in an organisational context can relate to areas such as training, gaining experience and interaction with one's colleagues (both real and imagined), inside and outside the organisation. Individuals may benefit from being given space for narrative experimentation and having both the necessary historical and fictional resources at their disposal, facilitating and supporting the types of process discussed in this paper. This may, for example, be particularly relevant for mentoring or appraisal processes where employees might be able to articulate the conflicts they experience such that support strategies or alternative job roles can be developed.

Beyond our analysis, further research might explore empirically how the tensions present at the heart of *Infernal Affairs* are experienced in practice and the types of story produced as narrative attempts to cope with the tensions encountered. This may be especially valuable when a job role demands actions inconsistent with a person's pre-existing sense of self. The pursuit of such projects could usefully develop the role of historical and fictional narrative modes in autrebiographical work as a means of understanding the experiences and coping processes undertaken by people in such difficult occupational contexts.

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