

***Using social categories in a study of identities:
Exploring methodological questions***

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Abstract

The aim of this short paper is to discuss some methodological questions related to using social categories in a study of identities. Different approaches to the issue can be adopted. I treat social categories as discursive constructions that have central importance for individuals' identities. By drawing on intersectionality as a methodology I have chosen to examine how identities are created in relation to several intersecting social categories. In my thesis social categories play an important role through out the research process from data gathering to analysis.

Key words: social identity, identity construction, intersectionality, social category, discourse

1. Introduction

Organizations can be seen as central places for the construction of individuals' identities. Identity research in organization studies has examined the ways in which identities are regulated by organizational context as well as how individuals actively engage in constructing their identities (e.g. Knights & Willmott 1989, Thomas & Linstead 2002). In my thesis I examine the construction of employees' identities as embedded in the organizational as well as in a wider discursive context. Very broadly defined I am interested in how employees draw on and are framed by different social identities¹ (such as those related to ethnicity and gender) when they construct their individual identities. The context for the study is international creative industry organizations.

This paper looks at some of the key methodological questions of my thesis focusing in particular on issues related to using social categories in a study of identities. I will first say some words about my theoretical starting points as a background for the further discussion. After that I will discuss my approach to social categories and finally I will move on to reflect the role of social categories in my research process.

2. Social identities in identity construction

Even though research on identities has during the recent years become increasingly popular in organization studies, the field remains relatively scattered with different approaches to the topic. The critical approach, for example, emphasizes power relations touching upon questions of control and resistance, the focus being on the ways in which organizational members' identities are controlled or regulated by the organizational elites or discursive regimes. The interpretative approach, in turn, studies the ways in which individuals manage their identities when dealing with ambiguous and contradictory experiences in organizational context. (Alvesson, Ashcraft & Thomas 2008) In my thesis I draw on ideas from the critical as well as the interpretative approach trying to

¹ I use the concept social identity in a broad sense, thus I do not draw on social identity theory as such

combine the ways in which the discursive (and material) context influences organizational members' identities with how they construct their identities.

In line with the critical approach my interest lies in how discourses produce identities. I see a discourse 'as a way of representing the knowledge about a particular topic at a particular historical moment' (Hall 2001: 72) in a certain socio-cultural environment. Discourses create social categories influencing the positions, relations and identities of the members of the categories. By providing representations of social categories discourses produce understandings of the category and their relations with each other in a specific time and place (e.g. Hall 2005). In other words discourses produce social identities that influence the ways in which individuals as members of the categories define themselves.

While discursively formed social identities play an important role in framing individuals' identities they can be also seen as cultural resources that are used by a person in his or her identity construction. In line with the interpretative approach I am interested in how organizational members construct their individual identities by drawing on discursively formed social identities available to them. According to a model by Watson (2008:128) multiple discourses produce a multiplicity of available social identities, which in turn are used by the individuals in their identity construction. Social identities become (re)constructed and used as building blocks for employees' individual identities serving as a part of the explanations of who they are.

3. Intersecting social categories

I draw on intersectionality as a way of approaching '...multiple, intersecting, and complex social relations...' (McCall 2005:1772-1773) in which employees' identity construction is embedded. Whereas intersectionality has no single methodology the different approaches share an interest in social categories as influencing the positions, experiences and identities of individuals or groups of people.

McCall (2005) distinguishes between three different approaches to social categories: anti-categorical, intra-categorical, and inter-categorical complexity. Drawing on deconstructive methodologies anti-categorical complexity questions the foundations and existence of social categories as such emphasizing their linguistically constructed nature. According to this view using social categories for research purposes can be seen as problematic. The intra-categorical complexity, instead, challenges the use of social categories such as 'woman' to count for every one's experience

and identity within that category. By looking at points of intersection it seeks to reach finer categories like 'white Western woman' to be able to better reach the experiences or identities of that group. It does not question the existence of social categories as such but criticizes seeing them as too universal. Inter-categorical complexity instead sees social categories as useful constructs even though acknowledging some of the critiques directed towards using them. In my approach to social categories I use elements both from the anti-categorical and intra-categorical complexity. By being interested in social identities I draw on the idea of social categories but treat them in my study as discursive constructions. Furthermore, I examine how social categories intersect with others creating new categories.

My interest in social categories is twofold: First of all I am interested in their role in shaping the interviewees' lives and secondly, they can be seen as analytical tools used by me as a researcher trying to make sense of the phenomenon I study. I will touch upon both of the questions, when defining my own approach to social categories. I discuss them in relation to two questions: the first one touches upon their ontological status whereas the second one concerns making use of them in research.

3.1. Discursively constructed social categories

In line with the anti-categorical complexity I see social categories primarily as discursive constructions. While discourse is a widely used term in social sciences it takes various meanings. Alvesson and Kärreman (2000) have grouped the different ways in which the concept discourse has been used in organization studies based on two criteria: the extent to which discourses are seen to be connected to meaning and the 'scope' they are seen to have (from micro to macro). Both of the criteria become important in defining my own stance.

The first criterion distinguishes between studies that mostly examine discourses from a point of view of language use and studies that focus on meanings related to discourses. In line with the latter one I am interested in discursively produced meanings that can be made use of in identity construction. Furthermore, I interpret meaning as not only emerging from the specific situations of language use but also going beyond them. (Alvesson & Kärreman 2000) This point relates to the second criterion, that is to say how local discourses are seen to be. I see discourses as going beyond the immediate situations of language use but at the same time being drawn on in these situations. In constructing social realities and regulating identities discourse becomes a term connecting the micro and macro, the local and specific to the more general.

By drawing on a discursive perspective to social categories I emphasize the socially constructed nature of them, thus taking distance from essentialist notions of identities. Discourses locate identities to the social sphere, making them something that emerges between and not within people, something that does not express some essence of an individual or a social category (e.g. Burr 1995). Thus, instead of seeing identities as natural or given they are understood as socially constructed products of the socio-cultural environment in which they are embedded.

However, regardless of the discursively constructed nature of social categories, they obtain considerable power in influencing individuals' positions, experiences and identities. In my thesis I strive to take into account the power that social categories can have on the lives of individuals but at the same time acknowledge individuals as important agents in the processes in which their identities are constructed. Thus, I seek to balance between deterministic and voluntaristic explanations of social reality. By drawing on social categories individuals reproduce something that already exists but also produce something new. Identities are not beforehand decided, but have to be realized by concrete individuals and their actions.

3.2 Drawing on social categories in research

The anti-categorical and intra-categorical complexities are both critical towards using broad social categories (such as gender) in research. They, however, differ in the form of their critique as well as in the solutions they offer. The anti-categorical complexity questions the very use of social categories, whereas the critique of the intra-categorical complexity is primarily directed towards making use of too broad social categories. According to the anti-categorical complexity social categories ultimately produce inequalities between the different groups of people. Therefore the approach seeks to deconstruct them emphasizing instead the complexity of social life. According to the anti-categorical complexity using social categories in research can be even harmful since it can reinforce inequalities between different groups. The intra-categorical complexity in turn directs its critique towards too universal social categories, and not towards the idea as such of using any social categories. Instead, more fine tuned social categories can (and should) be used in research for capturing the experiences and identities of specific social groups. (McCall 2005)

Because of the influence that social categories can have in shaping people's lives they have central role in my study. Even though I sympathize with anti-categorical complexity's concerns regarding using social categories I still see them as an important asset in studying identities. In line with the

intra-categorical complexity I am interested in identities as created in relation to not only one social category but several intersecting categories.

4. Social categories in the research process

4.1 Co-constructing identities in interviews

To approach my research interest I examine individual's identity construction as they talk about their work and work organization. So far my data consist of 21 semi-structured interviews conducted with employees in the Finnish unit of an international video game company. The interviews were conducted with a diverse group of people in terms of position in the company, profession, ethnicity and gender.

Since the material I analyze has been produced in interviews, the concrete site for identity construction can be argued to be the interview situation. Indeed, interview situations can be seen to be like any other social situations in which social phenomena are produced (e.g. Alvesson 2003). Also, in my study they are the concrete situations in which employees talk about themselves and their work organization and through that construct their identities. Furthermore, identities are constructed in an interaction between the researcher as the interviewer and the research subject as the interviewee. Thus, I see the interview material as the interviewees' and my co-constructions of the interviewees and their work organizations.

Even though interviews can be seen as the concrete situations in which identity construction takes place, I see the interview material not only telling about that specific interaction, but also about the social realities beyond the interview situation. The social categories employees draw on in their identity construction do not only exist in the local interview situations but have also importance outside them.

4.2 Social categories in the analysis

In my analysis I seek to acknowledge the complexity of identity construction (not easily bounding to any rigid categorizations) and at the same time to take social categories seriously. By drawing on ideas from Bilge (2009) I adopt different ways of treating social categories depending on the stage of the analysis. In her 'two-step hybrid approach' Bilge divides analysis into two different levels: data-driven inductive approach and theory-oriented deductive approach. The first level consists of identification, interpretation and coding of emergent themes in the data, thus it does not a priori

assume any social categories. The second level analysis then explicitly focuses on social categories by trying to see the data through different social categories. In my thesis this has so far meant first coding the central themes in the interviews followed by reading them with a focus on social categories. The idea is be able to study how social categories are drawn on by the interviewees as well as how they intersect in interviewees' accounts without having to decide on the importance of specific social categories beforehand.

4.3 Social categories in knowledge production

Since knowledge is always produced from a specific social location (Fawcett & Hearn 2004) studying identity construction of others requires also reflexivity on social categories that are available to me in the research process. The different categories can be used as resources or they can become constraints in interview situations as well as when analyzing the interview material and representing the research findings. This relates to sharing or not sharing the same social location(s), to being an 'insider', an 'outsider' or both in relation to the research subjects. The researcher can be in some regards an insider whereas in others an outsider. (Wolf 1996) Being an insider might enhance the understanding of some of the experiences of the interviewees, thus facilitating 'hearing' what they are telling. On the other hand despite of the shared social categories the researcher may misinterpret the interviewees for example by drawing too much on his or her own experiences.

In my interviews I noticed to alter between different social categories depending on who I was talking with and what was talked about in the different parts of the interviews. For example when interviewing a North American woman having more or less the same age than I did, I could identify myself with her in terms of gender and age. When she for example talked about her friendships with other women in the organization I could easily relate to her. On the other hand when she emphasized her being a native English speaker and told about her frustration related to communicating with people that were not as fluent as she was I had more difficulties identifying with her. Instead I noticed how I became increasingly insecure of my English skills during the interview.

5. Conclusion

In this paper I have pondered on some questions related to using social categories in my thesis on employees' identity construction. I have adopted intersectionality as the methodology for approaching several and intersecting social categories. I draw on two different perspectives on

social categories: the anti-categorical and the intra-categorical complexities. I see social categories as discursive constructions and am interested in how they frame and are drawn on by employees in their identity construction. On a more practical note social categories play a central role in all stages of my research process from data gathering to analysis and representation of the findings.

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