At work and play:
an exploration of street and graffiti artists

Charlotte Gilmore
Lecturer/Chancellor's Fellow in Cultural and Creative Industries,
University of Edinburgh Business School 29 Buccleuch Place Edinburgh EH8 9JS
Charlotte.Gilmore@ed.ac.uk

Abstract

Identity work has been a dominant metaphor within the identity literature, while 'identity play' has yet to be fully developed. The purpose of this study is to enhance the understanding of the relationship between play at work and identity play. Contributions to date have proposed and outlined its theoretical potential principally by drawing upon work in other fields such as child development and relevant aspects of psychology and sociology. In contrast this study seeks to address a (creative) work situation directly, introduce empirical insights into identity play within the organisational and creativity literature, and deliver theoretical insights into the relationship between (identity) work and play. The empirical focus of this study is on an area where play is central to the work and identity, that of the lived experiences of street and graffiti artists, where there is a strong connection between the identities and the work (play) created. Using a life history methodology, I seek to explore creative (identity) work and play within the street and graffiti art context, and what (work and play) identity outcomes can occur as a part of their artistic practices.

Key words: Identity play, life histories, creative lives and work, street and graffiti artists

1. Working at play

There has been a growing literature on identity work which focuses on who people are being in their work and what the consequences of those identities are in work and organisational settings. Identity work has been defined a number of times, for example, Snow and Anderson (1987) see it as being the activities a person undertakes in order to sustain their concept of self and Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) see it as a collection of ways of producing, maintaining and strengthening a sense of coherence of self. Watson (2008) stresses the interactive and social aspects of identity work, defining it as "mutually constitutive processes whereby people strive to shape a relatively coherent and distinctive notion of personal self-identity and struggle to come to terms with and, within limits, to influence the various social identities which pertain to them in the various milieu in which they live…." (2008: 129). All the definitions stress the processual nature of identity work, regarding identity as being 'in process' rather than 'complete'. The processes include making identity claims and assertions, adopting

stances, styles and behaviours and distancing the self from undesirable aspect of identity, or dis-identifying (Brown, 2015; Fleming and Spicer, 2003).

Identity work is portrayed as a serious business, often involving negotiation, contestation or struggle (Ybema, et al, 2009). The impetus for identity work is seen as a personal 'predicament' (Watson, 2008) or a threat to a person's self-standing in which their claimed-self is disputed or doubted either by the self or others. Equally, identity work can arise in organizational situations of fragmentation and uncertainty which reflect on the individual (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). In some cases, identity struggle is part of the work itself either in an aspirational way as, for example, when creative workers seek to assert a version of the self in their creative output (Beech at al., 2016). The outcomes of such struggles add weight to their seriousness as they impact on the significant matter of self-conception, how the person is understood by others and their standing in their group. Brown (2015) points out that identity work, conceived in this way, is a calculative, means-ends process in which people

aim for particular 'achievements' often with the intention of resisting or overcoming (if only at a personal level) the expression of power and broader discourses which frame the individual in particular ways.

Against this backdrop of struggle, disempowerment, dis-identity and disconcerting ambiguity, the notion of identity play comes as something of a relief. Identity play has been conceived as a liminal state in which the normal rules of work and identity are suspended and a different social setting, a 'safe haven', is entered in which self-expression, experimentation with fantasies and creativity are enabled and heightened (Ibarra and Petriglieri, 2010). As with other liminal situations, play can be concerned with significant identity matters (for example, children playing at parental roles) but, according to Ibarra and Petriglieri, identity play differs from identity work in being focused on variety rather than consistency, experimentation with imagined versions of the self and rather than coping with the current 'real world', being on the 'threshold between current reality and future possibilities' (2010: 11). Rather than making identity claims, defending identity positions negotiating and performing outcomes as in identity work, in identity play new behaviours can be tested out, improvised rehearsal can take place and the aim is reinventing the self as opposed to preserving an existing identity. This playing on the threshold of future possibilities (Brown and Starkey, 2000) allows temporary 'mismatches' rather than eliminating them and has a greater internal focus of evaluation (for example on enjoyment or feelings of authenticity) than identity work's external evaluation of achieving 'fit' or the granting of identity criteria (Ibarra and Petriglieri, 2010). For Brown (2015) it offers the potential of an alternative to a means-ends logic, compliance (and resistance) and rationality that can be implied by identity work. The alternative could be "a different set of potentially generative ideas relating to enjoyment, discovery, intuition, imagined other, spontaneity and fantasy" (Brown 2015, 25). For Ibarra and Petriglieri, identity play needs to be clearly separated from normal work, for example being on a sabbatical.

Play as a diversion from work has been studied for a considerable period. Roy's (1959) classic research showed how workers in mundane, demanding jobs in traditional factory work broke up the day into periods of work and periods of recreation. Similarly, Elsbach and Hargadon (2002)

have focused on play as a space of difference within the overall context of work when different rules are in operation. Play as engagement, or part of work, has been emphasised more strongly in the creative industries (e.g. Amabile, 1996) although there are other industries where a playful approach is regarded as part of the process of innovation (Sutton and Hargadon, 1997). Even in this context, play is a liminal activity in that it is on a threshold between stability and change, is performed at work but not simply as a means-ends function, but rather is an opening up of possibilities, some of which might produce innovations but not necessarily in a planned, resource-efficient way. Play also enables improvisation in changing roles, activities and styles on a temporary basis. The crucial feature of this form is that people do not escape their work to play but turn their work into play, hence it is a "behavioural orientation to performing work" (2006: 92). Mainemelis and Ronson (2006) emphasise not only the behavioural orientation but also the 'creatively-relevant cognitive processes' which play enables such as divergent thinking and practising with 'alternative solutions'.

Identity work has been a dominant metaphor (Brown, 2015), the alternative of 'identity play', proposed (Ibarra and Petriglieri, 2010), has yet to be fully developed. The purpose of this study is to enhance the understanding of the relationship between play at work and identity play. My empirical focus is on an area where different states of liminality (in-between-ness) and play are central to the creative works and identities of street and graffiti artists. There is a connection between the identities and the work (play) done and the artists who are literally playing ideas, concepts and styles. Therefore, the street/public art context offers an interesting empirical site from which to develop theoretical and practice-based insights. I seek to explore the lived experiences of street and graffiti artists, in relation to their creative (identity) work and play within the street and graffiti art context, and what relational identity outcomes can occur as a part of their creative practices.

References

Amabile, T., 1996. *Creativity in Context*. Routledge.

Beech, N., Gilmore, C., Hibbert, P. and Ybema, S., 2016. 'Identity-in-the-work and musicians' struggles: the production of self-questioning identity work'. Work, *Employment and Society*, 30(3): 506-522.

Ellis, N. and Ybema, S., 2010. Marketing identities: Shifting circles of identification in inter-organizational relationships. *Organization Studies*, 31(3): 1-27.

Fleming, P. and Spicer, A., 2003. Working at a cynical distance: implications for power, subjectivity and resistance. *Organization*, 10: 157-179.

Garsten, C., 1999. Betwixt and between: Temporary employees as liminal subjects in flexible organizations. *Organization Studies*, 20(4): 601-617.

Ibarra, H. and Petriglieri, J.L., 2010. Identity work and play. *Journal of Organizational Change Management,* 23(1): 10-25.

Kabanoff, B., 1980. Work and non-work: A review of models, methods and findings. *Psychological Bulletin*, 88: 60-77.

Mainemelia, C. and Ronson, S., 2006. Ideas are born in the field of play: towards a theory of play and creativity in organisational settings. *Research in Organisational Behaviour*, 27, 81-131.

Snow, D.A. and Anderson, L., 1987. Identity work among the homeless: the verbal construction and avowal of personal identities. *American Journal of Sociology,* 92, 1336-1371.

Sturdy, A., Schartz, M and Spicer, A., 2006. Guess who's coming to dinner? Structures and uses of liminality in strategic management consultancy. *Human Relations*, 59(7): 1163-1193.

Sveningsson, S. and Alvesson, M., 2003. Managing managerial identities: organizational fragmentation, discourse and identity struggle. *Human Relations,* 56, 1163-1193.

Turner, V., 1967. *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual.* Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press.

Van Gennep, A., 1960. The Rites of Passage (Vizedom, M.B. and Caffee, G.L. trans.) London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Watson, T.J., 2008. Managing identity: identity work, personal predicaments and structural circumstances. *Organization*, 15, 121-143.

Ybema, S., Keenoy, T., Oswick, C., Beverungen, A., Ellis, N. and Sabelis, I., 2009. Articulating identities. *Human Relations,* 62, 180-198.

Ybema, S., Beech, N. & Ellis, N., 2012. 'Transitional and Perpetual Liminality: An identity practice perspective.' *Anthropology South Africa*, 34(1&2): 21-29.