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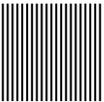
Managing Identity: Identity Work, Personal Predicaments and Structural Circumstances

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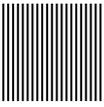
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Abstract. *Social science research can play a valuable role in enabling people to understand how their personal predicaments relate to the broader structures and historical circumstances in which they arise. This was argued by Wright Mills (1970, originally 1959) with his concept of the sociological imagination, a notion of considerable relevance to the identity issues which arise in relation to organizational involvement. Using a rare combination of ethnographic, autobiographical and interview research material, a close examination is made of two managers' identity work and the part played in this by their involvement in one specific organization in particular structural and historical circumstances. In the course of carrying out this study the concept of 'identity work' has been developed and refined. This incorporates a clear analytical distinction between internal personal 'self-identities' and external discursive 'social-identities' with social-identities being seen as a link or bridge between socially available discourses and self-identities. 'Managerial identities' take their place among the multiplicity of social-identities to which any particular manager may relate in both their 'inward facing' and their 'outward facing' identity work.*

Key words. *case-study; ethnography; identity work; managerial identity; self-identity; social-identity; sociological imagination*



One of the most important conceptions of how the social sciences might help people better understand their predicaments in the modern world is Wright Mills' notion of the 'sociological imagination'. Mills' call was



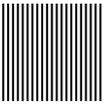
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for social scientists to relate the personal troubles and the biographies of individuals to the historical transformations and the social structures of their times. The present paper uses a rare combination of ethnographic, autobiographical/documentary and interview research material to examine closely one manager's identity work and the part played in this by his involvement in one specific organization in particular structural and historical circumstances. To analyse this material, existing thinking on identity work and on the relationship between self-identities and social-identities has been built upon and developed. These refinements can be used in future scholarly research studies and have the capacity to provide insights value to private individuals and those wishing to contribute to public debates about how working lives are shaped and work organizations managed.

Work organizations are particularly appropriate settings for the deployment of the sociological imagination and for attempts to understand how, in modern times, people deal with questions of who they are and who they might become. In organizations, people are required to take on various corporate personas. These personas are likely to differ from the ones that they adopt in other parts of their lives and, indeed, may come into tension with them. But they are also personas which the individual is required to adapt and change as global, societal and organizational circumstances change. This is the case with all workers but is seen especially sharply in the case of managerial workers and how such people go about shaping, 'managing' or 'working at' their concept of self. Managers cannot simply 'be themselves' at work. They have to act as the voice or the face of the corporation. They must be seen as knowledgeable, authoritative and, above all, 'in control'. Yet, at the same time, they must present themselves to others as credible human individuals. Without this they would be unable to establish and maintain the interpersonal relationships upon which successful performance of their jobs depends. But their work activities are only one part of their lives. They face the need to understand themselves both as managers at work and as private persons at home. This, it is argued here, is just one part of the 'identity' that every manager, like every other human being, has to work on all the time.

If full recognition is to be given to the challenging context within which organizational members, and managers especially, try to shape their identities, it is vitally important to avoid the danger of providing a reductionist analysis that focuses on 'what goes on in people's minds' at the expense of attention to the part that is played by the social structures, cultures and discourses within which the individual is located. The sociological imagination helps us set processes of individual identity work firmly in the structural or sociological context in which they occur. And it is intended here to demonstrate that this can be done in a way which does not compromise the close, rich and detailed analysis of particular individuals and specific local circumstances.



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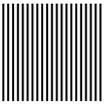
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To meet these purposes, we will first examine more fully the notion of the sociological imagination and the role 'beyond the academy' that it suggests for social scientists. Attention will then be given to existing thinking on identity work and to two ways in which this can be strengthened and developed in order to advance research in the area. The first is to get a better balance in this work between attention to the personal 'self' and the social or discursive 'personas' to which they relate. The second is to avoid the narrowing of focus that is currently risked by the way the concept of 'managerial identity' (like 'entrepreneurial' or 'professional' identity) tends to be used. To overcome these difficulties, a sociological notion of *identity work* will then be set out—this having at its centre an analytical distinction between people's 'internal' self-identities and the 'external' social-identities to which they relate. The investigative methods used in the case study will then be explained before an account is given of identity-work issues, mainly in the life of one former manager and his involvement in a single case-study organization, but also in the secondary case of a more junior manager in the same setting. This material will be analysed in the spirit of the sociological imagination using the version of the identity-work concept previously established.

Personal Troubles and Institutional Contexts

Mills made it clear that he was putting forward a role for all the social sciences, and not just sociology, when he advocated the nurturing and application of the 'sociological imagination'. He simply used the sociology label because 'every cobbler thinks leather is the only thing, and for better or worse, I am a sociologist' (1970: 26). The sociologist, economist or political scientist, Mills proposed, should seek to make links between the personal troubles of individuals (e.g. a manager losing their job as a result of an organizational 'downsizing') and broader public issues (e.g. the issue of work restructuring in a global search for employment flexibility). Researchers seeking to make links of this kind have to develop a capacity to 'shift from one perspective to another, and in the process to build up an adequate view of a total society and its components' (1970: 232).

The task is not, however, one of making sense of the world for its own sake. Mills calls on social scientists to produce analyses of aspects of contemporary life which help people become more aware of the connection between 'the patterns of their own lives and the course of world history' (1970: 9). Such assistance is required because people do not normally define the troubles they endure in terms of 'historical change and institutional contradiction'. He wishes to see people 'grasp what is going on in the world, and to understand what is happening in themselves at minute points of the intersection of biography and history within society' (1970: 14). The present research focuses on certain matters which troubled a man (called here) Leonard Hilton and, in showing how these troubles connect to larger structural matters, it is hoped that individuals involved in or interested in



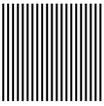
managerial work will find valuable insights of a kind that they might apply to their own lives and careers, with advantage. This is the warrant for the present paper. The refining of the concept of identity-work, which is also undertaken, is one of the means adopted to fulfil this warrant.

In the Pragmatist tradition established by Pierce, James and Dewey in which Mills was working (Eldridge, 1983) concepts and ideas are judged, not by their truthfulness (or their accurate 'mirroring of reality', in Rorty's, 1980, terms) but by the extent to which they are, as Wicks and Freeman put it 'useful in the sense of helping people to better cope with the world or create better organizations' (1998: 129). This means that we do not seek a 'correct' definition of identity work, discourse, structure or whatever but define our investigative terms in the way that will best help us produce knowledge which will inform practical human actions—at the personal, organizational or societal levels (Watson, 2006). This will be done shortly and the resulting ideas applied to the case study material. First, however, it is necessary to set this work within key trends in the treatment of identity issues within organization and management studies.

Identity, Self and Work Organizations

Since the 1960s, the growing recognition that people bring their own meanings into work organizations and that their 'work orientations' (Goldthorpe et al., 1968) may change over time has increasingly challenged the conventional assumption that organizational members are fixed entities with given 'personalities' which changes little over a lifetime. This departure away from an 'entitative' and towards a dynamic and 'relational' view of organizational members and their identities (Dachler and Hosking, 1995) was boosted by the later questioning by researchers in the post-structuralist tradition of the assumption that each person has an unchanging 'sovereign' or 'essential' self. The employee's subjectivity is seen as 'a product of disciplinary mechanisms, techniques of surveillance and power-knowledge strategies' (Knights and Willmott, 1989). Although the emphasis of this work has tended to be on the ways in which the human being's notion of who and what they are is shaped by the *discourses* which surround them, we see acknowledgement in many of the outputs of the writers in this tradition that individuals are not totally passive in the face of these discursive pressures (Collinson, 1992, 2003). Identities, or subjectivities, are caught up in contradictions and struggles, tension, fragmentation and discord. Because 'subject positions are made available in a number of competing discourses ... identity is thus of necessity always a project rather than an achievement' (Knights and Vurdubakis, 1994). As Knights and McCabe (2003: 1589) put it, there are 'competing bases of identification'.

The tendency of much post-structuralist work has been to stress these ambiguities and contradiction and to resist any temptation to see people's selves becoming 're-centred' through their own efforts, into the relatively



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coherent and consistent self-identities that Giddens suggests are possible: 'self-identity is continuity (across time and space) as interpreted reflexively by the agent' (1991: 53). It is arguable, however, that this is less of a problem for people working in a broader social constructionist tradition (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2004; Creed et al., 2002; Humphreys and Brown, 2002) in which identity is seen as an 'interactional accomplishment' (Cerulo, 1997: 387) or a 'casting and recasting of our "selves" through discursive practice' (Musson and Duberley, 2006). A range of empirical studies, by researchers influenced by both post structuralism and a broader social constructionism, and have drawn attention to the ways in which workers and managers are far from passive in the face of discursive pressures. The ways in which managers actively 'story' their lives and their working experiences has been demonstrated by Sims (2003). Watson (2001) and Thomas and Linstead show, in the words of the latter, how 'middle managers attempt to secure an identity' (2002: 79) and Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) show managers actively drawing on various organizational discourses as resources 'in creating a sense of self' (p. 1164). Pullen illustrates how managers 'draw on identity as a construct and resource in producing [accounts] of their situations', observing how '... this process is episodic in character as managers periodically restructure and reconstruct their identities' in the light of pressures and organizational changes' (2006: 25). And although Alvesson and Willmott (2002) concentrate on the efforts made by employing organizations to accomplish organizational control 'through the self-positioning of employees within managerially inspired discourses', they acknowledge that this can never be fully accomplished because such attempts are balanced by individuals with 'other elements of life history *forged by a capacity to accomplish life projects out of various sources of influence and inspiration*' (2002: 628, my emphasis).

The growing body of empirical evidence continues to indicate how important it is to give full recognition to the active 'work' which people do on their identities. Musson and Duberley's (2006) study shows how supervisors draw on discursive resources which are in competition with those of their employer and Symon and Clegg (2005) show information systems developers are similarly active in their construction of the work-related aspects of their identities. Storey et al. (2005) produce further such insights in their study of freelance and contract media workers. These were workers whom one would expect to have absorbed to some extent the 'discourses of identity that are dominant currently with their industry' and, especially, the notion of the 'enterprising self'. The researchers concluded, however, that workers variously 'incorporate, modify, or reject notions of enterprise in their reflexively organised narrative of self' (2005: 1050). This study questions the highly influential argument that a dominant or 'totalizing' notion of an 'enterprising self' (du Gay, 1996) emerged in the latter part of the 20th century as employers worked to establish what, in effect, was a new type of employee whose personality was 'saturated' with a 'culture of enterprise' (Cremin, 2003). But the study of the media workers by no means

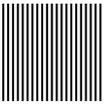


stands alone. Fenwick (2002), for example, had come to similar conclusions on the basis of her study of women setting up and running their own businesses, arguing that 'self-employed individuals negotiate multiple discourses and identities among which competitive individualism is not the most dominant' (2002: 708). And Bolton and Houlihan (2005) in their study of customer service demonstrate that the power of the discourse of enterprise and the cult of the customer has been over-estimated.

Generally speaking, detailed empirical research supports the view expressed by Halford and Leonard that 'while generic discourses of enterprise, profession, gender or age may be important, they are received and interpreted in the particular and complex contexts that individuals move through in their everyday lives' (2006: 699). The present study builds on this important and emerging insight. And to give the analysis a clear focus it will make central use of a concept of *identity work*.

Identity Work, Self-Identity and Social-Identities

Identity work would seem to be an obvious concept for many of the researchers whose work we have surveyed to have developed and used in their studies as an alternative to their casting around among terms like 'identity construction', 'identity management', 'identity achievement', 'identity manufacture' and 'identity project' as a way of dealing with 'agency' aspects of identity shaping. But this has only happened recently, and then only in a partial way in any formal sense. The term appears occasionally in the broader social science literature (Cohen and Taylor, 1978; McDermott, 1976; Stewart and Strathern, 2000) but organization and management researchers have, more often than not, tended to use it in a relatively informal manner; unattributed and without formal definition, typically putting 'scare quote' marks around it. For example, a piece of dialogue between the researcher and a manager was identified in an ethnographic study of managerial study as an example of a person 'doing "identity work"' (Watson 2001: 58). Pullen writes, at one point in her book, *Managing Identity*, 'this "identity work" is complex and unpredictable' (2005: 25) and Musson and Duberley in their paper about the 'manufacture of identity' offer the sentence, 'Thus "identity work" is an ongoing cycle' (2006: 147). Storey et al. refer to 'the complexities of "identity work"' (2005: 1050). But the use of the 'scare quotes' in this latter study is rather surprising given that these authors provided on the previous page a citation and a paraphrasing of an existing definition when they mention Alvesson and Willmott (2002) and 'what these authors call "identity work"' (p. 1049). Storey et al. state that there has been 'little empirical analysis of this process in action' (2005: 1049) and this too is surprising, given that it was in the course of providing an important empirical study (not cited by Storey et al.) of managers in several case-study organisations that a formal definition of identity work was put forward by Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) as a formal conceptualization of the ways in which human beings are continuously 'engaged in forming,



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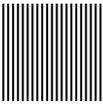
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repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness' (2003: 1165).

Although the analysis of these latter authors fully locates the identity work process in its social and discursive context, the emphasis of their formal conceptualization of identity work is on the *self* or 'internal' aspect of identity. As Sveningsson and Alvesson themselves put it, they are writing about how people 'strive to shape their *personal* identities' (2003: 1165, my emphasis). These 'personal identities' are by no means treated as a-social matters. But we can give more analytical power to the concept of identity work if we incorporate into it more explicit recognition that whenever identity work is done there is an element of working on the 'external' identity of the person, alongside the shaping of the 'internal' aspects of personal identity. This was a central insight in symbolic interactionist thinking which was captured by Cooley's (1902) notion of 'the looking glass self': who we take ourselves to be is very much a matter of the person whom we see reflected in the eyes of others, and we 'manage' the image of that 'person' to influence how those others see us. This principle operates in a fairly obvious way when one is in the company of others, as in Goffman's (1958) 'presentation of self in everyday life' concept. It happens in a semi-obvious way when one is in the company of 'imagined others' (the people who will or *might* read any document that we write, for instance). And it happens much less obviously throughout the rhetorical process of our everyday thought processes and our making of decisions about how to act (Billig, 1987); 'our very process of thinking and decision-making involves us in a dialogue in our minds with the arguments of human others' (Watson 2001: 23).

A significant way, then, in which we can strengthen all research on identity shaping would be by attending to what might be seen as a link between the 'self' aspects of identity and the discourses to which they relate. This 'missing link' is an 'external' or discursive notion of publicly available 'personas' or *social-identities*. Something like this was briefly considered in the Alvesson and Willmott study when they noted that one of the means whereby identity regulation occurs is what they call 'defining a person by defining others' (2002: 629). The insight there is important and needs developing. And this can be done by treating *social-identities* as elements of discourses, with these discursively located 'personas' being recognized as influences on individual self-identities, as opposed to the discourses themselves being treated as influences. One such *social-identity*, in the sense of the term being suggested here, is that of 'managerial identity'. However, there is a problem with this which needs to be overcome before we can proceed to formalize the conceptualization that we are moving towards.

The term 'managerial identities', as it has been used in the literature so far, has tended to beg the question of whether these exist 'out there' in contemporary cultures (as is being proposed here) or they are something that a person entering management takes on 'into themselves', so to speak.



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Although this latter meaning might be read as implicit in the very term ‘managerial identity’, such a reading underplays the uniqueness of each human being by reducing the complexity of the various facets of their ‘self’ to just one facet of that self. It also underplays the extent to which, in any particular setting, there are likely to be a number of variations of ‘what it is to be a manager’. The same can be argued about analyses of ‘professional identities’ (e.g. Dent and Whitehead, 2001) or ‘entrepreneurial identities’ (e.g. Cohen and Musson, 2000). At the risk of oversimplification we could say that what has tended to occur in much of the research on the relationship between ‘selves’ and discourses has been a two-step process, as represented in Figure 1.

In this standard ‘two-step’ thinking, a discourse is identified—a discourse of management, a discourse of professionalism or a discourse of enterprise, say—and then individuals are examined to ascertain the extent to which they have taken on a ‘managerial identity’, a ‘professional identity’ or an ‘enterprising self’. The terms ‘self’, ‘identity’, or ‘subjectivity’ are often used more-or-less interchangeably to refer to the ‘internal’ aspect of identity – who a person takes themselves to be. To develop a set of analytical categories that will be more ‘useful’ in the Pragmatist sense discussed earlier, it is necessary to clarify terms and to move beyond the tendency to operate in the two-step manner sketched in Figure 1.

To understand the relationship between the discursive aspects of social life and people’s personal involvement in identity creation we can usefully think in terms of a three-step process—as represented in Figure 2. This recognizes *social-identities* as focal elements within the discourses to which people make reference in their identity work. These are equivalent to what were called ‘role models’ in social learning theory (Bandura, 1977). We would thus see, within various discourses of enterprise, one or more social-identities of ‘entrepreneur’; within various discourses of management

Figure 1. A ‘two step’ view of the relationship between discourses and self-identities

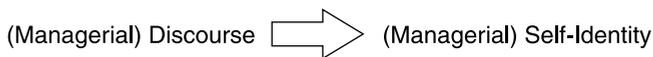
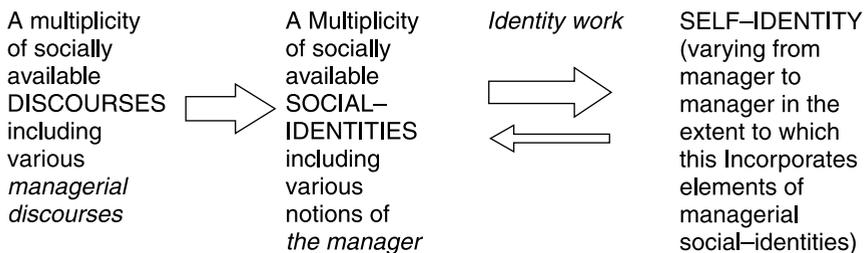
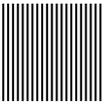


Figure 2. A ‘three step’ view of the relationship between managerial and other discourses and self-identities





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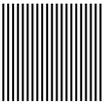
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we would see one or more social-identities of ‘manager’; within various discourses of professionalism we would see social-identities such as ‘a lawyer’ or ‘a professional engineer’. In effect, elements of discourse are personified in the form of ‘social-identities’ in a way which makes them meaningful, accessible, and appealing or unappealing to the individual, and in a way that the abstractions of a ‘discourse’ could not.

The small arrow in Figure 2 recognizes that individuals themselves make inputs into social-identities: they have scope to interpret or even modify the role given to them in the ‘script’ of any given social-identity. And the fact that the model refers to multiplicities of discourse and social-identity and to a variety of managerial discourses and ‘notions of the manager’ is a recognition of the stress which previous empirical research has increasingly put upon the plurality of often competing discursive influences (earlier pp. 124–125). It is precisely because there are so many diverse, competing and contradictory discursive pressures upon and resources available to every individual in the contemporary world (Giddens, 1991) that engagement in identity work is unavoidable. However, the crux of the matter, for the researcher, is this: the extent to which people embrace particular social-identities or ‘personas’ as elements of their self-identity is a matter for empirical investigation. It should not be pre-judged by the conceptual apparatus used by the researcher. The use of identity-making resources varies from person to person, from occupational group to occupational group. For some people who work as managers, doctors or academics, being a manager, doctor or academic is relatively central to who they take themselves to be. For others it is peripheral. And for perhaps the majority of people, their occupational identification is just one part of their life and their notion of self. To understand just what the case is with the people we study we need a conceptual apparatus which helps us to fully appreciate the interplay between public and private ‘identities’—the dialectic between the internal and the external aspects of identity work. We shall shortly see our main research subject, Leonard Hilton, declare that he is and has long been ‘a manager’. Following the existing tradition of analysis, we might therefore say that Leonard ‘has’ a managerial identity. But, in terms of the conceptual approach being proposed here, we would say, instead, that Leonard Hilton appears to have incorporated into his self-identity significant elements of external and socially available discursive notions of ‘managerial identity’.

The suggestion is, then, that in order to cover analytically both its ‘internal’ and ‘external’ aspects, and to recognize that identity work projects ‘outwardly’ as well as ‘inwardly’, we conceptualize *identity work* as follows:

Identity work involves the 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 milieux in which they live their lives.



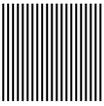
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This striving occurs in the context of the ways in which other people attempt to tell us who or what we are. It also occurs in the context of the broad institutional, cultural and discursive pressing upon us of particular 'subjectivities' (Foucault, 1980). As Jenkins points out, 'identities exist and are acquired, claimed and allocated within power relations' (1996: 25). An individual may utilize discursively available subjectivities or social-identities as discursive resources to advance what Jenkins calls personal 'stratagems' but they do not do this freely or as a matter of personal whim. Identities are matters 'over which struggles take place' (Jenkins, 1996: 25). When Leonard Hilton reluctantly joined the company in which he was to spend the rest of his career he was defined by his employer as an 'engineering apprentice'. Part of his resistance within the organization was to pursue a stratagem whereby he managed to differentiate himself from the other apprentices by qualifying as a mechanical engineer (rather than an electrical one like all the rest). The significance of this resistance is indicated by the title he chose for his autobiography, *I Don't Want to be an Engineer*. Individuals have to work 'with the grain' of existing and dominant discourses and subjectivities but, as they do this, they can exploit the variety of sometimes overlapping, sometimes conflicting, discourses and subjectivities in order to craft a self which is, to an extent, 'their own'. Individuals will, of course, vary in the extent to which they are relatively active or passive in these matters. Theoretically, we might say, everyone engages in identity work. Empirically, however, there will be considerable variations in how relatively active or passive individuals are in the light of the circumstances in which they find themselves at various stages of their life. Leonard Hilton is probably at the very 'active' end of the continuum along which these variations occur.

The identity work that people do is not most usefully understood as primarily an 'internal' self-focused process. Instead, it is better understood as a coming together of inward/internal self-reflection and outward/external engagement—through talk and action—with various discursively available *social-identities*. This vital distinction between *self-identity* and *social-identities* is an analytical matter. Jenkins helpfully refers to 'a perpetual dialectic of two analytically (but only analytically) distinct moments—the internal and the external' (1996: 25). For Jenkins, these two 'moments' are both aspects of '*social identity*' and, although I am using the term 'social-identities' here to refer only to what Jenkins calls the 'external' aspect of the broader concept of social identity, I fully acknowledge his point that 'self identities' are indeed 'social' phenomena. As Jenkins puts it,

Individual identity—embodied in selfhood—is not meaningful in isolation from the social world of other people. Individuals are unique and variable, but selfhood is thoroughly socially constructed: in the processes of primary and subsequent socialisation, and in the ongoing processes of social interaction within which individuals define and redefine themselves and others throughout their lives. (1996: 20)



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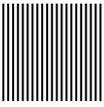
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The present analysis is fully consistent with this rooting in the notion of social construction and thereby differs from the more socio-psychological 'social identity theory' approach in which the self concept is treated as containing two separable elements of 'personal identity' and 'social identity' (Ashford and Mael, 1989). In the present analysis, 'social identities' are treated as cultural phenomena, external to selves. They relate to various social categories existing societally (Jenkins, 2000) and are, in effect, 'inputs' into self-identities (mediated by identity work) rather than elements of self-identities as such. (It might be noted that I have hyphenated the present analysis's concept of social-identity as a discursive phenomenon to help differentiate it from other usages of the term 'social identity'.)

We can formalize the self-identity/social-identity analytical distinction by defining self-identity as *the individual's own notion of who and what they are* and social-identities as *cultural, discursive or institutional notions of who or what any individual might be*. And, to help us analyse any particular setting in which individuals engage with social-identities in framing their self-identities, we can distinguish between five types of social-identity:

1. *Social-category* social-identities: class, gender, nationality, ethnicity, etc. (upper class, female, Asian, Hindu, Scottish);
2. *Formal-role* social-identities: occupation, rank, citizenship etc (manager, cleaner, captain, an Italian citizen);
3. *Local-organizational* social-identities: an old-style Nottingham professor, a Boots pharmacist, a GPT operations manager (there will be other versions of this: a *local-community* social-identity, for example: Ryland estate youths);
4. *Local-personal* social identities: characterizations which various others make of an individual, in the context of specific situations or events (life and soul of the purchasing office, a good Co-op customer, the Beeston branch clown ...);
5. *Cultural-stereotype* social-identities: a garrulous Frenchman, a boring accountant, a devoted mother.

These are ideal type categories and, in practice, they often overlap (the category used in GPT of 'a typical head office number cruncher', for instance, was a combination of the third and the fifth of the above categories). Examples of all five of these types of social-identity will be seen drawn upon in the identity work done by the two managers we shall be meeting shortly. In each of these categories we can recognize that there is always scope for individual discretion. This is partly because there are cultural variations with regard to each type of social-identity, this making it possible for the individual to choose which particular variation of 'the manager' with which to identify, inwardly to themselves, and outwardly towards others (the remote business-minded manager, perhaps, or the 'hands on/ we are all in this together' style of manager). The third type of social-identity is perhaps the one with the greatest scope for creativity. Although there are cultural templates (*cultural-stereotype identities* in the above scheme)



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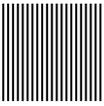
like the 'absent minded technical manager', the 'tough but kind shop floor manager' or the 'touchy feely HR manager', individuals may cultivate distinctly individualistic 'personas' to fit their personal and locational circumstances and preferences. Leonard Hilton at GPT is an example of this. And this takes us towards an explanation of the research context in which we will meet him.

Case Studies Within a Case Study

The case-studies of the individuals, Leonard Hilton and Kay Rhodes, are nested within a case study of managerial work in the organization in which the former worked from his apprenticeship until his retirement and the latter from university graduation until shortly after the former retired. Leonard Hilton is the individual given central attention here and the research material which I have gathered about his life is unusually rich. There is, however, only space for a tiny slice of this information to be presented here. The extensive quantity of available material 'has nevertheless informed every part of the present analysis. The richness and depth of this material has come about as a result of a remarkable piece of good fortune which made it possible to combine material from first-hand participant observation, from detailed autobiographical documentary sources and from lengthy interviews with the primary research subject.

The participant observation material was gathered between September 1990 and August 1991 during a year's secondment to a management position in a telecommunications development and manufacturing business called GPT (GEC-Plessey Telecommunications). The company had been formed only two years previously from the telephone systems components of two previously rival businesses. The HR function (called 'Personnel' at that time), in which I was located, was at the centre of efforts to bring about a transition from the older style of working that had characterized the Plessey plant on the Nottingham site to a 'progressive' high-commitment style—as explained in detail in the ethnographic study (Watson, 2001, originally 1994, in which the business was called 'ZTC'). Part of my own role was to work closely with the Operations (manufacturing) Managers to identify and deal with barriers to the introduction of team-working and associated shop-floor innovations. Each week, I attended a lunch-time 'Operations Managers' meeting', one of which will be discussed below. At these HR-production 'interface' meetings, progress, or the lack of it, was discussed. Leonard Hilton was senior figure among these Operations Managers. As a 'participant observer' within management, I worked alongside him and was in his company on various occasions. I formally interviewed him for one hour, at a mid-way period in the 12-month research period.

The documentary material consists of an enormous two-volume private autobiography written by Leonard Hilton after his retirement from GPT,



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together with some later reflective writing which he produced during the period in which I was talking to him (2005–2007). This material not only has the richness of detail and deep personal reflection, it has the advantage of showing how identity issues are worked out over time. There is a 15-year period between the Leonard being observed at work and his most recent written and conversational reflections on his life, work and identity.

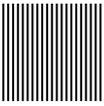
Leonard Hilton is not a typical manager, by any means. He is a deeply reflective individual and personally believes that clarity about ‘who one is’ is something that one may have to work on. He wrote his enormous autobiography, he says in its preface, for the benefit of his sons, who he hoped might learn something from his experiences of life. The writing of the books can thus be seen as an example of outward-facing *identity work*. But, as our conceptualization of identity work insists, this is inevitably connected to the ‘internal’ aspects of self-shaping. He commented in an interview that ‘the truth is that probably nobody but you, Tony, will read all that detail. But I think that after writing it I understand better who I am’. He stressed, however, in the same (2006) interview that he was ‘still working on these questions’ and in his recent written reflections he says ‘At the age I have now reached, I am at lengths to try to understand for my own benefit what happened to change me so ...’. These words indicate the existence in Leonard’s mind of a ‘personal trouble’—one clearly associated with issues of identity. And we now turn to an examination of what this might be, with the intention of then applying the sociological imagination and relating this to larger structural or institutional matters, in the manner advocated by Mills (1970) and discussed above.

Identity Troubles and Bad Language at Work and at Home

In his recent writing, Leonard Hilton tells us that it was in 1979, 15 years ‘after I became an industrial manager’ that it first fully occurred to him that he ‘was a manager’

I felt like a manager, talked like a manager and behaved like a manager. I felt my authority, accountability and responsibility and accepted it without question.

The managerial discourse that is being drawn upon here, with its emphasis on the manager ‘taking charge’ of part of the organization’s operation and then having to be accountable and take responsibility for what is achieved, is close to that drawn upon and presented to the researcher from individuals ‘across the range of managers’ in GPT (Watson, 2001: 50). There was only one figure, James Beech, whom Leonard would speak of as epitomizing ‘the manager’ in this sense. Far more significant was the large number of what he referred to as the ‘so-called managers that I observed as representing what I did not want to be’. These people can be understood as personifying a ‘traditional GPT managerial identity’, that is a *local-organizational* social-identity. And this does appear to have had an influence on what it was



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Leonard did 'become'. This is something he has only recently begun to come to terms with:

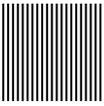
Now, sat here some 12 years after I retired from industry, I get to feel it is only in relatively recent years I have been able to recognise what happened to that quiet, timid, inoffensive individual who walked through those factory gates 56 years ago, to turn me into an executive manager.

Earlier, it was argued that we should avoid using any notion of 'managerial identity' as something that a person 'has' and that we think, instead, in terms of *the managerial element of individuals' self-identities*. If we apply this to Leonard Hilton, we can infer that at the core of the managerial element of his self-identity is what he refers to as an 'inclination to take charge'. In both his large autobiography and the reference here to the quiet, timid and inoffensive man he once was, Leonard suggests that this is something that circumstances forced upon him. He presents it as having come about as his managerial career developed. It is not, he implies, what might be called an essential part of his being. He uses the language of psychology to describe his emergent identity, saying that his 'personality changed'. He also uses psychological language to talk about an aspect of his personal life. He refers to what he calls a 'personality flaw'. And it is a worry about this apparent 'flaw' that constitutes what Mills called a personal trouble.

What Leonard is worried about is his tendency to use bad language; 'to swear'. And this troubles him deeply. He has been thinking a great deal about his late wife and is questioning how well he had expressed his deep devotion to her. In addition to his grief at losing his wife, he was, as he said in a conversation with me, 'so sad that I failed her in the way I let my work experiences colour how I was at home'. He wrote in his 2006 document:

My wife did not like what I became ... I could sense the characteristics which had endeared me to her when we met had largely gone ... She did not like it that I swore ... The sort of language we hear today, ever more commonly on the television, was not my style. But so far as I remember, when we met, I did not swear. In an attempt to excuse myself, I would tell her, that in the job I had, unless one held one's own and met kind with kind, people would trample all over you. But she didn't like it. And to my regret, I didn't change a great deal.

In the introduction to the present paper it was observed that identity work issues are particularly challenging for people doing managerial work in part because of the need to 'establish and maintain the interpersonal relationships upon which successful performance of their jobs depends'. And Leonard's whole account of his career at GPT indicates that this meant his having to hold his own with a whole series of ruthless and often vicious senior managers, the most notorious of which, Ted Meadows, was especially foul-mouthed. Yet, in a conversation with Leonard, after I had read these thoughts, I was able to tell him that I remembered him during my year at GPT as someone whose language was noticeably less 'colourful' than that



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of many of his colleagues. I told him that I remembered an incident at one of the Operations Managers' meetings where bad language was an issue—and that the bad language was not his. And I can reconstruct here, from my field notes, part of the discussion that occurred. I was attending the meeting together with a Personnel (HR) manager, Kay Rhodes. The meeting got rather heated about the extent to which it was appropriate for Operations Managers to seek sub-contract work directly from outside companies in order to keep the factory (and the workers) busy.

Gerry Cropwell: If the company itself can't get a flow of its own work through the factory it's surely up to us to feed the beast ourselves, with whatever we can get.

Harry Basford: Why the bloody hell should we? We have sub-contracting people whose job is to do that sort of thing. It just ain't me – I'm not saying I won't do it if the rest of you do. But I'm fucking reluctant.

[*Leonard Hilton*, sitting with his back half to the room is looking uncomfortable—is it this issue or the language that is troubling him? I don't think I've ever heard Leonard swear.]

Don Littleover: Well I'm keen, if we don't f ...

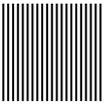
Gerry Cropwell: Language gentlemen—ladies present.

[*Leonard* has turned round, is looking more comfortable. Harry is looking embarrassed. Don looks cross]

Kay Rhodes: I'm not bloody bothered. Look, I don't think we have a problem with this from a Personnel point of view—on the job spec side I mean. But we cannot get too hung up on pulling in work for the sake of having work for the workforce. We've got to look at the business as ...

Don Littleover: Let's talk about some specific possibilities. I suggest that we each identify one business which

This discussion continued for some time and, afterwards, I made a point of walking back to with Kay to her office to talk about several aspects of the meeting. One of these was the issue of male managers being willing, or unwilling, to use bad language when women were present. I wondered, in particular, whether she continued to be untroubled by the tendency for some of the men to use the 'not in front of the ladies' line whenever the normal sort of factory language was used. As I wrote previously, 'Overt forms of discrimination against women managers at Ryland [the name of the GPT site] rarely went beyond the "whoops, ladies present" apology for bad language or the chairman's "Good morning, gentlemen and, sorry, lady". I observed both of these patterns frequently and sometimes had to avoid visibly wincing' (Watson, 2001: 198). Kay knew that I felt very uncomfortable with what I saw as some men's patronizing stance towards women colleagues. I had raised it with Kay and another woman personnel manager on a previous occasion. Both of them said they were untroubled



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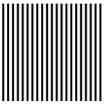
by it (whereas two other non-personnel women managers had mentioned it as a constant irritant). Kay said:

I'm just used to it, perhaps. What is more important is that some of those blokes are far more uncomfortable about the actual swearing in front of a woman than I am about a minor bit of male patronage. I bet you noticed Leonard over there in his corner, trying to pretend he wasn't in the room. Now he is a real gentleman. He wouldn't swear in front of anyone.

These words not only give us a good idea of Leonard's *personal-local* social-identity within GPT, they can also be seen as a piece of ongoing identity work on Kay's behalf. I had been happy to challenge her tolerance of what I saw as male patronage but I demurred from raising with Kay the fact that she had been completely ignored almost every time she spoke at the meeting which had just finished. Do note, for example, how Don Littleover simply changed the subject or 'moved on' when Kay mentioned Personnel. Was she being ignored at the meeting primarily because of her *local-personal* identity as 'Kay', because of her woman manager *social-category* identity or because of her *formal-role* Personnel Manager identity? All three of these played a part, I would judge, this illustrating the important theoretical point that, in practice, individuals are not 'read' by others in terms of a single social-identity but in terms of several. We will return later to questions about Kay's social-identity. For the present, we need to follow our 'mission' of applying the sociological imagination to these matters and to locating in a structural context this 'surface' phenomenon of bad language in the workplace and in Leonard Hilton's self and social-identities.

Identity-Work and 'Bad Language' in the Context of Structural Issues and Organizational Tensions

Tensions between line managers, like the Operations Managers, and members of the Personnel Department in GPT were considerable. And individuals like Kay Rhodes were often taken to personify what were seen as the 'interfering' and 'unrealistic' aspects of the Personnel function. The Operations Managers were constantly faced with short-term and localized pressures—to 'get telephone systems out of the door by month end', in GPT terms. And this often led Personnel managers to come into conflict with operations and other 'line' managers as a result of what I have elsewhere called the essentially strategic function of an HR department. This requires HR managers to consider the longer-term implications (as opposed to, say, immediate departmental output pressures) and more corporate implications (as opposed to local 'operation' or 'manufacturing' preferences) of various organizational activities (Watson, 2006). The Personnel department at GPT, for example, was adding to the day-to-day (and, especially 'month end') pressures on every operations manager with its stream of strategic-HR innovations on culture change, skill grading, pay systems, teamworking and the rest.



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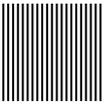
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We see a significant structural issue here within GPT. But the tension between personnel/HR specialists and other managers has long existed across every type of employing organization. Anthony and Crichton (1969: 165) wrote 'The history of personnel specialists as a group is the history of a struggle for status to become full members of the management team'. And the tensions between line and HR managers identified by these writers and later by Watson (1977) and Legge (1978) have by no means disappeared (Caldwell, 2003). This needs to be understood structurally. A large part of the work of Personnel/HR specialists involves them working to support people like the GPT Operations Managers to maintain control over worker activities and to maximise the corporate benefits to be derived from those activities. But, at other times, HR people find themselves working in ways which line managers take to be undermining them. And this, in turn, can be related to basic contradictions within all industrial capitalist societies (Watson, 1977) in which the logic of the political economy in which they work requires employers to treat employees as exploitable resources yet, at the same time, to maintain relationships with them as human beings to a level that retains their attachment to the organization.

Throughout Leonard Hilton's writing about management and the interviews and conversations with him there is a strongly negative view of Personnel/HR departments and of many of the people who work in them. And there was, for me, a deep irony in this because, prior to reading his autobiography, I had heard members of the Personnel Department at GPT speak of him with nothing less than high praise. He had a *local-personal identity* in the factory as a skilled negotiator with both informal and formal groups of employees. We heard Kay Rhodes refer to him earlier in *cultural-stereotype* terms as 'a gentleman' and he was repeatedly spoken of by personnel and industrial relations people as a man who understood human resourcing and employee relations matters better than any other non-HR person they had come across. Leonard indeed prided himself on his talents in this last area. He writes in the autobiography,

I found the personnel issues increasingly frustrating, time consuming and boring—not that I had any problem resolving any of them ... the personnel department and my colleagues viewed me as something of a miracle worker with the shop-floor people. This I could not understand, as in my mind, I only did what seemed natural and obvious.

Notice here that in the *local-personal* social-identity of an employee relations 'miracle worker' that Leonard embraces, dealing with employee issues is something Leonard says he does 'naturally'. What this implies is that so-called personnel specialists are unnecessary. He probably would not argue precisely this. But he does argue that the growth of personnel departments had a negative impact on manufacturing industry generally and GPT specifically. The growth in 'importance and power' of personnel departments 'had much to do with the burgeoning of trade union strength and hence the issue of employee relations'. Personnel departments 'grew at



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an alarming rate' and, at GPT, 'got a stranglehold on the whole organization'. And what did this mean for managers like Leonard? It meant, he says, that 'whilst previously, a manager on his own initiative and authority had been able to promote, demote and reward his or her people, now every scrap of paper to do with employees at all levels had to be authorised by the personnel people'. The size of personnel departments was 'the result of union power combined with the self-aggrandisement of personnel directors'.

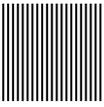
Individuals like Leonard, who had climbed the managerial ladder the hard way, from shop floor supervision to executive status, and especially if they were as 'naturally' skilled as Leonard was, should not be interfered with by people with little sensitivity to the realities of the world, it is implied. At times, Leonard insists, Personnel acted in ways which were 'quite mad'. He talks for instance of 'one of the most ludicrous initiatives' coming about 'at a time when our redundancy programme had reached new heights'. This was called 'Investing in People'.

Of course, only the personnel department could be so insensitive as to launch such an initiative on so massive a scale across the organization, sitting people in a lecture theatre, telling them how much the company valued and wanted to develop them, when some 10% of the audience had already been told they were being made redundant and had to leave the company in three months time. We managers were incredulous and incensed.

Note the phrase here: 'we managers'. These personnel people, it is implied, did not warrant the social-identity of 'managers'. And this is where Kay Rhodes fits in—and where these more 'structural' tensions link back to matters of inter-personal relationships, questions of identity and personal troubles. Leonard writes,

She was a smoking woman in her early 30's, who wanted to be a man. She would eff and swear in meetings, which caused more irritation and detestation in me than when it had come from Meadows [the most notoriously foul-mouthed man in GPT, as was mentioned earlier]. She climbed through the ranks [eventually being] appointed an executive over employee relations. Such were the times in which we lived.

In writing these words in his autobiographical account, Leonard Hilton is indicating a level of personal discomfort with swearing that helps us make sense of his being so troubled about how he swore in his own wife's company. He is clearly uncomfortable with the coming together of femininity and bad language. And a considerable depth of feeling behind this piece of written identity work is suggested by the use of the *cultural-stereotype* category of 'a woman wanting to be a man'. Especially interesting, however, is the comment, 'such were the times in which we lived'. Our noticing this helps us make the kind of link that Mills looks for in applications of the sociological imagination. Mills asks us to set personal troubles in the context of historical transitions and Leonard



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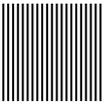
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Hilton is indeed doing this himself; relating his own personal discomforts and doing challenging identity work in a period of industrial change in which, in his view, personnel specialists were undermining managers, trade unions were undermining businesses and women were 'climbing through the ranks'.

Conclusions

The starting point of our case-study analysis was a piece of *identity work* being done by Leonard Hilton. In that relatively recent piece of self-reflective writing, he was dealing with what Mills (1970) would identify as a 'personal trouble': a serious worry about how well he treated his much-loved wife in the years before her death. Emblematic of this troubling behaviour, he feels, was his use of bad language at home. In his writing he is doing both inward and outward facing identity work as (simultaneously to his readers and to himself) he explains his having become a person with this 'personality flaw' as a result, in our terms, of the outward-facing *identity work* that he did in the workplace as he took on aspects of a particular *local-organizational* managerial social-identity that was necessary for personal survival in GPT. His concern is that in doing this outward-facing identity work he absorbed 'inwardly' a style of linguistic behaviour that became a part of his self ('personality' to use his word).

Once one goes back, through the ethnographic 'record', to Leonard's time in GPT, the credibility of some aspects of Leonard's self-criticism come into doubt. It would appear, at least, that the *local-personal* social-identity which attached to Leonard was not of a man who spoke as roughly as his fellow Operations Managers or indeed as roughly as the Personnel Manager, Kay Rhodes. And turning to Kay, it would seem that her use of bad language was an element of her outward-facing identity work. It was part of her way of handling a personal predicament she shared with the small number of other women managers in the company—a predicament in which the men (Leonard among them) were always keener to attach a gender-related social identity to women than a managerial one. This personal predicament is clearly related to broader structural and discursive circumstances of gender inequality. And also related to those structural circumstances are the 'troubles' which Leonard clearly had with regard to Kay Rhodes. But, as the case-study analysis showed, these gender-related matters were not the only structural and discursive circumstances influencing the identity-work performed by Kay and Leonard respectively. Also of major importance was the very significant tension between the company's Personnel/HR function and other managers. At the time of the ethnographic study, many of these matters were reaching a critical point (Watson, 2001). In 1990–91, trade unions still retained considerable influence and there was a growing tension between the work and employment restructuring that was occurring, spear-headed by a powerful Personnel department, and



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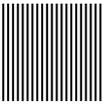
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the unions. The Personnel department, with a much higher proportion of women managers than any other function was, as part of their attempt to implement new ways of working 'across the business', pressing the shop-floor unions to lift their veto on certain of these 'reforms' being applied at the factory level. Redundancies were occurring regularly, at every level, and the top management regime in the region was in a state of flux.

It is sociologically vital to set these specific managerial circumstances at GPT within broader societal or political-economy level structural circumstances and transitions. The case study analysis does this. The analysis can be seen as having moved up through three levels: from the personal, through the organizational, up to the societal/historical. By focusing outwards from the details of very specific events and particular examples of managers' *identity work* to a broader structural picture, an analysis has been produced which demonstrates, it is hoped, the potential for social science analysis to fulfil Mills' mission of helping people 'grasp what is going on in the world, and to understand what is happening in themselves at *minute points of the intersection of biography and history within society*' (1970: 14, my emphasis).

The concept of *identity work* which has been refined and developed here is presented as one means by which this broader social science purpose might be advanced. At the same time, it is offered as a theoretical tool to be used by scholars researching identity aspects of employment, management and organizations generally. The valuable work which has already been done in these areas can be effectively extended, first, by analytically separating the 'internal' *self-identity* aspects of human identities from the external or 'discursive' *social-identity* aspects and, second, by examining how people's *identity work* bridges self-identities and wider discourses. The three-step model which has been introduced is offered as a specific device which can help in the analysis of empirical materials, as is the social-identities typology. And, it is hoped, people studying identity work will more often look at the ways in which people, in doing identity work, are both making connections 'outwards' to social others as well as 'inwards' towards the self. To do this would represent a significant move forward in identity-related research.

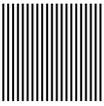
By closely examining the details of human lives in specific settings such as work organizations, wherever possible using combinations of ethnographic, interview and documentary techniques as in the present study, we can come to understand better the ways in which individuals generally strive to come to terms with a changing world, sometimes relatively actively, sometimes relatively passively. Leonard Hilton is a relatively 'active' identity worker and, before closing, I am very pleased to report that Leonard Hilton, now in his later seventies, is travelling, expanding his geographical and cultural horizons and continuing to write. His *identity work* continues and Leonard is perhaps to be understood not as someone who is working towards the discovery of a 'true' self but as someone who is



crafting what Tracy and Trethewey call a 'crystallized self', a self which is multifaceted and is 'stronger, more beautiful, and more productive for a variety of ... purposes and downright better than a planar self, flattened by managerial ideologies' (2005: 186).

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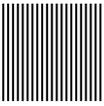
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