

Constructing cultural identities in multicultural workplaces in Hong Kong

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Identity is increasingly recognised as an important issue in organisational communication (eg Holmes 2000; Kendall & Tannen 1997; Angouri & Marra fc). In this paper we focus on a particular aspect of professional identities, namely cultural professional identities. While the link between culture and identity is much researched (eg Kim 2007), the construction and performance of cultural identities in workplace contexts are generally neglected. This gap is particularly surprising considering the globalisation of the work domain and mobilization of the workforce (Roberts, 2006), which often require professionals to construct and negotiate their various identities in increasingly multicultural contexts where notions of culture often become particularly salient.

This paper aims to address this research gap and explores some of the ways in which culture and identity influence and constitute each other. We focus on multicultural workplaces where, we believe, this intricate relationship between culture and identity is particularly well reflected because members are on a daily basis exposed to culture-specific perceptions, assumptions, expectations, and practices which are ultimately reflected in workplace communication.

In order to achieve these aims, we explore how expatriates who live and work in Hong Kong construct, negotiate and combine aspects of their professional and their cultural identities. Our data comprises of in-depth interviews with expatriates in a range of different workplaces, ranging from small privately-owned companies to large international financial corporations; and more than 20 hours of participants' authentic workplace discourse. This combination of interview and authentic discourse data results in a rich and multi-faceted picture of the complex (and often contradictory) processes involved in identity construction in organisational settings.

Our findings provide new insights into the complex processes of identity construction from two different but complementary perspectives: i) the ways in which participants portray themselves as adapting to, negotiating or rejecting the new culture in which they work and live; and ii) the ways in which these perceived identity construction processes are actually reflected in participants' workplace discourse. A combination of these perspectives provides a comprehensive picture of some under-researched but highly relevant aspects of the construction of cultural identities in organisational settings.

Self-categorization in interviews with immigrant career women

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Drawing on ethnomethodological research on membership categories, many researchers have focused on the way people construct and negotiate their membership of ethnic groups as opposed to other ethnic and social groups (e.g. De Fina, 2006). This becomes particularly interesting in institutional contexts, which typically entail the construction of a specific kind of professional identity, potentially guided by workplace norms and expectations. In such contexts, membership of a professional group may interfere with these other group memberships, which may then lead individuals to draw on other identities and renegotiate the construction of their identities.

For this presentation, my data consist of narratives. These form excellent data for identity analysis, since 'it is precisely in narrative that people's individuality is expressed most obviously' (Johnstone, 1996, p.56). More particularly, the data consist of four interviews with young (age ranges from 26-33), highly educated women of Moroccan descent who have a very active professional life. In these interviews, I look into the way the interviewees categorize themselves and shift these self-categorizations throughout the interaction when constructing several different out-groups, like for instance non-immigrant professionals, but also men of their own ethnic group. From these findings, conclusions are drawn regarding the typical self-categorizations of these interviewees, but also concerning the construction of identity in interview data, which have been criticized in narrative analyses for their reflexivity and construction of a 'rehearsed self' (Georgakopoulou, 2006, p.128).