

RECOGNIZING PARADOXICAL IDENTITIES OF DESIGN MANAGERS

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ABSTRACT

There is a need for designers with knowledge in business as well as business people with knowledge in design. All over the world master-level education programs are growing for this “in between” area. We argue that this knowledge and the identity of being “in between” are essential but also problematic. There is a danger that, similar to the relation between man and (wo)man, the business way of thinking becomes the common ground for (design) management, and the designerly characteristics become decoration, rather than another ground. In order not to suppress the one or the other, we argue that a paradoxical identity of being simultaneously both the same and different is needed. This paradoxical identity of both acknowledging the differences and at the same time looking away from them is theoretically anchored in the postmodern project – and earlier studies of one of the authors shows that it seems easier to embrace in practice than in (modernist) theory. Here we present a theoretical frame of reference and some empirical notifications from students in a Masters program in “Business & Design” at the University of Gothenburg. We will also present an ongoing empirical study.

INTRODUCTION

There is a need for designers with knowledge in business as well as business people with knowledge in design because this helps make the working relationship productive and satisfying. While some designers work smoothly with business people, especially when they follow guiding protocols (cf., Anderson 2000, Ashley

2007, Lindgaard 2004), others have different experiences. For some time we have been puzzled by problems in relationships between designers and business people when they work together. Johansson and Svengren (2008) observed that relationships between designers, engineers and marketers/managers are complex and fraught with frictions, and Johansson and Woodilla (2008) investigated epistemological underpinnings of differences among the various professionals in their approaches to work conducted together. The differences are of such a character that we sometimes think of designers and managers as belonging to quite different worlds, or at least two diverse discourses. The problems at hand do not seem to be “simple” communication or misunderstandings but rather belong to epistemological differences; differences in value systems and the way values influence the professional work.

Learning together about each other’s ways of working and sense making is one way to promote increased knowledge and respect between designers and business or management professionals (we use the words interchangeably), and master-level education programs for this “in between” area are becoming quite common. We consider this knowledge and the identity of being “in between” as essential but also problematic. The danger is that the business way of thinking becomes the common ground for (design) management, and the designerly characteristics become “decoration”, rather than another ground. In order not to suppress the one or the other a paradoxical identity of being both the same and different simultaneously is needed. Our reasoning begins from the observation that relationships between managers and designers can be similar to those between men and women, where it for a long time has been problematic to be “in between” the stereotyped dichotomy of men and (wo)man. We therefore suggest that a theoretical gender perspective might inform and also deepen our understanding of the dichotomous relationships between designers and managers.

In many ways design and management are like two different worlds, suggesting that the relation should have a dichotomous character. However, that is not the case. There are both groups in-between and great

differences within the groups. Any dichotomization represses the individual differences within the two categories and the spectra of both similarities and multiplicity of differences becomes invisible and turned into stereotypes. From gender research (Tong 2009) we have learned that the dichotomizing and stereotyping sense-making that is prevalent both in society and in many types of gender research is not liberating but rather preserves the situation. So, in order to find out more about this dichotomy of designer and manager - that is not a dichotomy - we now turn into the area of professional identities and look for how students construct their identities within educational programs where students are accepted with preparation or foundational knowledge in either design or management.

THEORETICAL FRAME OF REFERENCE

In this section we summarize theoretical perspectives that form the grounding of our study, namely, symbolic interactionism, feminist studies, and recent trends in organizational and cultural studies. We conclude with research into professional identities, paying particular attention to other empirical work that may help guide our research process. We have not taken research into organizational identity into account (cf., Harquail & King 2010, Hatch & Schultz, 2002). These may originate in the same perspectives but create frameworks that are at the organizational level of analysis with no connections to the individual level.

SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM AS AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL FRAME OF REFERENCE

The symbolic interactionism (SI) perspective starts with the notion that all people create meaning. If we did not do so the world would be fragmented and totally chaotic. Symbolic interactionism takes social constructionism (Berger & Luckman 1967) more or less for granted and focuses on the meaning-creating process. An object in this frame of reference is an entity with a meaning and could therefore be symbolic as well as physical (Blumer 2000).

The founder of SI, George Herbert Mead, was much concerned with the development of “I and me”, a dynamic development view on a social psychological level. He described how the “I” coming from the inside of a person interacts with the “me” that is the surrounding family and society’s picture that becomes internalized (Mead 1934). The dynamic between the “I” and the “me” is ongoing throughout life.

The concept of “role” in SI is related to a dynamic and constant work called “role making”, whereas roles in many other sociological traditions are treated as preset properties that an individual adjusts to or enters (Hewitt 2003). The concept of identity did not originate in SI, but became a strong concept in sociology after World War II when American society was confronted with the world outside, and the identity of the US people in relation to other nations became a focus of research

(Hewitt 1989). During the last decades identity has become a strong concept within organizational studies as part of the cultural turn. We regard identity as the way an individual or a group talks and thinks about themselves in relation to other people, that is, as the result of an integration of the “I” and the “me” dialogue. Consequently, the identity can be weak or strong, coherent or splintered, important or not so important, and so on. These characteristics, as well as what the identity is about, interest us.

FEMINIST STUDIES OF IDENTITIES

Identities – or dissolving identities – take many paths within feminist studies. Simon de Beauvoir (1949) wrote about the female sex as “the other”, a suppressed shadow of the male one. The man was the yardstick in the society, the one that counted and that everyone else had to refer to. Men, according to Beauvoir, were like the golden metre: the reference against which everything else (read “women”) was considered deviant or inferior. The analogy between women in the men’s world and artists and designers in the managerial world is striking!

Gilligan and Chodorow, in the 1970s and 80s, each in her own way, tried to highlight and focus on the female identity. Gilligan, as a moral psychologist, saw that what was formerly considered as “gender neutral” in moral development in fact only related to male development, and therefore focused on what she called “women’s voice” (Gilligan 1982). Her aim was to give voice to what had not been heard of or recognized and to articulate specifics. Chodorow (1989), on the other hand, theorized around the differences between boys and girls’ identity development and found that boys tended to be “over-separated” in their identity while girls tended to be “over-dependent”. The ideal development, according to Chodorow, is a paradoxical relation between the self and the society where you are separated and integrated at the very same time. It could also be phrased in the following way: a mature person is part of a holistic situation that is more than him/herself and yet simultaneously a specific and separated person. What we find interesting is that it is the paradoxical self that is the joint norm, whereas paradoxical thinking in academia has been abolished in the modern project and only praised by postmodernity. Many modernist philosophers regard paradoxes as weeds that must be pulled out of academia.

One of the authors (Johansson 1998) built on the paradoxical perspective of Chodorow in her ethnographic study about responsibility in organizations. In order not to fall into the dichotomous trap of differences between men and women (that would have hidden the interesting results) she constructed three sexes or role figures when she described patterns of sense making: (1) John, who stood for statements and activities that could only be associated with men, and (2) Mary Ann, who stood for what could only be associated with women, while (3) Mary John, stood for

statements that were possible to associate with both sexes. She also noticed that specifically Mary John seemed to have a paradoxical view upon gender, being able to both see and see away – or see (away) from gender dimensions – sometimes both at the same time in an ironic or humorous way.

Another way of describing traditional and dualistic patterns of behavior through which patterns of doing design management can be understood is using the analogy of an invisible screen that is always present in the background, as also described in gender studies by Johansson (1998). If we do not take into account the roots of the dualistic/separate identities of designer and manager, we are not able to grasp and understand the situation at hand when “design-management” identities emerge. To ascribe someone who works in the “in-between” area as taking on a new and distinct identity diminishes that person’s capacity. The “invisible screen” that is always present reminds us what is being looked-away-from as new or shifting identities are assumed.

Both Gilligan and Chodorow could be classified as what Tong (2009) labels as the second wave of feminism. This categorization has been strongly criticized for its dichotomization, and the subsequent repression of differences both within and between the categories. The third wave of feminists – with its combination of post modernists (cf., Holvino 2010), post colonialists (cf., Diaz 2003) and queer theorists (cf., Jagose 1996, Tierney 1997) - has the aim of dissolving the notions of both men and women as an important category of social classification.

PROFESSIONAL IDENTITIES/IDENTITY WITHIN CULTURAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL STUDIES

In recent years, professional identity has been a topic of interest in research on professional disciplines. For example, in education, with its strong foundation in ethnographic research, studies on identity when becoming a teacher (cf., Hamman, Gosselin, Romano & Buunan 2010) or counsellor (cf., Gibson, Dollarhide & Moss 2010) build on psychological concepts and generally consider “the professional” as an asexual object. In design, interest in “identity” predominately focuses on the designer’s ability to craft an identity of the object or service, not on the construction of the identity of the designer his or herself. Exceptions exist, for example, work by Schwier, Campbell and Kenny (2004) that takes a social construction perspective but relates men and women participants (sic) to their communities of practice.

Recent studies on identity published in management and organization studies journals reveal a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches. For example, working from the assumption that professional identity is the social “fact” of how a person defines him or herself in the context of organizational life, Pratt, Rockmann and Kauffmann (2006) detail processes through which medical residents “customize” their

identity during periods of work and study. Mainstream management theories in careers, role transitions and socialization contribute to understanding the “identity work” or dynamics of “identity construction” of 11 medical residents (4 women, 7 men) over a six-year period.

In another in-depth investigation, Sveningsson & Alvesson (2003) consider the case of one senior manager working in a complex environment where her “identity work” was more or less continuously ongoing. They take a discursive approach, with a conceptual platform that builds on Mead’s concepts of “I and “me” while taking distance from perspectives embracing impersonal sources of identity work such as organizational discourses, ideologies, social identities and roles. Their results reveal the subject as a location of contradictory discourses, and they argue for identity work as a struggle involving discourses, roles and narrative self-identities coming into play as individuals strive for comfort, meaning and integration, and some correspondence between a self-definition and work situation.

Not all studies of identity consider a meaning-making perspective. For example, narrative identity work has been theorized by Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010) in the context of work role transitions, with the conclusion that people (sic) develop a narrative repertoire that they draw on in social interactions and then save or revise depending on whether the variant of “one’s story” appeared authentic. We find this mainstream explanations insufficient to account for the several perplexing situations involving designers and managers that we have observed.

HOW GENDER STUDIES CAN HELP US RELATE DESIGNERS AND MANAGERS IN A MORE NUANCED WAY

The worlds of designers and managers are rooted in different epistemological paradigms, the managerial being mainly rationalistic and the designers being rooted in the artistic creative and emotional world. Both theoretical and practical evidence underpins such a claim. Not noticing these differences would be to do something similar to when men claim, from their platform, that “we are all equal”, suppressing the differences in epistemological foundation between themselves and women. Yet, it is also easy to find both theoretical and practical examples that refute the claim of lack of differences. Recent narrative and postmodern streams of organization theory problematize the rational foundation of managers and the business world (cf., Czarniawska-Jeorges 1997, Hassard 1994) and studies of what constitutes entrepreneurship (Hjorth and Johannisson 2003, Sleyaert and Hjorth 2003) demonstrate anything but a rational ground. In fact, Hjorth (2003) relies on artistic epistemology and replaces *homo economicus* with *homo ludens*. In the other direction, Johansson, Sköldberg and Svengren (2003) in their discussion of the epistemological ground

of designers find that they are a product of modernity but alien to the rationale of modernity. Instead, they say, designers are born in the cradle of modernity but remain alien to the logic of modernity with its split between art and technology.

Our thinking needs a paradoxical frame of reference where we can see (away) from the differences. Such a frame of reference allows us to recognize a spectrum of identities rather than a dichotomy – but at the same time it is a frame of reference that allows us to understand the existing dichotomy without being caught in it.

In brief, we believe that changing roles and identities of designers also require changes in business/management professional's roles and identities, which is why we theorize and research both identities. We recognize the problematic area of being “in-between” which we describe as a paradoxical identity. By analogy with research in gender studies, we suggest that this identity may allow the designer to both see him/herself as a designer and, at the same time, to “see away” from the designer identity towards a business/manager identity. The complex nature of these identities and ways in which they are expressed need an ethnographic study that appreciates gender differences as well as professional differences.

The changing and paradoxical nature of designer's and management professional's identities are illustrated by findings from our pilot interview study of students with design or business/management backgrounds enrolled in the Masters in Business and Design at the University of Gothenburg. In addition, results from a second study, to be conducted in late April and early May will further elaborate our position.

A FIRST LOOK: A PILOT STUDY

In autumn 2010 we held a series of small group interviews with students from the first two cohorts in a new master program in business and design. Each group interview took a little longer than an hour and used a series of questions to prompt conversation around issues of interest to the researchers, including reasons for joining the program, entering professional status, critical incidents during the program of study, and career aspirations following graduation. The interviews were conducted in English, with both researchers jointly leading the conversation. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. To preserve anonymity, students are identified below by a code.

From the first two interviews, one with students from the first cohort in the program (now recent graduates), and the other with one of the project groups from the second cohort (entering their second year), three “stages” in the identity process were apparent.

Students entering the program directly from their first degree did not think of themselves as a “manager” or a “designer”, but as students of the joint program “Business & Design”. They therefore were surprised –

and even shocked – when other students and instructors labelled them in this way. As one said:

I would never have regarded myself as a business person until I entered the program and everyone started telling me everyday that I was a business person and that meant something about my personality and that was really weird for me. (C2-W1: 100928)

Another student was more comfortable with the situation.

It is clear we have different points of view ... as we work it's hard to stay a designer. I don't mind if I lose the identity I never had. (C2-W2: 100928)

Later, when working in cross-disciplinary groups, students noticed a difference in work habits, and this served as a distinguishing feature of the other.

Before, even if it wasn't group work, evenings, weekends, we were always working. We were doing projects and in each other's projects, helping out in different ways. And the biggest difference when we started here was, OK people, go home now. We've done all the work. (Laughter) That was huge. I'm still struggling with that, working 8 to 5 and I'm trying to adopt that way of working, and it is hard. (C2-W2: 100928)

That's the way people work. (C2-M:100928)

By the end of the program, recent graduates seemed to be quite secure in their own sense of professional competence, but they were unable to find a label to describe themselves. They handled this situation with different strategies.

One former student said she had “taken time off” in her identity work, which indicates that it troubled her quite a lot earlier and maybe will also do so in the future:

I have just been thinking... Oh I need to do a business tabloid of myself and what am I actually doing and how is this coherent and so on... I just decided to give it a rest for some while. And keep on working with the project I am doing. And it would only take some time out of the projects I have. I have projects. And I am able to sell them. Sell myself. (C1-W2: 100927)

Another former student had invented an identity with help of a label – he forthrightly called himself “a design strategist” – and made sense of the situation for himself:

I have been thinking about this a lot. And I have realized that I am not an ordinary designer, but playing on this design strategic ...you know...it depends on what day it is. I am doing what I am doing and I like what I

am doing. It does not matter to me what I call myself or what other people call me. The problem is that if I call myself a design strategist, people will always ask what that is. So it does not matter what I call myself because I will always have to explain. So the important is that explain thing when people get to know what I am doing. (C1-M1: 100927)

Structuring the different paths as models of identity, however, would easily turn into new stereotypes. Instead we turn to the intuition we both had as researchers, a feeling of understanding individuals with an entrepreneurial spirit and a sense of “always in the process of becoming something as yet undefined”. This elusive perspective that emerged from the data is espoused in critical theory and needs to be elaborated and experimented with intellectually. Therefore we decided to expand our investigation and work within the premises of a critical perspective. Identity cannot be dichotomized into that of “the designer’s identity” and “the manager’s identity”, or stabilized as the final identity of a hybrid design-management professional.

ONGOING RESEARCH

The investigation due to begin in late April is based in a critical feminist perspective and demands a multifaceted research design. We start with three different kinds of research questions:

1. Empirical questions: How does participation in a cross-discipline master program influence identity creation and its continuous re-creation, etc? Are original identities kept throughout the program or what happens to them? If they fade away what sort of replacement processes occur during the program? At the end of the program do the students have a unified identity related to the program? If not, what do have?
2. Theoretical question. What ways can we find to describe patterns in identity processes that do not suppress the one or the other identities?
3. Practical question. What changes in the program might we suggest to ease friction in relationships based in differences in identities?

Three primary data collection methods will be used: (1) focus interviews with students in each cohort to engage in conversations and hear in their own words about their experiences and feelings; (2) collection of stories from teachers to hear their narratives of the education context; (3) observations of project groups to witness interactions between students. In addition we will document our own reflections as researchers to note our biases and emerging interpretations. The study design is flexible to allow for changes and additions depending on the data collected in the ongoing process. Throughout the process we will be mindful of issues of trustworthiness and ethics (Marshall & Rossman 2010).

Both authors have had considerable experience in analysis of data of the type we will be collecting in this study. We will start with “grounded theory inspired coding” of interview transcripts, narrative analysis of stories, and thematic analysis of field notes from observation and reflections. We will keep journals during the data collection and analysis processes that include theoretical memos detailing our emerging assertions. We also know from experience that we cannot anticipate the level of detail or particular aspects of data analysis.

We anticipate results in terms of identity-related themes illustrated by quotes. We also anticipate that an interpretation of the results from critical perspectives will give us frames of references that are useful for the University of Gothenburg and similar Master’s programs, and maybe also for other activities in the intersection of business or management and design. In addition, we will interpret the data relevant to professional identities from feminist perspective and anticipate finding examples of paradoxical identities.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

One way in which designers’ identities are changing is through the use of “in-between” knowledge when they work directly with business or management professionals, who also gain in-between knowledge. From an exploratory interview study with students in a Masters in Business & Design we observed that participants engaged in “identity struggles”. We suggest that these offer tentative support for our claim that the area between design and management requires a paradoxical identity of both looking towards and looking away from the foundation of the original identity. Feminist identity theory elaborates on this position.

Empirically, we realized that the situation was more complex than we initially anticipated in our interview study. Consequently we have designed a more comprehensive research protocol. We hope that our results will contribute to both theory and practice. By surfacing and investigating underlying problems in interactions between practitioners in design and business, we will have frameworks with which to understand the ongoing processes of identity(ies) construction, and suggestions for ways to take a more nuanced view of each other and processes of identity work.

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