

***Project Managers' Identity: An Interpretive Phenomenological
Perspective***

by Matija Radomir Djolic

Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

under the supervision of

Dr. Sumati Ahuja and Dr. Stewart Clegg

University of Technology Sydney
Faculty of Business

02/2022

CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I, Matija Djolic declare that this thesis, is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Management Discipline Group at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

This research is supported by the Australian Government Research Training Program.

Signature:

Production Note:
Signature removed prior to publication.

Date: 28/02/2022

Table of Contents

Dedication	6
Acknowledgements	7
Abstract	10
Introduction	12
The Becoming of Self: The Creation and Perpetuity of Identity	16
Introduction	16
The Study of Identity	18
My Life as a Project Manager: a Reflexive Tale	18
Identity Formation: An Ontological Inquiry into the Onset of Identity Forming	24
The Sovereign Aspect of Agency: An Ontological Inquiry into the Temporality of Identity Work	34
Synopsis	47
The Purposefulness of the Autonomous Subject	50
Introduction	50
Self-critical Identity Work	52
The Problematic of Reflexivity in Identity (Work)	60
Self-identity and the Crises of Project Management	67
Research Questions	76
Conclusion	81
The Stratified Ontology of Self-induced Reality	83
Introduction	83
Ontological Position: The Claim for the Ontology of Self-notions	84
<i>The Phenomenology of Stratified Ontology of Reality</i>	85
Paradigm: The Stratified Ontology of Critical Realism	95
The Interpretive Lens: The Integration of the Study's Ontology and Paradigm	104
Synopsis	115
The Map of Self-experience	117
Introduction	117
Design Frameworks	118
The Focus on the Experience	122
Sampling	124

Research Context	127
Data Collection	128
<i>Semi-structured Interviews and informal interviews</i>	130
<i>Observation</i>	132
Coding and Data Analysis	135
Reflexivity	138
Ethical Considerations	139
Limitations of The Research Design	141
Conclusion	141
The Superimposed Truth: The Vail of Perpetuating Self-ideas	143
Introduction	143
Depth Phenomenology of Being-in-the-world of Work	143
<i>The primary phenomenon of self-referential and self-reinforcing being-in-the-world of work</i>	144
<i>The epiphenomena of corrosive being-in-the-world of work</i>	152
<i>The secondary phenomenon of self-preservation in being-in-the-world</i>	160
The meta-phenomenon of a distinctive self-idea: the organising idea(s) of situated experiences	168
Synopsis	176
The Journey of the Distinctive Self	178
Introduction	178
<i>The (Non-)Emergence of Self-identity: The Journey of the Self-Idea</i>	179
<i>The 'Intentionality' and 'Distinctiveness' of the Self-Idea</i>	190
<i>Research Questions</i>	201
Conclusion	206
The Self as the Centre of the Universe	207
Introduction	207
Contributions	208
Is Identity a predicate of sociality or a purely situated and fragmented phenomena?	208
Is (distinctive) self-identity a discursive illusion?	215
Is the self in a dichotomous relationship with 'society'?	222
Is identity-work a discontinuous and a single-dimensional predicament?	228
Synopsis	235
The Self-fulfilling Prophecy of Existential Dilemmas	237

Introduction	237
What is (Un)successful Identity Work?	237
(Un)successful Identity Work, the Crises of Project Management and Existential Therapy	245
Limitation of the research and findings	251
Future research agendas	253
<i>For Project Management Practice</i>	253
<i>For Archer's Meta-Reflexivity</i>	255
<i>For Phenomenology of Unselfconsciousness</i>	256
Conclusion	257
Synopsis	258
Conclusion	260
Bibliography	266
Appendices	277
Formal Documents	286

Dedication

To my *mother* and my *father*

for whose patience and love I am forever grateful

Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without the help and support of many others.

I would particularly like to thank my supervisor Stewart Clegg for the encouragement, advice and thorough feedback he has given me throughout the process. To Stewart I owe deep gratitude for the genuine interest he has taken in my work and for being patient with me throughout this emotional rollercoaster. The breadth and depth of his knowledge have helped me find the right resources, arguments and words at times of crucial impasses. He has been a great motivating factor in my studies, and for that I am very grateful. This work would not have been possible without Stewart.

I would also like to thank my supervisor Sumati Ahuja whose directness has led me to reevaluate much of the firmly held beliefs I had about academic contributions. Her no-nonsense approach has assisted me in getting my message across in my writing. Most importantly, she has taught me that any philosophical observations, however creative and insightful, should not come at a cost to a coherent and well-argued theoretical position.

Further, I wish to thank the participants of the study for their willingness to let me into their private professional worlds. In particular, I am indebted to those people in the partner organisation who have believed in this research and made its conduct possible.

Away from the academic world, I would like to send special thanks to many people with whom I have had deep and intense discussions about the general philosophy of life and experience. To my brother Petar, my friends Nikola, Andrej, Sasha and Vedran, and to my Mother and my Father, I owe much of the lateral thinking that proved to be indispensable for producing this work. Their willingness to

challenge my views, to re-asses theirs' and their openness to new the alternative ways of looking at the world have provided me with more insight than any book I have read in the last 15 years of my education. Although I have written this piece, it belongs to them as much as it does to me. Most importantly, it is their unwavering struggle in the pursuit of truth that has been the foundation of my strength to persevere when little gives you motivation in this crumbling world that abounds. They are my heroes and nothing of value can be done without these beacons of light.

I thank you all.

Page left blank intentionally

Abstract

The elementary building block of identity is meaning since that which is meaningless is also invisible to the self and others (Peterson 1999). However, the shifting nature of meaning inscribed in the multiple contexts of self, the other(s) and discourses, has rendered various academic analytical attempts to highlight a distinctive self-identity rather inconclusive. Consequently, many identity-related studies conducted under the umbrella of social constructivism define self-identity in terms of a fragmented ontology in which the links between everyday agency and 'pre-existing' self are discontinued and seemingly non-referential. For example, by positioning identity as a predicate of discontinuous identity work, the subjective antecedents of identity work become 'concealed'. Empirical manifestation of self-identity is reduced to (impermanence of) meaning *in* discourse in such cases. On the other hand, essentialist attempts to define self-identity have led to a reified depiction of the self, in which case, agency is stripped of its *emergent* qualities. Therefore, unless one resorts to a 'fixed' and 'permanent' depiction of objects, entities and concepts, the fundamental inconclusiveness of (distinctive) self-identity positions all that precedes self-expression as either analytically inaccessible or ontologically indeterminate. On that note, to make the antecedents of identity work visible, this study draws on the 'depth ontology' of critical realism so as to highlight self-identity as a 'distinctive entity' (Marks and O'Mahoney 2014), that is, as a 'subjectum' (Heidegger 1953) of one's being-in-the-world of work. Further and more importantly, by highlighting self-identity as a distinctive entity that *informs* identity work, the study draws attention to the 'self-fulfilling prophecy' of existing self-definitions and the self-defeating proclivity of self-referential/reinforcing forms of perception. By demonstrating how adopted identities 'create problems' (Beech et al. 2016) on the 'empirical level' (such as producing the

experience of negative emotional states) the study develops a critical inquiry into the adopted self-notions highlighting the *problematic*, in addition to the precarious, nature of self-identity.