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Identity, Meaning, and Subjectivity in Career Development

Evolving Perspectives in Human Resources

palgrave
macmillan

FOREWORD

It is an immense pleasure and honor to write the Foreword for this landmark book. To my knowledge, no other human resource development (HRD) academic has so honestly and comprehensively articulated the complex interplay between identity, its impact on career development, and how HR professionals might respond. It is no surprise to me that this book breaks new ground. I have known of Julie and her important body of work for several years. However, it wasn't until June 2016 that I had the pleasure of finally meeting her at the European HRD conference in Manchester, United Kingdom.

Some of my initial perceptions of Julie's identity were shaped by the photo on her university's website. I was already aware of Julie's work around gender and sexual orientation and felt comfortable with her status. Looking at her photo, I immediately liked her nice, warm smile with sparkling eyes. Then, I considered Julie appeared strong, confident, and professional, and I suddenly felt a little intimidated at the thought of meeting and working with her. What did that say of my identity? As Julie notes, "it is the way that people self-categorize or relate, and who they think they are and who they think others think they are, that impacts development a profound level" (p. 5). Having now met Julie, I am acutely aware of how we subconsciously judge people (including ourselves), and can inadvertently make identity mistakes. Yes, Julie appears strong and professional, but she is also warm and humble. After sparking a friendship, I now see how different her professional profile is to her Facebook photo, which is perhaps unsurprising as mine—and I'm sure many others'—are quite different, too! This immediately raises issues regarding the

complexity, multiplicity, dynamism, and situated nature of individual identity. As with emotional intelligence, we need to be aware of our own identities and the impact these can have on the identities of others we encounter in our converging careers—such as trainer and trainee. Trainers intervene, intentionally or otherwise, and need care when interfering in people’s careers, and thus their lives. So, having allowed subjective perceptions to erroneously shape my judgment of Julie’s social identity, I now appreciate the importance of HR professionals becoming more aware of “identity intelligence”—but from a human (social/psychological) rather than computer science or defense perspective. The prospect of an encounter with Julie triggered many identity issues for me to ponder. When we eventually met at the conference, we connected through authorial, editorial, and social activities, offering deeper insights into our identities.

First, as a co-chair of the critical, theoretical, and methodological stream, I was judging papers for the Alan Moon Prize. Julie’s autoethnographic paper was outstanding, the best in our stream, and was eventually a close runner-up for this prestigious prize that rewards HRD research that is relevant and accessible to practitioners. Julie linked her own experiences as both trainer and HRD researcher, turning the lens on what shaped her own identity. Julie has practiced for over three decades as a trainer and HR professional and draws upon this rich well of personal knowledge and involvement. Having read the fascinating paper, which I am delighted Julie has developed into one of the chapters in this book, I was eager to attend Julie’s presentation. She delivered a consummate performance—humble, informative, passionate, evocative. I just sat, watched, listened, and learned much about Julie’s identity—and my own—and the impact this can have in our own training worlds.

Next, in a different role, but with the same personal qualities, Julie’s identity had an impact in an editorial context. As a leading HRD author with substantial publication experience, Julie had been invited to join the Board of Directors of the *Human Resource Development International* journal, which I chair. During our first Board meeting together, Julie clearly but quietly demonstrated to me the important and unique contribution she could offer in this small group. The Board is tasked with overseeing the management of the journal through representatives of its two sponsoring bodies: the (European) University Forum for HRD and the (American) Academy of HRD, of which Julie is president-elect. Working with colleagues from quite distinct demographic backgrounds,

yet immersed in similar careers (albeit with unique trajectories), I began to reflect again on Julie's conference presentation. It had moved me so deeply, I almost wanted to just sit back and observe the interactions between this small group of very different personalities and identities. Yet, I soon remembered that I had to chair this meeting and so launched into more functional activities, albeit spliced with some mini-observations and contemplation. Julie was—and is—right! Our identities impact everything we do as HRD professionals, through our practices in the classroom, in research encounters, and in managerial meetings, and these can have profound effects on those whose careers we touch.

In the social context, I remember exactly the moment in her presentation Julie mentioned she was a recovering alcoholic, and wondered how we might interact at the conference dinner—where it must be said I do like to indulge in red wine! Julie's revelation had roused me and caused me to consider my own drinking “career.” Was I troubled by her acceptance and remedy of a problem that could so easily assail me? Would Julie think any less of me for my own indulgence? Would I think any less of her for her abstinence? It never appeared to be an issue, and we engaged in a wonderful after-dinner conversation outside, on the cold streets of Manchester.

Through our various interactions, I believe we initiated a meaningful relationship, and I am thrilled to be invited to open this book. Writing a Foreword for such an important text is somewhat daunting, not least in light of the outstanding content of the book, and my emerging friendship with Julie. However, having read the work, I am grateful that Julie has shared her profound personal experiences and research, connecting identity and career development in such a beguiling manner. I am sure other readers will derive the same illumination and satisfaction that I experienced.

To whet your appetite, the book is organized in eight chapters. In [Chapter 1](#), Julie introduces the context, purpose, and problem of Identity, Meaning, Subjectivity, and Career Development. The purpose is clearly articulated: to raise HR professionals' awareness by examining the construct of identity and demonstrate why and how it plays a significant role in career identity. But the book is also intended for anyone and everyone, as individual we all contemplate our own fluid identities and how these impact and align with our career development—or not. Identity is a complex yet under researched concept in this emergent field of HR development, in a context where individuals are now increasingly responsible for their own career development. [Chapter 2](#) examines the construct

of identity and its relevance to HRD theory and practice, drawing on critical theory. This is a particularly interesting chapter in that it turns the lens inward on HR professionals. It explores how we negotiate our personal and social identities. Julie asks us to reflect on our own identities, as trainers and career developers, and consider our impact on others. **Chapter 3** explores how identity is constructed and how career success is subjective, focusing on the perplexing question: “Who am I?” Julie introduces the notion of a contested and matrixed identity. **Chapter 4** considers demographics, and the matrixed nature of identity through the nexus of age and gender, including racial and sexual orientation, ability/disability, and educational and professional qualifications. This was fascinating, critiquing existing theories as masculinized, assuming identity homogeneity and linearity. **Chapter 5** focuses on the various (micro) life events that impact identity, particularly family, marriage/divorce, returning from military deployment, addiction, and criminality. **Chapter 6** develops this theme, drawing our attention to other factors that impact identity, such as (meso) organizational strategies and (macro) national adult/higher education and HRD policies and global issues. **Chapter 7** synthesizes earlier discussions of HRD, identity and career development, culminating in a comprehensive typology of influencing factors and HR responses. The final **Chapter 8** offers conclusions and recommendations for HRD practice and research, arguing there is a “business case” for HRD professional to become more aware of, and be able to respond to, issues of identity.

This book will be invaluable for many readers, with extensive examples and implications for practice and ideas for further research. Julie invites HR professionals to consider the ways in which “identity shapes and crafts peoples’ hopes, dream, fears, joys and abilities” (p. 7). Practitioners can find new ways to think of and enact their practice in the knowledge that their enhanced awareness of individuals’ (including their own) complex, constructed identity impacts the career development of all they encounter/coach/teach. Julie also reaches out to those entering or changing careers. This book can help us steer our journey through the various contours of career development. I think this book also appeals to another audience. Researchers can draw on Julie’s autoethnographic approach to help illuminate both their own career development and their effect on others. This might activate more interdisciplinary (psychological, sociological) and phenomenological and (auto)ethnographic research to more deeply understand attitudes toward and processes of career development from trainer and trainee perspectives. Researchers unfamiliar with

autoethnographic approaches can be comforted by Julie's deeply personal revelations of her struggles of—and obvious success—in career development, and finding a way to write herself into this compelling story.

To conclude, Julie has shared with us her profound and enlightening views on the nature of identity and career development and what HRD professionals need to consider in their own practice. I encourage you to read this fascinating book and sincerely hope you enjoy it and learn as much as I did. Thank you, Julie.

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PREFACE

This work has been inspired by personal and professional events in my own context; most of which have occurred over a three-decade period in which I have experienced, or observed, the ways that people identify and pursue their career objectives. It seems to me, that in the quest to interrogate career development, and bring to the light of day aspects of humanity that might go unnoticed, unspoken, or perhaps even uncared for, that it is a good idea to provide some of the context for this inspiration. Having served as a trainer and human resource professional, I have some first-hand context for the compliance angles that are certainly most necessary, but I argue insufficient to assist in raising our awareness of the inner worlds, which then manifest in the outer worlds, of people's experience of being human. It is the way that people self-categorize or relate, and who they think they are and who they think others think they are, that impacts career development at a profound level. For example, for someone who is groomed from a young age to become a doctor or a lawyer, for someone who is a "legacy" at a particular prestigious school, for someone who is the heir apparent to a family business, or for the other types of ways that career and career preparation are "signaled" to an individual and the paths established, career development can become an exciting journey. Or perhaps a journey that is not seen so much as a journey, but as a taken for granted (pleasant, but taken for granted) aspect of life and life's journey. I think of this as akin to assumptions that middle-class people in the United States have around the tradition of a holiday such as Thanksgiving. The assumptions might include that someone is going to host a large, celebratory meal that is comprised of a turkey dinner and a

variety of mostly traditional types of side items. For those in the middle class (perhaps lower to middle class) and above, in the United States there is a template of expectations around this holiday that there is going to be a gathering of some sort of “tribe” or “pack” of familiar and (hopefully) friendly and affectionate people around a table. This is called a tradition. For many, this is not just a tradition, but an expectation—something to anticipate with a modicum of happiness. For many, however, holidays like Thanksgiving are not something to joyfully anticipate because of a range of circumstances that challenge or disrupt their lives. Having any kind of meal, much less a meal that has tradition woven into it, is a challenge on a daily basis (or weekly or monthly basis, for the working poor and the very poor) that is not taken for granted and, in fact, rather painful because of the contrast in life experiences that are raised to the surface by its very presence.

Career development as a construct, therefore, has rather middle-class to upper-class overtones on its very face because it assumes that someone has thought about how they are going to make a living, and they have planned, to some kind of extent, their career path or plan. There are people born who do not have luxuries of nurturing, safety and security, and guidance (and underwriting) toward higher education, who enter the workplace ill-equipped to play offense (meaning, to be proactive and intentional), and who, instead, play defense when it comes to navigating the workplace. There are others who, as indicated in the preceding paragraph, are groomed and positioned to have at a minimum, rather undramatic work lives and at a maximum, flourishing, or at least comfortable work lives (and, by extension, lives). The range of human experience with respect to earning a living is as varied as the human experience itself. There is a pulse of connection that all people face, however, which is the fact that we all have characteristics that help to shape and define us, and these characteristics can change over time. Some of the changes are gradual and inevitable, such as aging. Some of the changes are complex and laden with transformation, such as realizing that one has an affliction such as alcoholism or drug addiction, which jeopardizes not only one’s career, but one’s very life itself. Getting sober or clean is a life-altering proposition that has very real implications for career development. Realizing one’s sexual orientation, or gender identity, which is different from the heretofore identity (in other words, realizing that one is, for example, a gay rather than straight man, or realizing that one’s gender on the outside—biological gender—does not match one’s sense of self—one’s gender

identity), has real consequences for career development. Going through a divorce, getting married, having and raising children, coming back from serving in the military overseas, and perhaps in combat situations—all of these types of aspects of self—impact how one relates to the external world and in particular, and for purposes of this book, the world of work.

For human resource professionals and for those engaged in interfacing with employees or prospective employees (in whatever form: full time, part time, temporary, contract), attending to matters of employment law such as those laws and policies that prohibit discrimination based upon demographic or other factors is a necessity, and it makes good business sense to be vigilant about compliance with laws and policies. This book is designed to speak to human resource professionals and to encourage and invite them (us, for I am one) to think broadly, deeply, and perceptively about our employees and consider the ways that identity shapes and crafts peoples' hopes, dreams, fears, joys, and abilities. For individuals who work and would like to work and for those in the midst of career or job change, the book is designed to “speak” to you as well. I would like to provide some education related to career development for these audiences, which means reaching minds. I would like to provide, through these pages, some inspiration for *hearts* as well. When we come to the realization that people's characteristics, which shape their sense of self, and which shape how others perceive them, are interwoven in a complex weave that is dynamic, not static, and that presents challenges as well as opportunities; when the reading of this book helps a human resource professional or manager shift and consider the nuances of people's particular identities and take those into account with awareness and sensitivity, then I have done the job I intended with these pages. My intention is to take these ideas about identity, to apply them to a subject of fascination for me, and to hopefully raise the visibility of career development within the field of Human Resources.

Therefore, this work explores different facets of identity. As the world of work has grown increasingly complex and unpredictable, individuals have become increasingly responsible for their own career development. Identity is a fluid and complex construct, one that plays a crucial yet under-explored role in career development. This book will examine the construct of identity, which is shaped by multiple factors such as demographics, life events, and individual interpretations of career histories. I will explain relevant characteristics of identity, and then identify and explain the implications for Human Resource practice and research.

CONTENTS

1	Introduction: Context, Purpose, and Problem	1
2	Examining the Construct of Identity and Its Relevance for HRD Theory and Practice or Turning the Lens of Examining Identity Inward upon HR Professionals	13
3	Identity is Constructed and Career Success is Subjective	39
4	Demographics, Identity, and the Matrixed Nature of Identity	61
5	Life Events that Impact Identity	89
6	Other Factors that Impact Identity	97
7	Human Resource Development, Identity, and Career Development	115
8	Conclusions: Where Do We Go from Here?	129
	References	139
	Index	155