

Exploring the notion of “identity play” as a threshold concept in academic life.

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It is nearly 30 years since Markus and Nurius (1986) presented the concept of possible selves. To date, however, there has been limited research undertaken in the area of emergent and evolving motivational self systems of academics in higher education. It would also seem that there has been a limited focus, in particular, on motivational identity development frameworks, which embrace and promote the notion of possible and ideal selves amongst academic faculty.

This conceptual paper, therefore, explores Ibarra and Petriglieri's (2010) concept of “identity play” as a threshold concept in academic life and as a professional development goal. The paper is also based on previous research projects undertaken at Waterford Institute of Technology and internationally on teaching faculty motivation and evolving and emerging professional identities.

Ibarra and Petriglieri (2010) define, firstly, the notion of identity work as one's “engagement in forming, repairing, maintaining and strengthening or revisiting . . . (his/her) . . . identities” (p. 10) in line with organizational strategic objectives. The complementary notion of identity play is defined in the context of organizational change management as “people's engagement in provisional but active trial of possible future selves” (Ibarra & Petriglieri, p. 10), which fosters both personal and professional motivational dispositions as well as bridging the gap between institutional strategic objectives, personal and collective aspirations and motivational dispositions.

Key to our understanding of identity work in higher education is the notion that academics in higher education work towards and sometimes struggle towards achieving certain goals, missions or strategic objectives within the context of their academic institutions. Often there is a discrepancy among their personal and role identities, which is when a disconnect occurs and individuals become confused as to how to make sense of their situation.

The concept of identity play, therefore, enables faculty, individually and collectively to embrace the notion of self-authorship in alternative spaces, as they strive towards embracing rapid change pertaining to teaching, learning and research in higher education

According to Petriglieri and Petriglieri (2010), the conceptualization of such identity work/play spaces rests on two assumptions. One assumption is that individuals are unable to conduct identity work or identity play in isolation and the other is that such occurrences are “stimulated by identity destabilisation, and experiences of uncertainty, confusion and anxiety” (Alvesson & Wilmott, 2002, as cited in Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010, p. 45)..

Based on the work of Winnicott (1975) on the notion of a “holding environment” and the work of Kolb and Kolb (2010) on the notion of a playspace, the paper explores how academic faculty identity playspaces could be perceived as safe spaces in which transformative learning occurs - as faculty strive towards becoming their aspirational or future possible selves or to reduce the discrepancy between their actual and feared selves in the light of rapid change.

To conclude, the paper reflects critically on how individuals might make the critical transition from the safety of identity play spaces to being re-engaged in identity work at an institutional level having encountered a transformative experience resulting in the emergence of new possible selves.

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