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**TITLE: Identity work through sensemaking**

This developmental paper presents findings of the data analysis of a PhD study. The study investigates how black professionals of African origin make sense of their experiences of life and work in Finnish culture.

The methodology adopts critical interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), and borrows from narrative analysis (NA).

The findings show that, in the process of sensemaking, the participants of the study carry out identity work. All the participants drew from the cultural values rooted in their respective home cultures. However, the identity work carried out by female participants differed to that of their male counterparts. The female participants maintained a strong sense of women identities, whereas the male participants expressed a sense of identity ambiguity.

**Key words:** identity work, narrative analysis, interpretative phenomenological analysis

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## **Introduction**

Since Finland's membership of the EU (1995), the country has been experiencing a steady influx of a foreign workforce. Moreover, the late 1990's witnessed a new form of higher education institutions, introducing the polytechnic as an alternative path to higher education. This created more study places than before, as well as easy accessibility to pursuing higher education. These expanded opportunities of free education attracted many foreign students from outside the EU. The participants of my study came to Finland in the late 1990's to pursue higher education studies.

Within management and cultural studies, these demographic changes call for re-evaluation of human resource management where foreign cultural values should be acknowledged, and multicultural collaboration should be fostered.

This developmental paper presents findings of the data analysis undertaken as part of PhD research that investigates how black professionals of African origin experience life and work in the Finnish culture. My research also aims at understanding the cultural identity, understood as cultural values, of the participants.

## **Sensemaking and identity**

Drawing on phenomenology, sensemaking focuses on the socio-psychological processes through which an individual creates a sense of a situation. This psychological aspect of sensemaking asserts agency of an individual. Apart from the individual, the context is also important, as sensemaking takes place in a broader social environment. Mills et al. (2010, 188) describes sensemaking as "a process through which individuals project their identities into an environment and see it reflected back." Langer (1989, 37 in Colville et al. 2011), within management studies, also makes a connection between who people are (identity) and the context. For her, "context is a premature cognitive commitment, a mindset". Context, therefore, depends on who people are, and who they are also depends on the context. Staying connected to the context also means the framing of past experiences into categories of meaning.

From the anthropological and cultural perspective, identity is defined as "superficial or artificially imposed 'selves' which a people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common" (Hall, 1996, 3). Clifford (2001, p. 477) expands Hall's definition by describing identity as "a dialectic entanglement of both indigenous 'roots' and travelling/migratory 'routes.'"

From a critical perspective Alvesson and Willmott (2002) link the concept of identity to motivation, subjective meaning-making, experience and visions of the self. Giddens (1991) offers a sociological view which defines self-identity as a comparatively conscious set of self-images, traits or social attributes, a reflexively organised narrative derived from experiences, and made up of cultural raw material: language, symbols, meanings, and values.

This paper combines the above conceptualisations of contextually and socially constructed cultural identities rooted in the ancestral past, as well as creating subjective meanings of an experience.

## **Methodology**

The study adopts interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith et al. 2012) and uses interpretative poetics (Rogers, 1999), borrowing from narrative analysis (NA) (Clandinin, 2007). This methodology allows for an investigation of the experiences of the participants, through their voices. It also sheds light on the way they make sense of the experiences.

The focus of the phenomenological (IPA) approach allows for a deep analysis of the meaning of experience. Smith et al. (2012) define an experience as "an event" of importance that a person reflects on and attempts to make sense out of it.

The rationale behind borrowing from narrative analysis is that it is argued that “narrative is a primary cognitive instrument” (Mink, 1978, 131) which constitutes the basic organizing principle of human cognition. People use subjectively conceived identities in the form of narratives. Although sensemaking is inherently social, it is tied to processes of individual identity generation and maintenance. Further, following Bruner (1990) and Polkinghorne (1981), a man is a “story-telling animal”, and the narrative is the primary form through which humans make their experiences meaningful.

The focus of narrative analysis is located not only in the individual’s experience, but also in the social, cultural and institutional narratives within which the individual’s experiences are constituted, shaped, expressed and enacted during the individual’s entire life. Therefore, to obtain the data for I adopted (and adapted) the life-story interview framework (Atkinson, 1998). The framework divides identity development into three chronological parts during which one takes on specific roles: an actor during childhood, an agent during adolescence, and an author during adulthood.

I selected a purposive sample of five women and five men. They were all black professionals from Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Zimbabwe and Zambia, educated at university level. The average age of the participants was 48, and the average time spent in Finland was 15 years. The interviews were carried out between February 2016 and May 2018. All interviews took place in the participants’ homes, were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

## **Findings**

As the study investigated the experiences of the participants, through their voices my analytical approach was inductive. I carried out a thematic analysis, using Gioia et al.’s (2012) model for qualitative interpretative research. Table 1 and 2 show the superordinate and subordinate themes aggregated after initial coding, using in vivo codes (Saldana, 2013). The analysis revealed differences between the themes in the narratives of the females and the males, hence the gender division. The male participants, at the actor and agent stage, mentioned the value of education, and a strong sense of kinship and belonging. Education and work ethics were viewed by the participants’ parents and grandparents as equivalent to achieving respected social status and “becoming somebody”. Respect for parental authority led to developing a strong sense of familial and community belonging.

The themes identified in the narratives during the author stage were those of alienation, injustice and a consequent feeling of dislocation, and loss of the sense of self. The feeling of alienation was caused by feeling unwelcome and unaccepted as an equal partner at work.

The themes identified in the narratives of the female participants at the actor and agent stage (home culture) were upbringing in a large family, education, strong kinship and sense of belonging, as well as religion and faith.

The themes identified in the narratives at the author stage (host culture) were injustice, faith as a tool, and strong sense of woman identity. Women used their faith and belonging to church communities as a “weapon” to make sense of their experiences in the host culture. They also held on to their cultural identities and did not cloak their cultural values to fit in. Instead they maintained a strong sense of African woman identity.

The way all participants described their experiences in the host culture revealed an on-going process of sensemaking in which they drew from the values of their respective home cultures, which were learned and acquired during their childhood and adolescence. Cultural and social values that informed their sensemaking were respect for family and authority, education, collaboration, ambition, perseverance, resilience, and religion.

However, in the case of the male participants their values got compromised, and consequently partly altered as they became confronted with the values of the host culture. This clash triggered an identity threat and identity anxiety.

The narratives of the female participants, on the other hand, did not show signs of identity threat or the need to alter their social values when confronted with the host culture. Conversely to the males, they expressed having a strong African woman identity.

All the participants mentioned having experienced unfairness, injustice and discrimination in the host culture. However, the sensemaking and identity negotiations of the men showed a sense of helplessness. The women, through their sensemaking and identity reinforcement expressed a sense of belief in their own potential.

Selected elements of interpretative poetics (Rogers, 1999) provided more depth to the analysis. The story threads in the narratives of the female participants were related to taking on various roles of responsibility, missing connections, parental influence, flexibility and acceptance. The story threads identified in the male narratives were related to holding on to own culture, unfairness, ambiguous sense of identity, and regret. Different forms of address and positioning of the narrator in the narratives showed distancing from uncomfortable situations in the host culture (becoming a teller not an experiencer) and belonging (in the home culture). Recurring stories of the past that broke the chronology in all the narratives of the present suggest a strong connection with the home culture and its salient impact on the present experiences in the host culture.

**Table 1, 2** Themes identified by thematic analysis

<b>SUPERORDINATE and subordinate THEMES</b>	
<b>MALE PARTICIPANTS</b>	
<b>HOME CULTURE</b> Childhood, adolescence	<b>HOST CULTURE</b> Adulthood
<b>PARENTAL PUSH TOWARDS GETTING AN EDUCATION</b> Perseverance to achieve goals prospects Respect for education	<b>INJUSTICE</b> Discrimination Limited career
<b>IMPORTANCE OF KINSHIP AND CULTURAL BELONGING</b> accepted Respect for own cultural values	<b>ALIENATION</b> Sense of not being  <b>DISLOCATED SELF</b> Attempts to fit in

<b>SUPERORDINATE and subordinate THEMES FEMALE PARTICIPANTS</b>	
<b>HOME CULTURE</b> Childhood, adolescence	<b>HOST CULTURE</b> Adulthood
<b>LARGE FAMILY AND STRONG CHILD-PARENT RELATIONSHIPS</b> Collective Taking on roles of responsibility	<b>INJUSTICE</b> Discrimination Limited career prospects Lack of trust
<b>CLOSE PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS</b> Respect for parental authority	<b>STRONG SENSE OF IDENTITY</b> Belief in own potential Ambition, self-reliance
<b>FAITH, RELIGION, SPIRITUALITY</b> Keeping own cultural values	<b>FAITH AS A WEAPON</b>

## **Discussion**

Weick's sensemaking theory (2001) outlines seven cyclical properties that describe the manners all individuals follow when trying to make sense of the world around them. All Weick's properties resonate in the findings of my study.

The first property, grounded in identity construction, claims that who people are influence how they see the world. People's understanding of their self-images drives and guides people in the ways they interact with their surroundings and also in the ways they interpret events and experiences. The findings of my study show a missing dimension in the above conceptualisation. Some of the participants revealed identity ambiguity. I conclude therefore, following Weick, that their understanding and sensemaking of events and experiences might reflect that ambiguity.

The second property, retrospection and reflection, refer to the process of looking to one's past in order to put the present into context. For example, in the study, the participants' narratives contained stories of unpleasant and uncomfortable situations they experienced in the host culture which made them feel vulnerable and out of control. They used their past experiences to interpret similar experiences in the present.

The third, fourth and fifth properties combine continuity, sociality, and coupling an agent, the world and experience. It can be either constrained or created by the very environment it has created. The environment that has been created by the sense maker reinforces his/her sense of credibility. The narratives in the study showed how the participants came to terms with what they experienced and what strategies for moving forward they developed (Weick, 2001).

The sixth and the seventh properties are connected: sensemaking is focused on extracting cues and is driven it by plausibility rather than accuracy. The sense making process involves focusing on certain cues that make events plausible, while completely ignoring the others in order to support the interpretation. Based on the narratives by the participants, my study expands this by suggesting the importance of the values of one's cultural identity as influencing factors. For example, the participants in my study extracted only some cues, omitting others in order to understand and find their place in the host culture. This was guided by their understanding of who they were and where they came from. Through retrospection the participants evoked the past in their narratives where

stories about their childhood in their native countries told of the values, the role models, the choices. It is what Maitlis and Christianson (2014) call intercultural sensemaking: “the process involving the selection of scripts that reflect individuals’ cultural values and cultural history.” The plausibility was a property prevalent in the participants sensemaking as viewing the world in ways that they found suitable, and as a way of negotiating their position in the world.

## **Conclusions**

Adopting interpretative phenomenological analysis, this inductive study, investigated how black professionals of African origin make sense of their experiences of life and work in Finnish culture.

Based on the discussion of the findings I conclude that the ongoing process of sensemaking allowed the participants to understand their experiences in the host culture. In their process of sensemaking they carried out identity work. Through retrospection and reflection all the participants drew from the cultural values rooted in their respective home cultures. As a result, female participants showed identity reinforcement, whereas males expressed identity ambiguity.

In all the narratives, the stories of the past informed the understanding of the present.

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