Concluding Chapter

Alan Brown* and Simone Kirpal†
*University of Warwick, UK;
†University of Bremen, Germany

This edited volume on *Identities at Work* has brought together a range of perspectives on dealing with continuity and change in work-related identity formation processes at a time when in many contexts there has been considerable change in the organisation of work, the labour market and in the wider environment in which work is situated as well as in the expectations of employers. Such changes in work contexts, employment conditions and patterns of work organisation affect individuals' career orientations and in many contexts patterns of commitment and identification with work are themselves undergoing significant change. However, the extent to which these changes affect different groups of workers varies considerably and for many workers there are also significant continuities with how work was performed in the past.

Both the occupation and the organisation remain key elements in work-related identity development, which itself constitutes a significant element of a person's more general social identity. While vocation can still be a significant organising principle for the identity development this is mediated for many people by a much stronger sense of 'self' whereby the balance of the internal dimension of 'making' an identity as opposed to the externally-oriented 'taking' an identity is shifting towards the former. It is worthwhile reviewing what the various contributions to this book can contribute to such issues.

The contributions to Part One looked at the meaning of vocational identity for different occupational groups. The *FAME Consortium* contribution drew attention to how an individual's identity is made up of

'a basket of selves which come to the surface at different social moments as appropriate' (Cohen, 1994, p. 11). Thus the self-definition of a person's work-related identity may vary between contexts, as identities are flexible, conditional and subjectively modifiable. In this process the individual assumes a crucial role in actively shaping her or his work identity, as part of a dynamic interaction where work shapes the individual, while at the same time the individual shapes work processes and structures. The self is not an autonomous agent, but it is socially and culturally constructed and certain elements of a person's identity will always be collectively imposed. However, the individual possesses the ability of conscious, purposeful action, of choice of roles and performances even under a situation of constraints (Cohen, 1994).

While work remains a formative element of the overall identity of an individual, it has become just one component among a variety of factors influencing identity development. Still, being able to master a particular occupational specialisation often plays a strong role in developing a social identity. Skilled work can be a medium for personal realisation of meaning and interpretation of existence and the implementation of biographic intentions and interests. An occupation may prove to be a normative horizon for one's entire life, as well as representing one of the key sites for meaningful social relations. Thus, to be able to work in a chosen vocation occupies a special position between 'social structure' and action in the 'private sphere'. It remains important in social life as a defined passage for social and economic participation and can be regarded as a major source of the feeling of one's own value or one's view of oneself, and the means through which someone presents herself or himself to the outside world (Goffman, 1959).

In his chapter on being a Danish banker *Morten Smistrup* argued that while training is of fundamental importance for developing an initial vocational identity and becoming part of a community of practice, an individual's vocational identity is reproduced and transformed in the course of working and learning throughout life. This duality between continuity and development is an essential element of vocational identity, not least during times of change. Additionally, the work situation of bankers is characterised by conflicting interests and demands. This means that the individual banker continuously has to balance these demands in relation to each other and deal with these in relation to his or her self-understanding as a banker. This highlights how vocational identities are not necessarily internally consistent but may be a frame within which individuals have to create some kind of coherence or meaning in a work life characterised by conflicting interests. Vocational identities

can establish shared ways of containing contradictions but these may typically be shared by more experienced practitioners, whereas those who have recently completed their initial training may feel that they are struggling to achieve such a resolution (Eraut, 2004).

The vocational identity of an individual is strongly situated in a particular context, but also has elements of biographical continuity, as any learning process is building upon previous knowledge, understanding and values. The biographical aspect, however, includes not only an image of what you are and were, but also a vision of what it is possible to become. In this sense a vocational identity is not just a construction of the present based on a reconstruction of the past but is also a forecast for the future. The contribution of *Gwendolyn Paul* and *Uta Zybell* on teenage mothers in Germany provides a powerful reminder of how entry into the world of work can have significant social and psychological benefits, helping young mothers overcome possible social isolation and a feeling that they were using only a limited set of their capabilities. Integration into and participation in work settings influences the overall identity of these mothers, underlining the interdependence between work and family life in identity formation processes and drawing attention to how for many people participation in a community is now based around work rather than the place where they live.

The contribution of *Nikitas Patiniotis* and *Gerassimos Prodromitis* also pointed to the interdependence between work and family life in identity formation processes in their investigation of the work-related identities of people working in small, often family-run, businesses in the Greek tourist industry. These people have to respond to the challenge of having multiple identities that have significance for how they perform their work. Not only are family identities often entwined with work, but individuals may also engage in a variety of other work on a seasonal or part-time basis; work which may be subject to precarious employment conditions. In such contexts, the challenge of being flexible and adaptable in the labour market appears to be spread across the family rather than simply being an individual concern—the work in the family business can be tailored to fit the shifting demands of other work on the family members.

The contribution by *Felix Rauner* provides an account of the extent to which countries with 'strong' initial vocational education and training (VET) systems, as in Germany, can provide socially recognised pathways to particular types of work and work-related identities and how this approach can have clear organisational benefits in terms of employees' performance orientation and quality awareness. The value of VET

pathways leading to skilled work and 'strong' occupational identities is clear in systems with well defined occupational labour markets and Finegold and Wagner (1999) highlight how this works particularly well in areas of manufacturing built upon a system of diversified quality production, using the abilities of highly skilled workers and engineers. Finegold and Wagner (1999) also point out, however, that this system was essentially based around individual performance and how the shift towards the multi-functional team as the basic organisational unit for work performance in lean manufacturing, typical of US practice, posed particular challenges in a German context. Mason and Wagner (2000) take this line of argument a stage further, highlighting how the 'strong' occupational identities, formal structures and institutional support that have been so successful in supporting traditional manufacturing in Germany appear less suitable for high technology industries, whereas the reverse is true for the UK, where trade and innovation performance is much stronger in fast changing areas like electronics rather than in traditional manufacturing industries like chemicals and engineering. Mason and Wagner (2000) argue that the high degree of individual mobility of highly-qualified scientists and engineers helps to spread tacit knowledge and experience and to develop collaborative research links between enterprises. Overall then, the extent to which work-related identities are individual or collective, occupational or organisational at a systemic level can have differential effects for organisational performance in different sectors and work contexts.

Part Two brought together contributions that examined the dynamics between personal identity, work and employment and, particularly, how individuals deal with the demands for flexibility of some modern work settings and manage to integrate diverse work experiences into coherent self-images in order to generate continuities in their personal identities and career narratives. *Sabine Raeder* and *Gudela Grote* explored personal identity in the context of work flexibility in an investigation of Swiss workers who experienced career changes. They concluded that most of these workers had generally succeeded in integrating career changes in their identity through emphasising biographical continuity and a high overall ecological consistency. Where individuals had been able to construct a coherent career narrative this proved to be psychologically valuable, although Raeder and Grote argue that individuals may need support in making sense of their individual biographies in the light of changed circumstances and may need help in the construction of new work-related identities that can link to what had happened in the past and look towards the future.

Stephen Billett also looked at how individuals construct continuity in their lives when experiencing changes that included major redirections in their careers and employment. As with Raeder and Grote, a quest to create a coherent self-image was clearly evident and individuals were active agents in this process influenced by their own sense of self. The quest to create a coherent self-image included the negotiation of a new work-related identity and this in turn influenced how they engaged in their new work. This was important as these individuals were not passively accepting new roles, but rather they were engaged in processes of learning and remaking work practice. That is, the work itself became different—there was not a one way process whereby they adapted to the 'new' work, rather they were also active in adapting work processes. As a consequence their new work-related identities were actively shaped in ways that were important to the individuals concerned and this in turn gave a sense of the individual being able to construct a coherent career narrative where they were able to exercise a degree of control over the direction their careers were taking, even if the initial disjunction in their careers was involuntary. The importance of aligning policies and practices associated with lifelong learning with engagement with this individual sense of self needs acknowledging—support needs to be available to these individuals not just those who have not yet formulated a clear career direction. These individuals were eager to engage in learning to shape work in the direction they wanted in order to align with their sense of self and the type of work-related identity they saw as consonant with that sense of self.

Simone Kirpal and *Alan Brown* focused upon three case studies drawn from England and Germany of individuals who were 'flexible' in their attitudes towards work, actively using flexibility, mobility and learning to meet their broader vocational goals and develop their careers and who were ready to change aspects of organisations and/or their occupation if necessary. They exemplified employees who, in the course of their employment trajectory, had developed a highly 'flexible' identification with work with a much more individualist basis and this was more powerful for them than any occupational or organisational commitment. Their work identities were highly individualised, primarily based on personal skills, a capacity for continuous learning and a project-oriented attitude to work. A variation of this flexible type of identification with work was apparent in the 'strategic careerists' who saw their current occupational position and/or organisational attachment as one phase of a career that involved relatively frequent changes in the nature of work they do. They are committed to 'moving on' and see their

careers as something they actively construct. Their attachment to their current role is partly influenced by the knowledge that they are only 'passing through'.

Flexibility can be regarded either as a strategic tool or as a characteristic of the individuals themselves that is closely linked to their pursuit of self-realisation, and Kirpal and Brown highlight cases, drawn from the wider sample of over 500 employees from seven countries across Europe, of how workers in a wide variety of contexts were active in re-defining, rather than passively accepting, work-related roles. They were actively re-defining and challenging traditional work roles and concepts of identification with work. Work identities, also, are subject to change as they are adjusted over individuals' lifetime employment trajectories. This can mean the identities shift back and forth between developing forms of attachment and highly flexible forms of identification with work. What seems to be decisive in this context is the individual's response or 'strategy': whether he or she takes on a passive or active role; the level of risk affinity, the openness and ability to use flexibility, mobility and learning as tools to pursue their own interests; and general attachment to work. There was a clear distinction between employees who had been socialised and trained to be more flexible and active in developing their occupational orientation and identity, and employees who had not been socialised in this way.

The contributions to Part Three examined the links between occupational identity formation and organisational commitment. *Yehuda Baruch* and *Aaron Cohen* discussed the relevance of commitment and identity for the working life of individuals, and suggested one focus for further studies could be into the combined effect of both constructs. Personal identity represents individual aspects of how we see ourselves relative to others in the same social group, whereas social identity comprises those aspects of our self concept we believe we have in common with others in the same social group (Arnold, 2005, p. 333). One challenge for organisations is to get employees to associate, combine or connect their occupational and organisational identities. Ibarra (2003, p. 18) suggests that when a working identity is defined by formative events in his or her life, the individual response is often an attempt at making sense—creating or identifying catalysts and triggers for change. These can be utilised in career narratives that involve a reworking of our 'story'. Relating the two major constructs, identity and commitment, Baruch and Cohen believe that while there is a reciprocal association between the two, it is mostly identity that influences, or even formulates, commitment. Once a person comes to identify with an

organisation, he or she starts to become committed to it. Of course, being committed reinforces identity in a cyclical manner. Within working life, both organisational identity and occupational identity are powerful influences upon organisational and occupational commitment.

Bernd Haasler in his study of first year apprentice toolmakers in a major Volkswagen plant in Germany found that their identification with the company was very much stronger than their attachment to their chosen occupational specialisation. Indeed most engineering apprentices in the company would have preferred to have undertaken a commercial apprenticeship—they did not display any distinct interest in engineering, neither in terms of motivation behind their choice of occupation, nor in respect of their previous practical experience. They saw themselves, first and foremost, as company employees. Even if identification with their occupational specialisation builds later in their training or employment, it is interesting that occupational interest is no longer the common driver it was in the past (Haasler and Kirpal, 2004). Heinz (1995) had drawn attention to how the socialising function of apprenticeships worked in two directions: from the individual's point of view as a learner in order to become equipped and prepared to succeed in a given occupation; and from the occupational community's point of view to 'mould' a person to conform with the established norms and standards within a particular community.

One conclusion to be drawn from the evidence of Haasler's contribution could be that attention needs to be given to the development of organisational commitment, particularly if the roles to be performed within the organisation are liable to shift over time. This is particularly interesting in the light of Herrigel and Sabel's (1999) earlier argument that 'most German assemble-to-order and customized plants had made relatively little use of multi-functional teams, at least in part because the personal identity of German skilled workers appeared to conflict with the blurring of individual roles and narrowing of some technical skill requirements that can accompany the move toward a team-based organization' (pp. 152–153). It may be that this becomes less of an issue for more recently qualified skilled workers, if Haasler's findings are part of a wider trend for employees to have less strong occupational identities when compared to the influence of their organisational attachment and individual orientation to work.

The qualitative study with over 300 employees from France, Germany and the UK by *Simone Kirpal*, *Alan Brown* and *M'Hamed Dif* showed how individuals' attachments to classical forms of commitment and identification with work may conflict with increased demands for

flexibility and learning at work. They observed a general trend towards the 'individualisation' of employee commitment and work identities which challenge the individual to develop a proactive and 'entrepreneurial' work attitude based on multi-skilling and flexibility. As with the cases outlined by Billett and Raeder and Grote some workers coped well with new challenges, engaged in learning and incorporated the changes into new career narratives. On the other hand, the challenges of change daunted some workers because they lacked the necessary resources, skills and capacities, and they were not sufficiently supported at work to meet changing work demands and this could potentially lead to their labour market exclusion.

In his contribution, *Akihiro Ishikawa* showed that some contemporary stereotypes of Japanese workers are far from the mark, in that even for many permanent full-time workers work is not seen as so central in their lives, satisfying or as company dependent as compared to workers in other countries. The meaning of work and working, however, differs considerably between different job strata (between manual workers, administrative staff, supervisors and technical staff). This is not to say that long hours and additional work-related commitments do not exist for many workers, but it does question the extent to which positive attitudes towards work are widely shared as part of a supposed exceptional organisational commitment. The negative attitudes towards a strong commitment towards work of those not in permanent employment, especially among Japanese youth, further undermines the traditional picture of a widespread dedicated work-oriented life style in Japan.

Individual agency can play a significant role in how work-related identities are adapted to changing conditions, but the contributions to Part Four show how work identities are also shaped by organisational and institutional mechanisms, as when changing job profiles or work demands facilitate the emergence of new forms of work identity. *Monika Nerland* and *Karen Jensen* show how changes in initial education can play a role in the construction of new professional identities that are more individualised than those created in the recent past when there was a stronger collective sense of the professional role. The curricular and policy documents associated with becoming a nurse or computer engineer in Norway outline, either implicitly or explicitly, expectations of students as creators of knowledge, boundary crossers and innovators of self and ethics. These studies showed how important it is to contextualise identity development—identities are strongly influenced by place and time—but increasingly identities at work are differentiated from each other too. This is due not only to the general trend towards

individualisation, but also specifically because the task of constructing meaning within identity development processes is increasingly individualised. Lash (2003) describes this process as *insourcing*, that is, a reallocation of functions, activities and responsibility onto the individual which traditionally were understood to be a collective matter.

David Finegold and *Robert Matousek* in their contribution showed how changing skill requirements in the bioscience industry in the US have led to a desire for new curricular forms that could lead to the emergence of two new types of bioscience professionals. These new professionals would embody new skills mixes: computational biologists who are able to integrate programming skills and biological knowledge, and bioscience business professionals who can integrate science and business to help commercialise new products. However, even when such students emerge with new prototypical vocational identities from these newly designed programmes there are still key labour market and organisational challenges to surmount before these new professional profiles and identities are translated into new roles at work.

Overall then, the contributions to this volume highlight how individuals are actors who shape important aspects of their own occupational trajectories and careers. Many of the contributors identified that individuals have increasingly taken an active role as coordinators of their personal work biographies. They become actors who actively shape their individualised work orientations and commitment patterns, which a few decades ago were often more collectively shaped. However, employers too shape work-related identities, for example as in their demands for skilled workers with 'modern' skill sets, including abilities to work in teams and communicate effectively (Davis et al., 2000). Broader societal influences come into play too; for example, in France, the strengthening of technical education and training and giving more attention to employer-directed continuing vocational training has been complemented by an emphasis on self-directed continuing learning and development (including through the process of skills review contained within 'bilán de competences').

The contributors identify that while some work-related identities retain strong continuities with those of the past, in other cases there has been a decomposition of traditional occupational identities that were based on relatively strong work-related collective socialisation processes. Thus some traditional identification processes have been supplanted with the emergence of more flexible, individualistic forms of identification with work. It is important, however, to acknowledge both continuity and

change within identity development processes: 'classical' forms of identification with work whereby individuals identified with the occupational specialisation for which they had trained, their daily work tasks, and/or the company or the company's products partly persist, while other employees are developing a more 'flexible' type of identification with work. The latter had a much more individualist basis that was more developed than any occupational and organisational commitment. One typical characteristic of these 'flexible' employees was that they were willing and able to actively use flexibility, mobility and learning as tools to achieve their broader goals, and in doing so they were ready to change organisations and/or their occupations, if necessary.

While in some contexts occupations and organisations remain key elements in shaping individual work-related identity development, several of the contributors illustrated how for many people the internal dimension of 'making' an identity has gained in significance, whereby self-definition processes and the individual's agency in actively shaping her or his work identity are emphasised. Where individuals were aware of their active role in this process this was often influenced by their own sense of self. The quest to create a coherent self-image included the negotiation of a new work-related identity and this in turn influenced how they engaged in their work. Instead of passively accepting new roles, these individuals were actively engaged in processes of learning, remaking work practice and shaping work in the direction they wanted in order to align their sense of self with dimensions of their work-related identity.

Several contributors highlighted how initial training could give a particular emphasis to the development of a work-related identity, but that this could be reproduced and transformed in the course of subsequent working and learning throughout life. Indeed one common theme across many contributions was how hard individuals worked to create some coherence or meaning even where a work life was characterised by conflicting interests, changes in direction or other discontinuities. The commentaries used to express that these self-defined biographical continuities often involved elements of growth, learning, recovery or development as individuals moved between images of what they were, had been in the past or thought they might become, thereby emphasising biographical continuity and ecological consistency. While major dislocations in individual careers could obviously be traumatic, where individuals had been able to construct coherent career narratives and 'move on' this proved to be psychologically valuable.

Individuals, who were able to adapt to change and to shape important aspects of their own occupational trajectories and careers, actively co-ordinated their personal work biographies, and sought to shape the patterns of their work orientation and commitment. Although occupations, organisations and broader societal influences all still influence the nature and set of work offers available to individuals, work-related identities are becoming less collectively shaped than they were a few decades ago. Thus, we can observe the emergence of more flexible, individualistic forms of identification with work. Evidence for continuity and change persist, but the number of people who strategically develop a flexible approach to their work-related identity and career development appears to have grown considerably.

The drivers of this more flexible approach appear two-fold. First, there are those individuals who have a strong strategic sense of the need to actively shape their own career development. Second, the desire for many individuals to make sense of their evolving work history and to construct career narratives that emphasised biographical continuity and ecological consistency meant that a common response to an externally induced change in their work situation was to take action whereby they regained a certain degree of control. This latter point appears particularly significant, psychologically robust work-related identity development has a strong sense-making component. This means there could be real value in helping individuals disoriented by change in their work situations to make sense of their evolving careers in order to produce a career narrative that is forward-looking and could generate the drive necessary for active work-related identity development.

Although individual agency plays a significant role in how work-related identities are adapted to changing conditions, work identities are also shaped by organisational and institutional mechanisms that may be used in realising employers' expectations or policy goals. These institutional mechanisms can also play a role in helping individuals respond to changing job profiles and work demands. One major challenge for institutions and organisations, then, is to get employees to associate, combine or connect their occupational, organisational or individualised identities to foster their engagement with work. A significant number of individuals certainly need support in making sense of their individual biographies in the light of changed circumstances and in constructing a work-related identity that can link to what had happened in the past and look towards the future. This means that some employees need to be supported to cope with changing work environments, including in some environments

meeting demands for being more flexible and mobile, and making sense of their evolving careers under changing and sometimes apparently contradictory directions. One key challenge therefore is to give those individuals confidence in their own competences and to empower them to become agents of their own career development.

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