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Transgredience and relational identity construction in

management development processes

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper explores the notion of transgredience by Bakhtin (1990) and relational identity construction (Gergen, 1985, 1994, 2011) in a top-management development program. The concept of transgredience covers the process of identity crossover and development during the dialogic process. By following the processes of co-authoring and dialogue it is possible to study the continuous emergence of meaning and identities constructed during the meetings. By using Bakhtin's (1990) metaphors of the self-portrait, portrait and photograph it becomes evident that the task of self-objectification via the translation of inner language into the world of others and reflection on the responses from others is extremely difficult. However this process is of vital importance for management development to occur.

Design/methodology/approach: The authors of this article have followed a top-management development program for a year. This program included four two-day seminars and five to six

meetings in each of the three Development Groups (DG). In this paper we focus upon the process of the DG meetings in which the managers were placed in groups assisted by a management consultant, with the purpose of discussing and reflecting upon self-defined "Big Issues" in their respective organizations. In addition to this we have interviewed the managers individually. By organizing these DG meetings the management consultants facilitated dialogue and self-development while the participants were engaged in constructing stories about their big issue.

Findings: This paper illuminates the emergent processes of relational identity construction and self-development in a management development program. By exploring how managers construct their inner life world and reflect upon other managers projected life world we find that several de-routes are taken by the managers to avoid the reflections and mirroring of the other managers. These de-routes are identified as intellectualization, projection of responsibility upon others, discursive ideal construction on the aspects of leadership versus management. However it is also found that over time the DG members develop a relationship that assists them in the ongoing construction process of outwardly finished personalities. It is these moments of transgredience, or third space reflections, that interest us as researchers and what we with inspiration from Bakhtin (1990) and Shotter (2005) call to look inside the moment of management development.

Originality/Value: By applying Bakhtin's ideas of transgredience to the understanding of the managerial DG group process it becomes clear that co-authoring and dialogue are important to the managerial development process. By identifying both moments of transgredience and de-routes, the paper illuminates how dialogue both enhances the discursive ability to make sense of the self, and negotiate new meanings (Gergen, 1994, 2011), but the way there is often lost in de-route construction. Thus creating new and other understandings of why management development and learning can be so difficult to facilitate.

Key words: *Transgredience, identity construction, discursive construction, management development processes.*

Bakhtin's philosophy on the dialogic process

"The point at issue here is precisely how to accomplish the task of translating myself from inner language into the language of outward expressedness and of weaving all of myself totally into the unitary plastic and pictorial fabric of life as a human being among other human beings, as a hero among other heroes" (Bakhtin, 1990, s. 31)

This quote illustrates the dialogic process which Bakhtin in his writing sees as the center stage of all human activity. However as Bakhtin continues, this task of translating the self, described as inner language into outward expressednes and hereby weaving the self into the discursive world of an with others illustrates the point of departure taken in this paper. Identity and self is not seen as an absolute core or unique personality rather identity is seen as an ongoing discursive and relational construction process.

The concept of transgredience can be described as the temporary moment of reflection upon what I have understood about myself through the other. The moment, where we, through dialogic interactions in third space reflection, construct ourselves differently via the perspective of the other.

"The self from inside and outside consciousness will never fuse without the help of the other's transgredient position—i.e., her state of being outside of my consciousness. As a result, the subject needs the other in order to see itself from outside, and vice-versa. This surplus of seeing, or transgredience, allows for co-consummation—or temporary ontological completion—of self and other."(Hall, 2012, s.11)

For transgredience to occur requires what Bakhtin describes as empathetic co-experiencing. The subject-other co-relation depends upon the construction of a time-space where this empathetic co-experiencing is present. The idea of transgredience is carried on in Shotter's (2009) work on the dialogic process as a moment of "living connection" between two people engaging in the dialogic process, leading to a dialogic moment or joint-action.

"Central to the occurrence of such moments, is the spontaneous, living responsiveness of our bodies, both to the others and to the "otherness" around us, a responsiveness to which we can become inattentive but which we cannot wholly eradicate within ourselves (Shotter, 2009, p. 22)

These moments of transgredience are however scarce as Bakhtin (1990) describe how the dialogue can take several de-routes from transgredience, and uses three metaphors to describe these.

The self-portrait becomes "a peculiar ghostly character of the face: the face does not, as it were, include within itself the full human being, does not encompass all of him entirely. For me,

there is something eerie about the forever-laughing face of Rembrandt in his self-portrait….(Bakhtin, 1990, p.34)". The eerie part is that it is only a projection of how the artist sees himself, with no reflection from others the self becomes an empty and isolated shell.

The portrait is described by Bakhtin (1990) as a reflection of the artist seeing you. "In this case, what I have is indeed a window into a world in which I never live; this is truly a seeing of oneself in the other's world through the eyes of a pure and whole other human being" (p.34). This means that in the portrait is a pure reflection of others seeing you, but it also contains a predetermination of you, that can be seen as limiting to the painted.

The photograph is to be aligned with a simple mirror-reflection, "A photograph of one self also provides no more than material for collation, and once again we do not see ourselves here – we see only our own reflection without an author" (p. 34). In this case the photograph is a mechanical reproduction of the self, that gives no feedback to constant process between the inner life world and the exterior experience of you by others.

As seen in the above each of these metaphors are flawed in their usefulness to bring the translation of one's inner self into the external world, as described by Bakhtin (1990) as fundamental for human existence. In the paper we explore how Bakhtin's three metaphors; the self-portrait, the portrait and the photograph as an analytical framework for the analysis of managerial development processes.

The onto-epistemology of transgredience and relational identity construction

As described earlier in this paper relational identity construction is linked to a new and different way to define identity. We as researchers follow the words of Gergen (2011) on this point.

> *"On the one hand is the tradition of the individual knower, the rational, self-directing, morally centered and knowledgeable agent of action. Within the constructionist dialogues we find that it is not the individual mind in which knowledge, reason, emotion and morality reside, but in relationships (Gergen 2011, p.109).*

In social constructionism relationships and language construction is seen as the focal point on the study of identity and identification processes. The philosophical work of Wittgenstein (1953) can be seen as one of the main influences on this development. It is however in order to further explore the idea of transgredience and relational identity construction necessary to discuss the onto-epistemological similarities and differences between the work of Bakhtin, postmodernism/structuralism (Foucault, Saussure) and social constructionism (Gergen, Shotter, Potter & Wetherell) on this topic.

A traditional postmodernist understanding the processes of language construction as sites of power struggles, in which hegemonic social relations contribute to the fixation of discoursive identity construction (Tate, 2007, s.6 on Foucault). Following these ideas research on identity construction becomes a question of critically examining how powerfull discourses affect what can be constructed as legitimative identity positions. This argument is however according to

Bakhtin (1981,1990) and the later evolved social constructionist movement only part of the story (Gergen (1985,1995,2011), Shotter (2005), Potter & Wetherell (1987), Wetherell (1998). According to these researchers the hegemonic/centripetal forces in language construction plays a very important part of the identity construction process but other perspectives are called for to create further understanding of the polyphonic/heteroglossic/centrifugal forces also present in the discursive processes of identity construction. Leaning towards a social constructionist onto-/epistemological understanding of identity construction the focus is directed at the relational and social understanding of identity as dynamic and dialectic (Gergen (2011), Shotter (2005), Potter & Wetherell (1987), Wetherell (1998). This is in line with Bakhtin's concepts of centripetal and centrifugal forces in the social process (Bakhtin 1981, Gergen, 1995). On the topic of identity construction Bakhtin's centripetal force can be aligned with Foucaults discursive theories that positions the subject in a fixed discursive structure as described in the concept of hegemoni. This directs research attention away from the equally important centrifugal forces where the subject speaks back at the discursive gaze, and in this way accommodates polyphony and heteroglossia in the social interaction process. According to Bakhtin (1981) these two divergent forces, are always a part of human interaction. The concept of transgredience can be placed as a middleposition between these two forces. By offering what can be described as third space reflection where dialogue and reflection affects identity construction. It is these third space transgredient dialogues that interest us as researchers and we therefore position ourselves onto/epistemologically as social constructionist. This positioning further emphasizes the understanding of identity as a constant dialogic process that resides in relationships and therefore emphasizes the need to explore Shotter's (2005) ideas on situated social science and as he describes it "go inside the moment of managing" as new and ever changing relational encounters. By going inside the moment of transgredience is therefore in this paper seen as ever changing in relational encounters, not as anything enduring or stored in the "filing cabinet" of the human brain, just waiting to be used in other contexts.

Dialogue in management development processes

In this article we aim at going inside the moments of reflexive dialogical practice in management development processes, by observing the process of reflexivity as moments in dialogue, as transgredience. This means that rather than probing what goes on in the heads of the participants and constructing assumptions about what is changed in their worldviews and sensemaking processes, and presenting our findings as proof of development or learning, we look at the ongoing construction process itself and make no assumptions about the outcome. This understanding of development/learning as ongoing dialogue is in line with Gergen (2001) and Cunliffe (2002). Culiffe (2002) draws attention to the active and emergent nature of the reflexive dialogical process in this quote.

> "*If learning is reframed as an embodied process of being struck – of learning from within – then the learning process may be seen as a discursive, contextualized and ongoing practice contructed in the moment (Cunliffe, 2002, s. 45)*"

This way of describing reflective processes and learning differs from the traditional views of this process. As Cunliffe (2002 s. 38) write; "Reflection is traditionally defined as a mirror image." …"A systematic thought process, centered on finding patterns, logic and order, reflexivity means complexifying thinking and experience by exposing contradictions, doubts, dilemmas, and possibilities." In contrast to this she emphasizes the role of dialogue as a way of talking the imaginary into the imagined. She writes that the dialogic process crates new possibilities and new intelligibilities via practical dialogic reflexivity enabling the managers to question the taken-for-granted "truths" of their organizational lives. This focus upon dialogue as potential for management learning/ development is in this paper interconnected with the earlier described concept of transgredience. Seeing transgredience as a cross over between elements of the self into others that happens during dialogue the reflective process is set off because "outsiders can see things about us that we cannot see ourselves". It can best be seen as a continuous process that creates a "surplus of meaning" (Jabri, 2004, s.573). According to Jabri (2004) transgredience is needed in order for relationality to occur in the dialogic process. Identity change and development is hereby seen as a result of transgredience, and true dialogue. It requires an openness to others ideas and projections and an ability to incorporate changes into ones self-image. Jabri (2004) suggests that this concept can be applied in organization studies as "identities in a surplus of seeing".

In this paper this cross-over process is explored in a management development setting. By exploring how these mirroring processes transpires and how some can be impaired by the metaphorical images introduced above, but also how dialogue and transgredience can assist in the development process.

The empirical findings

The empirical datamaterial for this article has been constructed by following a management development program for a year. As described earlier this program included four two-day seminars and five to six meetings in each of the three Development Groups (DG). The focus in this paper is on the relational encounters situated in the context of the DG meetings. The purpose of these meetings was to reflect upon self-defined "Big issues" in their own organizations assisted by the other managers present and a management consultant. The following analysis must be seen as a first glance upon the large quantity of data material available to us as researchers.

The aim of this first gaze at the data material is to explore how managers construct identity in one of the DG groups and by using the concept of transgredience and the three metaphors we aim to structure the analysis and highlight both moments of transgredience but also moments of de-route construction. These de-routes are identified as self-construction, the construction of restricting gazes upon fellow DG-group members and discursive ideal constructions of management vs. leadership.

Moments of transgredience

During one of the DG meetings one of the participants have made a decision on his Big Issue. To begin the down seizing some of the company's activities and lay off the Danish organization members. What is interesting in this dialogue is first of all the first comment on this by Henry choosing to construct it as a story and PR issue of concern for Larry and the organization. This comment is not carried further because Mia refers back to an earlier meeting and asks about the decision making process. From a research perspective this open question seems to guide to further reflection on the process, where Larry turns the conversation into a management issue, constructing a new managerial identity of not to having to have all the answers and being on a shared journey with his employees. These discursive turns in the conversation are interesting and in our interpretation leads to a moment of transgredience, and a discursive reconstruction of Larry's identity as a manager.

Larry: During this week I have realized that the decision (down seizing) has to be made in the fall. Including HR concerns

Henry: Yes, also about the story being told about you or the organization?

Mia: You seem to be searching for answers. Has it become clear to you?

F: Yes, I don't need to have all the answers. I need to involve my employees in the difficult issues, sharing. This is a part of the journey. Down seizing is the answer.

The portrait

The portrait is used in this analysis as a metaphor to enable the analysis of what happens in moments of dialogue where DG group members frames one of the other members and how this affects the dialogue in the DG.

Shortly after in the same DG group meeting Christian comments on Larry's development process in the following way:

Christian: A lovely clear case. You are on top of the situation. It's interesting to follow your personal journey… Do they(the top-management) notice the changes in you or do they think it's strange?

Larry: The board of directors probably haven't noticed. I challenge them and have done for the last year… I didn't know where the organization was heading.

As researchers we interpret the following sequence as Christian painting a portrait of Larry as a successful and transformed leader. He then asks if Larry's change has been noticed by his leaders. Larry's reaction to this is to say that they probably haven't noticed any change in him at that he during the last year has been consistent in the way he interacts with the board of directors. This construction can be reflected upon with the portrait-metaphor. Christian paints a very flattering picture, but Larry's reaction to this is to resist the predetermination of him as a

new and entirely changed manager by emphasizing that his interaction with the top-management haven't changed during the last year. The conversation on this point ends rather abruptly and the management consultant takes over.

At one point in the same DG session this portrait metaphor representing a deroute from constructing transgredience is seen by the researchers in this dialogue. Turns are taken in the DG groups discussing their big issues. Now Henry is the center of attention and he is the manager of one of the staff-functions in the same organization as Christian.

Henry: It's all changing (The top-management) we are increasingly invited to participate in important events. But we are currently waiting for the strategy process to be concluded…..

MC: What is your role in the strategy process?

Christian: This process is held tightly by the board of directors

Henry: How are we as a staff function going to be able to support this process? I they make all the decisions on what we can do. And what about the rest of the organization, what are they being told? What is going to be the shared story in the organization?

Christian: It's all about having a persistent and stubborn attitude and pointing out that your functions is an important part of this process. It's important to barge in and be a part of it.

As researchers we interpret that Christian and Henry's affiliation in the organization might have an influence upon Christians framing of his situation and advice on the situation. In the dialogue Henry chooses not to comment on this framing, thus stopping the dialogue on this theme. We have further research material that supports this interpretation of the interrelationship between Christian and Larry. Larry seems to us as researchers to be stopped in his reflection process and having a really hard time seeing the picture Christian paints of him and his managerial role. Another way to see how the portrait metaphor can be used to gain further understanding of how this limits the dialogue and excludes Larry in the process.

The self-portrait

Bakhtins' metaphor of the self-portrait is in this segment of the analysis applied as a way to grasp the ongoing process of self-construction in the DG.

During the third DG meeting this interesting dialogue occurred.

MC: We will start the DG session with short comments on your development and focus upon the question What is useful for me?

Christian: For me it's about the new lonely journey I'm departing on. I'm changing my big issue and I'm very excited about the new challenges in my new job position.

Larry: Quotes a Danish song: "Står på en Alpetop"

Christian has landed a new position in the organization and his excitement and worry about the challenges are meet by the group by a song quote, in our interpretation the extended meaning of this Larry's quote is the next line in the song "Hvad faen sku' jeg egentlig her", not expressed in the dialogue, but this can be seen as an ironic comment on Christians description of his new job position. Extending sympathy on the loneliness of the journey but also offering a more existentialist comment on climbing towards the top. Looking at this quote can be interpreted by Bakhtin's metaphor the self-portrait. Christian constructs his new challenges in a positive manner and is not reflected upon this because Larry constructs a further need for reflection upon the managerial aim of ascending in the organization.

Reflections

Reflecting on this very preliminary empirical analysis, with regards to the framework of this paper, moments of transgredience and possible de routes from transgredience, the self-portrait, the portrait and the photograph is i important to emphasize that this is just ways of constructing what takes place in the DGs. It is interesting to see how the dialogue all of a sudden for a short period of time becomes transgredient to the DG participants. It is not to be seen as a something fixed which can be used to say anything about the further dialogues or future actions of the managers, but can only be seen as a shared relational moment. The empirical analysis offers a variety of different portrait moments in dialogue where it is interesting to see how the manager being portrayed resists this framing in the dialogue. One explicit example and one implicit example is describes here. To the researchers this metaphor seems interesting to gain further knowledge on and by applying a process perspective upon the dialogic relationships being formed in the DGs this seems to be an important de route from the dialogic ideal of transgredience. The self-portrait is more elusive in the data material and the quote suggested in the analysis can be seen as ambiguous. However this might be constructed as a consequence of the framing and purpose of the DGs. They are framed as self-development groups and therefore construction self-identity is legitimated in this context. The metaphor of the photograph is not found in the data material and seems less applicable in this context.

It is at this stage of the research process not possible to say more about how Bakhtin's philosophical ideas on the dialogical process are applicable as an analytical framework for further research. It has, at least for us, been interesting to explore these ideas and we want to explore how further work on the subject of transgredience and relational identity construction can contribute to the field of management development processes.

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