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Citation: Haynes, Kathryn, Grugulis, Irena, Spring, Martin, Blackmon, Kate, Battisti, Giuliana and Ng, Irene (2014) A Two-Year Stretch: The Functions of an Identity Workspace in Mid-Career Identity Work by Management Academics. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 23 (4). pp. 379-392. ISSN 1056-4926

Published by: SAGE

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1056492614521692>  
<<https://doi.org/10.1177/1056492614521692>>

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# **A TWO-YEAR STRETCH: THE FUNCTIONS OF AN IDENTITY WORKSPACE IN MID-CAREER IDENTITY WORK BY MANAGEMENT ACADEMICS**

## **Abstract**

This paper examines the way in which identity workspaces function to facilitate and stimulate transitions at mid-career. We explore our collective experience as a cohort of a mid-career management academics participating in a two-year fellowship programme, which acted as an identity workspace in which mid-career identity work took place. Using insights from our narratives, interviews and experiences, we demonstrate how the fellowship provided rites of passage, experimentation and social defences, and we analyze our identity work, in relation to mid-career development, disciplinary orientation and relationships with existing institutions. We conceptualise the identity workspace as a liminal zone in which to experiment with provisional selves, finding that identity workspaces function through alterity as well as identity, and at a communal as well as individual level. The paper draws out the challenges for the academic community to facilitate mid-career identity work experienced in this identity workspace within existing institutions.

**Key words:** Identity, Career, Academia, Identity work, Identity workspace, third place, Liminality

## INTRODUCTION

The way professional identity changes over a person's career has long been a concern of scholarship on identity (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). It has been established that individuals engage in identity work (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003), particularly at critical transition-points in their careers. Identity work consists of the construction and reconstruction of identity through an interaction of taking on identities required by others, and projecting self-identity, in a dynamic process which encapsulates projections of others towards the self, projections of the self towards others and reactions to received projections (Beech, 2011). Individuals need resources and circumstances conducive to identity work, yet recent research suggests that increasingly fluid and unstable organizations are unable to provide these, and that separate institutions known as 'identity workspaces' can play an important role by satisfying this need (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010).

Most researchers have focused on career transition as an individual rather than a collective phenomenon, and yet identity work is, according to some, necessarily an inter-subjective undertaking (Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006; Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010). Furthermore, mid-career transitions are especially problematic, as individuals negotiate the norms required by their own organizations and professional contexts (Baruch, 2003) and are at increased risk of 'losing the plot' (Thomas & Linstead, 2002) as they reach the middle-management layers of their organizations. Academic work is particularly salient in this regard since the multiple roles of teacher, researcher, member of scholarly community, writer, editor, committee member, manager and more can be contained within it, and successful academics specialize in different areas of the job and construct their identities in very different ways (Frost & Taylor, 1996; Stablein & Frost, 2004). Corley (2010) suggests that, at mid-career (in particular on achieving tenure), scholars can shift from the "I should"

mentality, shaped by what is required by the institution, to the “I want to” approach of the senior scholar, who has more latitude in deciding what kind of academic to be.

In this paper then, we examine academic mid-career transitions and the way in which identity workspaces function to facilitate and stimulate these transitions. Previous work (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010) has introduced the concept of identity workspaces and outlined the conditions for their existence and legitimation: we develop an understanding of how identity workspaces function. In order to achieve this, we explore the collective experience of a cohort of a mid-career academics participating in a two-year fellowship programme, which, we argue, acted as an identity workspace in which mid-career identity work took place. That cohort consisted of the six authors of this paper. Using insights from narratives, interviews and experiences from our regular cohort meetings, we analyze our identity work and demonstrate how the fellowship provided an identity workspace. More specifically, we address the following research questions:

- To what extent and in what ways did the fellowship and its institutional context exhibit the properties of an identity workspace?
- How did the fellowship enable and stimulate identity work?
- How did the identity workspace relate to the ‘home’ organizational environment of the participants?
- What insights did the fellowship process provide into identity work as a collective activity as opposed to an individual activity?

In addressing these research questions, the paper’s key contribution is to an understanding of how identity workspaces function in the process of identity work.

The paper is structured as follows: first we explore the concepts of identity work and identity workspaces within the extant literature. Second, we describe the history and context of the fellowships which form the identity workspace. Third, we describe our methodological approach, which draws from identity theory and narrative methods in the form of narrative identity work, using autobiographical narratives, interviews and experiences as data. We then go on to present our findings in relation to the fellowship as a context for identity work and as an identity workspace, in which career development takes place. Our discussion section evaluates the significance of the identity workspace for undertaking identity work at mid-career in providing space for experimentation, a sentient community, social defenses and rites of passage, and we provide a framework illustrating how identity workspaces function. In concluding, we offer some insights into this functioning of identity workspaces and the implications for mid-career identity work. Although we report on the identity work of six academics working within a particular and rather unusual initiative in the UK, our work can shed light on broader questions of identity work, career transition and identity workspace. This aspect of the fellowship also means that many of these insights on the nature of identity work may generalize to other professions and forms of knowledge intensive work.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND ON IDENTITY**

### **Identity Work and Identity Workspaces**

*Identity* has been ascribed to the meanings that individuals attach to themselves in interaction with others (Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010), or the narratives individuals give of who they are (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). Identity construction is the interplay of a

dialogue in which inner self-identity is influenced by the outer social-identity (Watson, 2009). According to Ybema et al. (2009), the formation of an identity therefore involves the discursive articulation of an ongoing iteration between social and self-definition, which “might be conceptualized as a complex, multifaceted process which produces a socially negotiated temporary outcome of the dynamic interplay between internal strivings and external prescriptions, between self-presentation and labeling by others, between achievement and ascription and between regulation and resistance” (Ybema et al., 2009, p. 301). As a result, theories of identity have tended to conceive of it as neither static nor innate, but part of a process of being and becoming (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Jenkins, 1996), and as fluid and socially constructed rather than fixed and deterministic (Craib, 1998; Elliott, 2001; Ybema et al., 2009).

The processual nature of identity requires *identity work*, in which, according to Alvesson and Willmott (2002, p. 626), people are “continuously engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a precarious sense of coherence and distinctiveness”. Identity work includes both *identity stabilisation*, consolidating an existing identity, and *identity transition*, acquiring a new identity. In relatively stable or routine life situations, identity stabilization dominates, and identity work is relatively unconscious, although it is contingent upon life history and the unchallenged position of the hegemonic discourses through which identity is reproduced (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Specific encounters and events such as starting a new job, however, often entail conscious identity work, and transitions can therefore highlight and heighten awareness of the constructed quality of identity (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003).

Work-related identity focuses on the aspects of identity that are tied to work and work-related activities, “a central domain for the construction of the self” (Dutton et al., 2010, p. 286). As professionals develop their careers, they often take on different roles that build on their skills and experiences, and the transitions between these roles may require conscious identity work. Ibarra (1999, p. 764) found that, rather than merely contemplating ‘possible selves’ *before* the transition, individuals adapt to new roles by *actively experimenting* with ‘provisional selves’ that serve as trials for new but not yet fully elaborated professional identities, by “(1) observing role models to identify potential identities, (2) experimenting with provisional selves, and (3) evaluating experiments against internal standards and external feedback in the form of experimenting with provisional selves”. Of course, it is necessary for individuals to have the opportunity to conduct such experiments: to some extent, interventions such as leadership development programmes provide such opportunities as they “often prepare managers to make leadership transitions by helping them see that they are at such a juncture, work through any ambivalence they may feel, and anticipate the identity requirements of their careers” (Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011, p. 485).

Organizational studies of identity construction have predominately focused on work settings, work-based situations and actions such as how newcomers make sense of new (Beyer & Hannah, 2002), or existing work settings (Dutton et al., 2010). Fine (1996), for example, studied the identity narratives that chefs constructed in restaurants. However, if organizations lack the space for experimentation with ‘provisional selves’, how might the identity work get done? According to Petriglieri and Petriglieri (2010, p. 44), one way to achieve this is to use ‘identity workspaces’, defined as ‘institutions that provide a holding environment for individuals’ identity work... a social context that reduces disturbing affect

and facilitates sense-making'. They argue that an individual is likely to invest an institution with the function of an identity workspace when it provides the following three elements: a coherent set of social defenses, sentient communities, and vital rites of passage. As such, it facilitates identity work, and the construction of narratives that are both personally acceptable and socially legitimate (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010). The context in which Petriglieri and Petriglieri (2010) study this concept is the Business School, where managers studying for MBAs may seek a workspace where identity narratives can be consolidated and redrafted. Such workspaces are less and less likely to be provided by increasingly fragmented and turbulent organizations, they argue. Business schools offer a 'third, equidistant entity' that may provide a means for managers to maintain and adapt their professional identity even in the face of the 'shifting relatedness between corporations and these individual employees' (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010, p. 52).

### **Identity, rites of passage and liminality**

One of the three elements of Petriglieri and Petriglieri's identity workspaces is the rite of passage. Rites of passage were theorized by van Gennep (1960) to include three stages: separation, liminality and aggregation. Beech (2011) draws on this anthropological analysis of rites of passage and, in particular, liminality, to examine identity work in organizations. He finds that, in his cases, the state of liminality, of in-between-ness and ambiguity, is a useful way to conceptualise people at moments of transition such as job change or being under threat of redundancy. But he finds less evidence of clear moments of separation and aggregation and, indeed, argues that these aspects of rites of passage are typically less prominent in organizational analysis. Similarly, Trice and Morand (1989, p. 402) point out that this last stage of aggregation (which they term 'incorporation') is often missing from



accounts of organizational rites of passage. However, the notion of identity workspaces strongly conveys the idea of ‘going somewhere else’ (literally and/or metaphorically), which brings with it at least the possibility of moments of separation and aggregation. Certainly in Petriglieri and Petriglieri’s discussion of business schools, the managers leave their organization (separate) and, at some later date, return to it or to organizational life in another organization (aggregate).

Going somewhere else – to a ‘third place’ – is also the theme of Berthoin Antal’s (2006) discussion of intellectual entrepreneurship. She argues that such entrepreneurship, which is seen as increasingly important in contemporary academic life, requires ‘between times’ and ‘between places’, for example train and aeroplane journeys, meetings with colleagues from different disciplines or institutions, perhaps in social settings, or solitary moments for reflection in hotel rooms and the like. In other words, the ‘ivory tower’ of every day university life is not such a ‘good place to get some thinking done’ and may be the worst. In using the term ‘third place’, Berthoin Antal (2006) draws on Oldenburg’s (1989) discussion of such places as bars and cafes in American life, which are the ‘third place’ between home and work. Oldenburg (1989, p. 22 - 37) identifies some of the characteristics of these third places, which are typically: on neutral ground; a ‘leveler’ (in the sense of removing hierarchical and status differences); where ‘conversation is the main activity’; ‘the regulars’ are an important element; and, as a physical structure, are typically ‘plain’ to encourage leveling and discourage pretention.

These third places are at the interstices of everyday life, rather than being the sites of infrequent, major phases of identity work. They are also, for the most part, physical places, such as trains, planes and rooms. This view contrasts with the notion of the identity workspace, which is not wholly physical: in the words of Petriglieri and Petriglieri (2010), a

workspace is ‘a physical as well as a social and psychological space’ (p. 46) and an identity workspace is ‘an institution that provides a holding environment for identity work’ (p. 45). Nevertheless, there are also some common elements between identity workspaces and ‘third places’ as described here.

In summary, while professional identity work is an integral part of the processes of identity construction, much of the literature focuses on the workplace and narratives used to make sense of workplace identities, rather than professional identity work which takes place *outside* the formal organization in what might be termed an identity workspace for professional identity work. It is this latter space and how identity workspaces function in the process of identity work we address in this paper.

## **STUDYING THE WORKSPACE – CONTEXT AND METHOD**

### **Research Fellowships as Identity Workspace - History and Context**

All six authors were awarded two-year Mid-Career Fellowships funded by the Advanced Institute of Management Research (AIM)<sup>1</sup>. AIM was devised to support and enhance UK management research, and its researchers were drawn from a wide variety of universities in both the UK and overseas. A total of 57 fellows were funded through salary buy-outs for between one and three years in six different cohorts; AIM Scholars and AIM Associates were more junior researchers brought in to work with the fellows; individual projects were funded via standard awards; a scheme of Visiting International Fellows and AIM Overseas Fellows extended the network beyond the UK; and AIM Executive Advisors incorporated practitioners. In total, AIM covered over 200 academics.

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<sup>1</sup> Aim was funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Engineering and Physical Science Research Council (EPSRC)

The AIM Mid-Career Fellowships had several distinctive features. First, they were explicitly intended for academics at “mid-career”, defined as being not more than one-third of the way through an academic career (or, in one version, having ‘more of a future than a past’). This was broadly interpreted and members of our cohort ranged from one fellow who had been a full professor for five years to a lecturer (assistant professor) who had completed her PhD three years before (although interestingly all of us had entered academia as mature candidates). During the fellowship, one of the cohort was in her 30s and all of the others were in their 40s. The fellowship funding bought out a large portion of fellows’ teaching and other commitments, as well as paying for research and other activities.

The second distinctive feature was that each cohort of researchers was based around a common theme: in our case this was the service sector or “Services”. Services now constitute the majority of private-sector activity and nearly all public and third-sector activity (AUTHORS); indeed, about of 80% of economic activity in developed countries now centres on services. As such, the service sector is wide-ranging and complex and its management provokes a number of challenges for practitioners, professionals and academics. Unsurprisingly, given the breadth of services both as practical and academic domain, the six AIM Services Fellows came from a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds: econometrics, HRM, operations management, marketing, and critical accounting, and were exploring topics such as innovation in services, the creation and pricing of new service business models, entrepreneurial behavior in services, and gender and diversity in the sector.

Third, the AIM fellows were explicitly required to engage in what were termed “capacity-building” activities. These included mentoring and supporting the development of other academics in the sector, outside their own institution. Examples of these activities included running workshops on writing grant applications or writing for publication,

conducting engaged fieldwork, and so forth. Sometimes the fellows themselves delivered substantive content; on other occasions, they would arrange for other scholars to provide a significant part of the content. Often, these capacity-building activities saw the fellows shifting from being competent exponents of the various skills to taking on the role, often for the first time, of seeking to develop those skills in others.

Fourth, fellows were directly encouraged, through the explicit criteria of the fellowship and through interventions organized by the AIM Directors, to engage with and disseminate work with policymakers and practitioners, in a way that went beyond the norms of our existing academic institutions and our existing experiences. Significant funding and organizational support were made available to allow fellows to run practitioner and policy events at prestigious locations in London and elsewhere, and to produce practitioner-oriented briefing documents based on academic work, aided by journalists who were skilled at writing for a practitioner audience. Some fellows underwent media training to further develop their ability to disseminate work to a wider audience and to use media such as video.

As a cohort, we were drawn from six individual and separate academic institutions and, in the main, did not know each other before becoming fellows. We met regularly every two or three months during the two years of the Fellowship (and during the year after). Meetings typically lasted one day, with the Lead Fellow setting and circulating the agenda, and managing the running order. We discussed our progress, reflected on common themes and worked on some *ad hoc* collective endeavors, including an edited book. The meetings were also attended, at least in part, by one or more of the AIM Directors, who was able to provide advice and insight on the AIM initiative and other matters. Cohort meetings normally took place in the AIM offices in central London, but we also met in Manchester, Birmingham, and Oxford. One meeting in Edinburgh was held jointly with another cohort of

AIM Fellows who focused on innovation research. Between cohort meetings we worked individually, in pairs or in smaller groups on our research and capacity-building activities and were in regular virtual contact.

### **Methodological approach**

Identity scholars have long argued that individuals make sense of their transformations and experience during transitions through crafting narratives (AUTHOR; Day Sclater, 1988; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010) as they engage in identity work to form and reform their sense of self in new contexts. While our individual research projects undertaken as part of the fellowship utilized a range of qualitative and quantitative methodologies, for the purposes of our reflections on the process of the fellowship and the identity work and workspaces addressed in this paper, we draw from this rich tradition of narrative research, which includes accounts, stories, justifications, and disclaimers (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010), used to understand identities (Brown, 2006; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; McKenna, 2010; Watson, 2009). Narratives form part of the experimentation, reflection and ongoing stream of sense-making required to affirm identity and transition within identity construction (Beech, 2011; Brown, 2006; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). Furthermore, as Watson (2009) points out, within our identity work we both make narratives and use those which our cultures make available to us. The interaction of identity work and narrative leads to narrative identity work, ‘social efforts to craft self-narratives that meet a person’s identity aims’ (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010, p. 137). The forms of narrative enacted in narrative identity work may be contested and varied, ranging from explicit story-telling, autobiographical narratives, and ‘public narratives’ to reflexive internalized sense-making by the individual (Watson, 2009),

but they offer a space for the individual to explore, create and revise the self, the self as ‘other’ and the self as a social being (Ybema et al., 2009).

Hence, our process of reflexive engagement with our identities in the identity workspace of AIM is grounded in the stories and narratives we have told to ourselves and to each other of our experiences and shifting sense of self during our fellowships. We draw on our collective experience as AIM fellows during our regular meetings where we effectively ‘narrated’ our selves each time that we met. We combined our observations and reflections on our conversations with three specific reflexive methods to gather data on our experiences.

First, we each wrote short autobiographical reflective pieces on our experiences in the form of vignettes. Stories and vignettes are commonly used in exploring aspects of the self in the autoethnographical tradition (Boje & Tyler, 2008; Ellis, 2009; Learmonth & Humphreys, 2012). Autoethnography enables the researcher to understand their own experiences, identity and location within the research process (AUTHOR), while a reflexive use of autobiographical material also provides a valuable resource for exploring, presenting and representing the self (AUTHOR; Daskalaki, 2012). It allows for dialogical inquiry of both the self as other and the self in relation to theory (Cohen, Duberley, & Musson, 2009; Humphreys, 2005; Spry, 2001). We met, shared and discussed our autoethnographical writings, which prompted further debate and discussion of their meaning (Ellis, 2004).

Secondly, after sharing our autoethnographical vignettes, we interviewed each other in pairs to probe on some specific aspects of how the fellowships had impacted on our careers, identities, relations with peers and future possibilities. A number of broad questions were agreed upon but the semi-structured nature of the interviews meant that they were flexibly applied. Questions considered the experiences and effects of the fellowship on developing academic identity, career aspirations and progression, being part of a cohort of

service fellows, experiences of collectivity and inter-disciplinarity, and engagement with policy and practice. As researchers interviewing other researchers, multiple levels of reflexivity were required because, as Bryman and Cassell (2006, p. 46) observe: “the researcher interviewer is implicated in the data by virtue of the fact that he or she asks questions about the process of social research and interprets the ensuing answers in a manner that unavoidably will be influenced by his or her own presuppositions about the very process that is being asked about”. We were conscious that the interview represented a form of identity work in itself, in narrating ourselves as fellows. The interviews were transcribed and shared amongst the cohort for analysis.

Third, we held several cohort discussions specifically about the content and analysis of the autoethnographical vignettes and the interviews, and their relation to identity theory. Our first-hand knowledge and experiences of AIM complement the specific data collected to provide a more nuanced, rich interpretation. The paper includes extracts from these multiple sources, together with our reflexive interpretation throughout, and within the iterative process of writing this paper in which multiple drafts were circulated and discussed (see also Thomas, Tienari, Davies, & Meriläinen, 2009). Although all informants are identified as authors we have anonymized quotes by assigning a random number between one and six to each fellow.

We now turn to our analysis of the AIM Fellowship as an identity workspace, and the degree to which it enabled our identity work at mid-career.

## **ANALYSIS OF EXPERIENCES**

### **The fellowship as an identity workspace**

One of the unique features of the AIM Mid-Career Fellowships was the requirement for the six fellows to meet bimonthly as a cohort. As strangers from different academic

institutions we were thrown together, outside of our existing working environments and workspaces. As such the fellowships were deliberately constituted as a new institutional context in which we were all expected to develop professionally to facilitate the development of our careers, requiring identity work on our part.

Initially, our first cohort meetings were carefully scripted and structured by the AIM Directors and Lead Fellow, whereas in later meetings we had the opportunity to shape the agendas as we wished. We each had our own individual research projects to undertake, and there was not necessarily an expectation that we would work together on collaborative research projects. Rather, the fellowships acted as both a literal and social space for observing each other as potential academic role models, forming opportunities for creating and exploring identity narratives, and enabling us to compare experiences:

It was nice having the regular meetings. It was nice to see who was better off than me and worse off than me and the way they were being treated by their institution. It puts it into perspective for you, because I think I was one of the people in the middle, who were sort of treated alright, not too badly and could have been a bit better, could have been a lot worse. So it does, it does sort of drive that home to you. (interview, Services Fellow 6)

Working within a cohort with peers from other institutions enabled us to evaluate ourselves against each other; less in a competitive way and more with a sense of understanding different options of developing as an academic:

Seeing people at roughly the same stage in life and career as me, and seeing how they manage and juggle, and go about being academics, just through chit chat about work, and job moves, and conferences and so forth. So understanding how people from different disciplines in different institutions go about being an academic, because we



see a lot of people in the same corridor maybe, and see other people at contrived events like conferences, but I suppose over the two years we've seen one another, we have learned to some extent, other bits of how we live our academic lives. (interview, Services Fellow 3)

The fellowships gave us a space to develop, and were designed deliberately to accelerate that process by exposing us to new opportunities and requiring us to undertake activities such as working with policy-makers and practitioners and taking part in capacity building where we supported the development of other academics. As such, the fellowships as an 'identity workspace' enabled us to experiment with new provisional selves, as we pushed ourselves in new directions:

The Fellowship gave me the opportunity to fully immerse myself in surroundings that I'm not entirely the most comfortable in, but it gave an opportunity to learn a lot. (interview Services Fellow 4)

I felt as if I had to step up, to push myself to work at a higher level in a number of ways, not just in my academic field, but in organizing events and projects, contributing to initiatives in the sector etc. I have often felt that I have been really out of my comfort zone – but that's how you learn. (written evidence, Service Fellow 2)

This required a conscious engagement in identity work in the way we presented ourselves as researchers and conducted our research projects:

I deliberately set out to do a more active research, collaborative research than I've done in the past..., typically in the past it's been passive case study research, which I was kind of bored with. I remember telling the panel at my interview that I was bored.

[The interviewer] asked me, “why do you want to do that? It’s terribly time consuming”. And I think my answer was: I’m bored. So I set out to do something a bit different in the way I did my research. (interview Services Fellow 3)

The fellowship enabled us to engage in research which we could not otherwise have done. Two fellows set out to do detailed ethnographies and one planned extensive overseas travel.

Yes, it has certainly developed my research. I will say that I have always wanted to do, what I think of as a proper ethnography, where you’re just there for a year. And that sort of thing is so dependent on quantity time. (interview Services Fellow 6)

A standard research grant would have made these projects possible but would have funded a research assistant to do the majority of the fieldwork. This fellowship was our opportunity to spend more time at the research ‘coal face’ conducting all the interviews, observations and negotiations ourselves. It was the chance, in Service Fellow 1’s words, to “give research another try”.

“I think the main thing is acceleration. I’ve probably done things that eventually, many of them, I might have done anyway. But I’ve done them much quicker and it’s through opportunity, deadline, expectations and so on, made me do more things like run events, invite people I sort of admire and get to know them. And work with industry, workshops, that kind of thing. Which I might have done anyway but it’s made it more....well, it’s funded it, but it’s also made it more - feel more - within my scope, within my reach, within my capabilities and authority, if you like. So I feel like I’m legitimate in doing those things, whereas I might not have previously.” (interview Services Fellow 3)

### **Experiences of Identity Work and disciplinary orientation**

Early in the fellowship we needed to negotiate our varied expectations about the extent to which we were randomly-selected scholars doing similar projects at the same time or a closely-aligned group with some joint working and outputs. It was clear that despite our common experience of being awarded the fellowship, we did not all have the same kinds of expectations:

I have to say I found some of the early meetings quite hard because I didn't actually know what we were meant to be trying to achieve as a cohort. Are we all supposed to think the same way? because we clearly didn't and I didn't want to, and I'm sure lots of others didn't want to.. (interview Service Fellow 1)

I'm trying to think back to what I expected and anticipated before, and I suppose I didn't have any very clear expectations. As it turned out, I think the way we've worked has felt about right in terms of the extent to which we've worked collectively, because as it turned out we're from, mostly anyway, very different disciplines and backgrounds, so it would be quite difficult to see how we could do a genuinely collaborative, closely collaborative project, and that was never the intention anyway (interview Services Fellow 3)

One of the key issues to negotiate was the degree to which our academic identities were associated with our own disciplines, such as for example accounting, operations, human resources , or with a multi-disciplinary approach to 'services', given that we were 'services fellows'. The service sector spans most management disciplines but lacks a distinct home in

any. As we started out our AIM fellowships, we learned about each other's research and fields during our first few meetings. Although the AIM Mid-Career Fellowship call left significant scope for interpretation, becoming an AIM Services Fellow offered an opportunity to shift from a service perspective within our own management disciplines, to a wider cross-disciplinary service standpoint. Some members of the academic and wider community expected 'services fellow' to become our dominant identity, even though it was only one possible way to characterize our work. This was a concern for one fellow, who defined herself as a 'service science' researcher and was disturbed that others did not.

I thought there was going to be an AIM service fellows' cohort, they were all service people you know, like me . . . . But I was really, really, culturally quite shocked that it wasn't that way. I mean it [was] one of the biggest shocks to me that they saw themselves disciplinarily first. (Interview, Services Fellow 4)

For another fellow it raised a sense of unease or inauthenticity in terms of a coherent identity as a 'services' academic:

I still feel a bit like a fraud in terms of service and services because actually most of my interests are not to do with service or services. They are to do with the context but not the actual notion of service and that is something I have had to grapple with in relation to the cohort (Interview, Service Fellow 2).

Over the period of the fellowship we explored beyond our disciplinary identities, but this tended to clarify and shore up these identities:

So to have a broader view, to understand services in general: In terms of whether I shifted trajectory, no, because I'm still publishing in the same journals, I still read the same articles. I read more perhaps, more things, but then when I have to publish, have

to write, then I tend to talk again to people in my own disciplines. (interview, Services Fellow 5)

The multidisciplinary nature of our cohort did not lead to convergence or interdisciplinary work. The concept of services was an important influence on our identities but it was not the only one and the pull of our traditional academic disciplines was strong:

I wouldn't class myself as interdisciplinary and I'm not sure I've become totally interdisciplinary as part of the AIM project. But I hope that because of what I've learnt from others, my work has picked up useful things. So it's - interdisciplinarity is more, more the spice in the curry than the meat or the vegetables. You know, it's not the core thing but it does give it flavor. (interview, Services Fellow 6)

Despite the apparent comfort of remaining in our disciplines, however, we recognized that going beyond disciplinary boundaries raised opportunities, both intellectually and professionally, as this interview extract shows:

- It's actually more true of the cohort than not true, isn't it, that we are not actually mostly services people. If we had been services people, we wouldn't have been very useful. (Services Fellow 1)
- Maybe not, and maybe the fact that we are all so disparate and different makes us more useful. (Services Fellow 2)
- It also means that you never get bored because [you are] always changing and you can re-invent yourself by studying something new. So it is less constraining than enabling I think, but it is also murky and ambiguous. (Services Fellow 1)
- Sometimes there is opportunity in the murk and ambiguity. (Services Fellow 2)

Over time and as we grew to know each other better, the group did achieve a degree of shared understanding:

I was feeling like it was more like a floating poker game in a way but now it does feel like a cohort, common knowledge and shared understandings as well as common work (interview Services Fellow 1).

Much of this was to do with the relaxation of our social defenses and experience of connection at a personal rather than an intellectual level. We were able to be more open about the struggles and issues that we were dealing with in our research and our personal and professional lives.

It is going to be mostly retrospectively that the cohort matters, and of course you know going on in it was sense making and figuring stuff out, but the kind of social bonds have been a lot of fun, going to [other fellow's] house and teaching her daughter to paint the backroom-type stuff, which isn't necessarily academic work, but it is just part of the sort of general bonding stuff I suppose. (interview Services Fellow 1)

The group provided important social support as members of the cohort experienced personal and professional transitions, changed jobs, moved house, cared for children, lost parents, and underwent other significant life events. Even though we had not chosen the other members of our cohort, they became important parts of our social networks and provided emotional support on our individual trajectories.

### **Mid-career development and relations with institutions**

However, despite the opportunities given, the fellowships were not a panacea for career development. There were tensions between the AIM fellowship as an identity

workspace and our existing institutions for which we continued to work. Some of our existing institutions did not appear to recognize how our activities had given us the opportunity to develop, and were not geared up to recognize or measure our development:

I feel as though I've outgrown the institution, which was probably actually true before the Fellowship and the Fellowship really threw it into stark relief. (interview Services Fellow 6)

I had been there quite a long time and the Fellowship had really developed my experiences in a way that the institution did not seem aware of, or maybe did not recognize. I felt as if they saw me as the academic I was two or three years ago, when I felt that I had really grown. (written evidence Services Fellow 2)

Few of the existing structures in our academic institutions were able to accommodate the objectives of the fellowship. One fellow avoided these entirely by moving to another institution for the duration. She met new colleagues and got involved in stimulating projects. Some of the others, who stayed in their home institutions, found that 'teaching buy-outs' were not as complete as originally promised and that organizational systems penalized, rather than encouraged, fellowship activities. For example, in appraisal processes within institutions, some of the work required by the AIM fellowship appeared not to be considered of worth:

The appraisal forms, that they appraise us on, were changed during the Fellowship and ...they got incredibly prescriptive, so it was, what have your activities been as module leader? and what ratings have you got on all these courses you've taught on? and because I was bought out of most of teaching and most of admin, I was coming to

the appraisals going, well I've done one or two little bits in these boxes but look what else I've done, I've done all this capacity building and this wonderful ethnography and I've got this fabulous access and I'm doing this policy level work. And none of that counted, because that wasn't in the boxes (interview Services Fellow 6)

In terms of what I like to do, the time I was given for myself, it was good. In terms of promotion it's been negative, because in [institution] I was told, given that I don't do any teaching, I couldn't have been promoted to Chair, to Professor, believe it or not, they say we don't have enough evidence of your teaching so we can't promote you. (interview Services Fellow 5)

This dissonance between our self-perceived and institutionally-perceived identities may have been at least partly why three out of the six Fellows moved to new jobs in different universities during their fellowships, and two of the remaining three made significant shifts within their current institutions:

Many of us have moved yeah. I think because of the Fellowship, our life was different but the institution didn't, in a sense, understand (Interview Services Fellow 5).

Despite the fact that career development was a goal of the fellowship, the facilitation of job changes to new locations and institutions was not an intended outcome.

## **DISCUSSION: HOW DO IDENTITY WORKSPACES FUNCTION?**

We draw together the various elements of the theorization of identity work, in the context of our empirical setting, to propose a framework for the key elements and processes of identity workspaces. This is shown in Figure 1. Our main contribution is to build on



Petriglieri and Petriglieri's (2010) delineation of the characteristics likely to make an institution be seen as an identity workspace, by identifying some important elements of the way identity workspaces function. In overview, we conceptualise the identity workspace as a liminal zone. Participants are separated from their organizations, enter the workspace, undergo potential transformation, and are subsequently re-aggregated into their organizations (or at least into a similar organization). We return to this over-arching perspective shortly. First, it is necessary to identify how the fellowships took on the characteristics of an identity workspace.

Identity workspaces require a set of social defenses, sentient communities, and vital rites of passage (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010). For example, the requirement for us to meet with a senior civil servant for the first time to discuss government policy on services proved to be a significant rite of passage early in our fellowship, requiring us all to evaluate our own understanding of services in preparation, and engage with others' thinking in the cohort. The presence of significant others, such as our Fellowship cohort members, as witnesses and fellow travelers is fundamental to rites of passage, which serve both technical and expressive functions, instructing the individual and signaling his or her change in status (Trice & Morand, 1989.)

Similarly, the AIM Fellowship cohort provided us with a sentient community which was central to our developing identity as mid-career academics. Sentient communities are important professional groups 'that individuals invest in, relate to, and identify with' (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010, p. 48). Irrespective of our different perceptions of the nature of services, the Fellowship cohort provided a supportive social network during our individual and collective transitions. Beyond this, it also provided a sense of belonging and identification with a community, AIM, in which our individual development and identity

work took place. As seen from the data provided earlier in the paper, the degree of our sense of belonging to AIM and the development taking place therein provoked some tensions between our identification with our AIM identities and those connected to our own academic institutions. The fact that so many of us moved institutions or roles during or after the Fellowships suggests that our sense of community had shifted more towards the AIM identification and self-perception. To help support our identity transformations, the fellowship cohort provided us with a collective social defense that facilitated adaptation and relatedness between ourselves and other external environments (Kets de Vries & Korotov, 2007). The social defense was interactionally constituted as we worked through what it meant to us to develop an identity as an AIM Services fellow, an AIM fellow more generally, and an academic at mid-career.

Having identified these characteristics of the fellowship as an identity workspace, we extend Petriglieri and Petriglieri's (2010) theorization by examining the details of the functioning of the workspace as a place for identity work.

Most obviously within the cohort, the Fellowship involved frequent encounters with peers – the other Fellows. As Petriglieri and Petriglieri (2010, p. 45) argue, '...by definition, individuals cannot conduct identity work in isolation'. In some respects, we were alike: mid-career, management academics, similar ages etc. This was accentuated to some degree by the 'levelling' reminiscent of Oldenburg's 'third places': while our institutional 'ranks' ranged from lecturer to full professor, in our workspace we were all Fellows, with one identified as Lead Fellow – *primus inter pares*, acting as representative and administrative conduit rather than line manager. This aspect of our encounters allowed identity work of the type characterized by Parker, Arthur and Inkson (2004) as 'career communities': our data show

how we valued the cohort's function as a sounding-board and benchmarking opportunity by which we could gain insight into others' institutions, careers and academic lives in a supportive mode.

At the same time, we were different to one another. Here we draw on recent themes in the identity literature that concentrate on alterity rather than identity, emphasizing the extent to which identity work involves individuals finding out what they *are not* as much as finding out what they are (Carroll & Levy, 2008; Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001). By its very design, AIM brought us into contact with and forced us to work with, or at least communicate with, academics from other disciplines, notably, but not exclusively, within the cohort. In keeping with the analysis of Abbott (2001), academics, however proximate their fields may appear to an outsider, will find ways to differentiate among themselves, almost *ad infinitum*. Beyond the cohort, AIM encouraged and instigated contact with people from other fields (practice, policy), the academic domains of general management (rather than our sub-fields), and 'service' management (which only one of our number readily identified with). Encountering all these 'others' or alters sharpened our understandings of why we were different to them, while at the same time making us work on how best to use, present and articulate our own identities the better to communicate and work with 'the others', to whom the fine distinctions between disciplines and sub-disciplines were often undetectable and irrelevant. These encounters with peers and alters, as one function of the identity workspace, are represented as the inner ellipse in Figure 1. At the level of the cohort, we were negotiating the relationship between our internal selves and the notion of services, our identity as 'service scholar'. This involved such activities as trying to put together a briefing document on services for a senior civil servant specializing in the area, and devising and writing an edited book. In the context of engaging with policymakers and practitioners, we were enabled, through the use of

infrastructure resources as well as personal support from the cohort, to experiment with different degrees of engagement and conscious identity work in undertaking these activities, and to evaluate our experimentation against our own expectations and each other in moving forward. This enabled the use of experience to clarify our shifting identities. As we saw, the evidence is that the inner self typically won, and our discipline-based identities endured and, in some cases, were strengthened.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

The other main function we identify – the outer ellipse in Figure 1 – is the opportunity, and sometimes incitement, to experiment with provisional selves, or temporary solutions used by individuals to bridge the gap between their current capacities and self-conceptions and the representations they hold about what attitudes and behaviors are expected in a new role (Ibarra, 1999). Although these experiments sometimes took place in the cohort context, often they were individual endeavors outside the immediate cohort context of joint activities and meetings, drawing on AIM as a whole, encompassing the resources, facilities, staff, legitimacy, brand and, above all, the *concept* of AIM. There were incentives, resources, advice and support for experiments, which might contribute to the construction of these ‘provisional selves’. At this level, the most prominent aspects of identity work were the more generic extensions into areas of greater expertise or authority, rather than the disciplinary positioning and re-positioning just discussed. Capacity-building activities were often concerned with general capacities such as writing; practice-oriented events were in the main run by individuals as ‘AIM’ events (even if the substance might be concerned with services). The elements of identity that we could ‘try on for size’ included,

for example ‘expert writer’ (to which ‘who, me?’ was sometimes the instinctive response), ‘impresario’ (as we tried to devise and run major events) or ‘academic entrepreneur’.

Figure 1 identifies aspects of identity work in an abstract manner. But there was a more concrete side to the process, namely the cohort meetings, typically in London. These had several of the features of Oldenburg’s ‘third places’: we met in neutral ground in a rather nondescript, small suite of offices; we were for the most part on a level, all Fellows together, in contrast to the hierarchy-bound identification that typically obtains in a university department; and the main activity was talk. In addition, although the meetings were not purposeless, we to a very significant extent had to find our own purpose.

The two-year fellowship programme was designed to focus our energies and time towards a collective endeavor as ‘services’ academics. As such, it altered the perceptions of us being imposed from outside: we found ourselves being positioned in new roles as knowledgeable about services in general, a huge and heavily contested concept, when our expertise often lay in a specific area of service or service management. It also raised tensions within the cohort internally as we strove to understand each other’s perceptions and positions on service and services, and to explore possibilities for inter-disciplinary work in the field, a challenge which proved difficult. As a cohort, we did not achieve a collective, inter-disciplinary understanding of the field of services, tending rather to supplement our existing disciplinary areas with some potentially new theoretical or empirical insights. In negotiating this process of external and internal expectations of the nature of being a services academic, we therefore experienced a degree of in-between-ness and ambiguity, or liminality, as we navigated the interaction of an inner identity and an identity imposed by others (Beech, 2011), but recognizing, as Services Fellow 2 put it earlier, that ‘there is opportunity in the murk and ambiguity’.

As Figure 1 suggests, the AIM fellowship as a whole can readily be interpreted as a liminal experience within Van Gennep's conceptualization of a rite of passage. Although we all maintained some involvement in the day-to-day activities of our institutions (most of us continued with some of our teaching, for example), we often 'went somewhere else', figuratively (e.g. working on planning a practitioner event in London rather than marking exams) or literally (e.g. attending a cohort meeting). While we were AIM Fellows, we were absent in the sense of not being a 'full person' in a Head of Department's workload calculations or missing departmental meetings due to AIM-related commitments. Over the whole fellowship period, we were 'betwixt and between' members of the institution and members of AIM. As we see from the data, the attachment to the institution often did not survive that liminality – most of the cohort changed institutions during the period. Whether that would have happened anyway, we can never know. But there are several indications that the period of identity work that AIM enabled led to reflection and realization that a future identity would fit better somewhere else. There are also several instances in the data of the benefits of AIM as perceived by the Fellows being invisible to the calculative devices (Callon & Muniesa, 2005) of workload models and promotion criteria.

Within the fellowships there were many 'mini-liminalities', all part of what one of us termed 'the two-year stretch'. By this we mean the occasions when we might run a practitioner event for two hundred people for the first time, chair an expert conference panel on services, put ourselves on a pedestal (literally, sometimes) as an expert at writing for publication, and so on, and then return to the office and try to fit back in to the regular routines of the institution, seeing those routines in a somewhat different light as a result of the mini rite of passage from which we had returned. In more mundane practical ways, there were many more of Berthoin Antal's (2006) 'between times' and 'between places', if for no

other reason than that we were all travelling more and finding ourselves on trains, planes, and in cafes waiting for trains and planes, than might normally have been the case. As we became accustomed to trying out ‘provisional selves’, the fellowship as ‘a two-year stretch’ stretched our abilities, sense of self and capabilities, intensified identity work, and enabled us to transition into new directions, such that, while some of the stretching might be temporary, some of those new identities began to stick and become more enduring as we returned to our organizational homes.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

This study contributes to the literature on identity work, in particular by developing the notion of identity workspace. In this sense, the fact of its being conducted in an academic career setting is incidental. However, the study also has something to tell us about the more specific issues arising in academic work. Conclusions in each of these areas, the general and the specific, are now set out.

### **The function of identity workspaces**

Prior work has delineated the notion of holding environments more generally, and the more specific form of holding environment that Petriglieri and Petriglieri (2010) term an identity workspace. Their work captures critical factors that determine whether or not an institution will be regarded by members or would-be members as an identity workspace. Having established that our empirical setting displays those properties, we have gone on to develop an understanding of some important ways in which identity workspaces perform their function. One of these is by providing conditions that promote the definition and re-definition of participants’ professional identities in relation to peers and ‘alters’ with whom

they are brought into contact and with whom they interact. The workspace facilitates this by making identity work take place in a collective environment (the cohort, in our case), removing many of the hierarchical and status differences between members, and by bringing together individuals, within the workspace and from outside it, who have different experiences of and perspectives on an area of common concern. This is represented by the inner ellipse in Figure 1.

The second way in which the workspace functions is to provide opportunities, inducements and even expectations, all with resources and some of the supportive mechanisms characteristic of a ‘holding environment’, to experiment with provisional selves. These experiments are often concerned with possible *future* orientations, with advancing to higher levels of expertise or authority, in contrast with the encounters with peers and alters, which are more concerned with taking stock of and reflecting on *current* professional identities. In this sense, the experiments with provisional selves represent the most obvious way in which the identity workspace ‘stretches’ the participants. Some aspects of the provisional selves are adopted, and some are not. This is represented by the outer ellipse in Figure 1. The two functions, although identified separately in the Figure, are closely inter-related. To give an example from our study, an academic encountering the world of government policy formulation at first hand for the first time might then experiment with a provisional self of policy advisor, by developing new skills, contacts and activities.

The identity workspace has a potentially useful, but also a potentially antagonistic relationship to the participants’ ‘home’ institutions. Here, we have examined identity workspaces as ‘liminal’: however, in anthropological studies of liminality and rites of passage, the liminal zone and its function is widely endorsed and legitimized by the society in which it operates. That is not necessarily so in our study and, we suggest, in such extra-



organizational identity workspaces more generally. It is argued in the literature that identity workspaces of this sort have become more important as organizations have come to have less enduring relationships with their employees and find it more difficult to provide opportunities for identity work themselves. If that is so, our study seems to suggest that more work needs to be done to allow organizations to make sense of and value both the activities that participants undertake while they are in identity workspaces, and the ‘new’ identity, skills and expectations of employees returning to the organizational mainstream.

### **Conclusions for Mid-career identity work among academics**

In the academic context, we might ask why this identity workspace would be needed if institutions were providing a supportive environment? It might suggest that at mid-career there is a mis-aligning of identity workspaces between the academic and the institution. Hence, the AIM initiative could be framed as a new form of meta-institutional response to institutional failure to support the development of academic identity work at mid-career. It crucially provided space and support for identity experimentation, community sense-making, and growth through collective experience of rites of passage. Hence, a challenge for the academic community is to consider how, and to what extent, the facilitation of mid-career identity work experienced in this identity workspace can be encapsulated within existing institutions and schools, in order to support career development at the crucial, but oft-neglected, moment of mid-career. As we have seen, academic careers can encompass a very wide range of activities and emphases, but it seems that institutional mechanisms and frames of reference are blind to some of those that their employees value, and which could be valuable to the institution, and have limited institutionally-endorsed opportunities for employees to develop their professional identities. In the face of rapidly-evolving roles for

universities, and perhaps especially business and management schools, in the wider economy and society, the two classic routes for advancement of ‘star researcher’ or senior administrator may no longer provide what the organization and many of its mid-career academic employees really need. Hence, new alternative identity workspaces are required to facilitate and support mid-career transition.

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