
Article Introduction: In the following paper William C. “Bill” Murray focusses on how the annual ASB conference influences the career trajectory of junior faculty in the region and how this helps to shape the idea and legitimacy of the ASB in turn. Bill, then a part of the 2006 cohort of the Sobey PhD, developed his paper alongside contributions from Brad Long, Trish McLaren, Shelagh Campbell, Adam Rostis, and Rhonda Pyper on issues of crisis, legitimacy, resume references to ASB by former participants, and the role of Best Paper awards as a staple of conference prize giving.¹

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**ENTERING THE PROFESSORATE: WHEN INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION
MEETS INSTITUTIONAL HABITUATION**

ABSTRACT

Doctoral students seek to discover their identity within academia through professional interactions. Involvement in professional conferences affords opportunities for interaction that are used in the process of socially negotiating the construction of reality and as the cornerstone of identity creation. Based on Weick’s belief in understanding through storytelling, this study will examine the experiences of junior researchers at the Atlantic Schools of Business, exploring their process of identity creation when interacting with academic professionals who are embedded within the habituated practices of the institutionalized professorate.

Those who choose to work within the field of academics progress through a series of learning checkpoints. Graduate school, research, conference presentation, teaching, and publication are all markers along this professional development. These cues highlight the transitional process to both the specific actor and their socially negotiated environment. Cues exist not only to help build skills and abilities of one who has become an “academic”, but also signal a change in professional identity to others. If this sounds like joining a member-only club, the parallel is very accurate. Becoming an academic is to join an elite organization, and those who already

¹ Campbell, S. M. R. (2007). If a Tree Falls in the Forest. . . Reproducing Organization Through Text -- A hermeneutic Analysis of Curricula Vitae and the Atlantic Schools of Business conference. *Proceedings of 2007 Atlantic Schools of Business conference, Acadia University, September 28-30*, 33-43; Long, B., Pyper, R., & Rostis, A. (2008). Constructing a Legitimate History: Crisis, Legitimacy, and the Atlantic Schools of Business Conferences. *Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences*, 25(4), 295-306; McLaren, P. G., & Mills, A. J. (2008). "I'd Like to Thank the Academy": An Analysis of the Awards Discourse at the Atlantic Schools of Business Conference. *Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences*, 25(4), 307-316.

possess membership control entrance. Thus, it becomes a *mélange* of objective measures, including scholarship and publishing, as well as a significant subjective evaluation in which potential candidates are judged on personal fit by members already in place. Those within academia assess candidates on their adoption of particular actions, artefacts and language usage (Beech, 2006), reinforcing the constructed reality of their everyday world as one negotiated between individuals (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The life of the professorate thus is a socially structured institution created through the intersubjectivity of academic professionals (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Through the experiences encountered during the doctoral process, students make adjustments to behaviours and learn to function within the realm of academia (Mitchell *et al.*, 2001).

This paper focuses on the reflexive experiences of junior academics in their construction of a professional identity. Drawing on their experiences at the Atlantic Schools of Business (ASB) conference, experiences that are representative of similarly reproduced professional interactions at other academic conferences, junior academics work within the conferences' institutional framework and the interactions with other actors to help make sense of their new negotiated reality. With a 36-year history, the ASB conference is one of Canada's longest running business conferences, uniquely maintaining a multi-disciplinary business school focus in the Atlantic region (Mills, 2005). The ASB conference has replicated itself throughout the majority of its history without the traditional infrastructures that drive similar academic gatherings. The majority of its reproduction stems from accepted habits of the informal institution. Lacking the trapping of a formal structure for the majority of its existence, one can surmise that this conference maintains a value within the community of practitioners in the Atlantic Canadian region of post secondary educators. For the individuals participating, these routines embody the valued characteristics of the collective and become activities that formulate its history (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

“I DIDN'T REALIZE IT WAS JUST REGULAR PEOPLE THAT SHARED IDEAS”

Shared cultural phenomena, as maintained in the epistemological perspective of interpretivism, are external displays of experiences based on internal understandings (Burrell & Morgan, 1979) that have subjective meanings attached to them within a specific social context (Weber, 1947). Berger and Luckmann clearly state that because institutions are socially constructed and exist as an external reality, the individual cannot gain understanding through outside observation alone (Berger & Luckmann, 1966); they must move within the institutional structures to truly learn them. Weick refers to this process of interaction as the constituting element of identity creation (1995). Individuals working towards acceptance into the world of the professorate, those who are completing their graduate studies and working toward tenure, seek to make the transition into this different reality, or new community of discourse (Blenkinsopp & Stalker, 2004). This transition begins early in the doctoral studies (Reybold, 2003), as the inner workings and novel responsibilities of the professorate are discovered. Beech stated that even the act of becoming a student constituted a shift in personal identity (2006), beginning the process of transformation. Moving through the unique system of graduate studies into the realm of academia represents a fundamental shift of interactions. Changes with the people involved in the interactions, as well as the corresponding discourse, create a shift in how a person constitutes their identity (Weick, 1995). Acknowledging this transformative journey, junior academics seek to both learn and demonstrate the appropriate cues of the professorate. This progression understandably alters the identity of those involved and how students begin to define themselves as professionals. Due to the large influence of intersubjectivity involved in both a socially constructed reality and identity development, definitions of self become negotiated artefacts within the larger social construct of academia.

In his study of academic culture, Reybold found (2003) that it is the cultural construct that provides the definition of expected professional realities for all individuals embedded within that particular culture. These defined realities provides various lenses which present members of that community with the means to understand and place value on the events of the world around them (Bergquist, 1992). Identities, or one's sense of self, are considered by many as fluid and changeable, with new identities forming with the progression of our lives and experiences (Blenkinsopp & Stalker, 2004; Reybold, 2003). As individuals make the choices of both professional direction and the lenses of interpretation through which that profession assigns value, they also shape their identities within that social context (Blenkinsopp & Stalker, 2004; Giddens, 1991). Leavitt (1991) acknowledges the familial conditioning that occurs with doctoral students as they are brought into the folds of the professorate, normally under the parental figure of an academic mentor. This immersion into the academic culture helps to prepare students to assume the roles of conduct of institutionalized environments (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and become aware of the appropriate scripts for behaviour in the professorate (Reybold, 2003). Within these scripts, students become introduced to and are influenced by areas of knowledge and ways of being, both at the cognitive and affective levels (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) that are appropriate to their changing roles.

The participation in academic conferences provides an opportunity for the behaviours of senior academics to be observed, as well as an environment in which junior academics can begin to practice their roles, actualizing it upon the presentation stage (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and observing the consequences of those presentations (Weick, 1995). Actions and interactions provide a frame of reference for less experienced participants, allowing them to make greater sense of appropriate displays within this constructed environment. A large component of work completed by academics takes place in relative isolation, yet from the interpretivist perspective, identity can only occur through the negotiation among participating actors within a social network. In the case of the educational community, greater influence in this ongoing negotiation is privileged to those already rooted within the environment. This privileged voice of embedded actors produces actions of habituation (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), typifying the actions into a form of institutionalization. These habits of action help to guide the entrance of newer actors through a socialization process not only of technical knowledge but also the exposure of "appropriate attitudes and self-conceptions" (Weiss, 1981), preparing them for academic role enactment.

For the junior academic, the challenging progression through graduate studies includes understanding and adopting the professional characteristics that exist within academia. These attributes of academia help the doctoral student negotiate meaning within the educational environment and add to their comprehension of the epistemology of the professorate (Reybold, 2003). As such, participation in social functions with other academics provides the opportunity for meaning negotiation; this type of association with peers and colleagues therefore serves a valuable role in professional development (Merton, Reader, & Kendall, 1957). Yet the construct of academia has existed for centuries, possesses a history predating any one academic and lasting well beyond their years. As such, the duration of academic existence and its history often allows this negotiated social construct to be experienced as an objective reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Through involvement with institutional activities, such as conference participation, existing patterns of predefined behaviour can serve to guide and focus junior academic development and limit the multitude of available alternatives (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). By observing the actions and behaviours of those embedded within the specific community, junior academics begin to understand their roles and expectations in the academic labour process. These incorporate the production of academic artefacts, including conference participation and publications (Blenkinsopp & Stalker, 2004), all of which impact their developing professional identities as faculty (Reybold, 2003). Paradoxically, the observation of established behaviours and mimetic reproduction in the process of identity construction can both enable and constrain future directions and choices of junior academics (Blenkinsopp & Stalker, 2004; Giddens, 1991).

For this study, a series of five interviews was conducted over a two week period with PhD candidates pursuing their degree at an Atlantic Canadian university. All candidates have presented original research at the Atlantic Schools of Business conference within the past two years; their reflexive experiences were collected in an effort to reveal stories of professional identity construction as influenced by conference participation. Names were selected from published documents of past ASB proceedings. Interviews were conducted at the school of each participant; names of all participants have been altered for anonymity. Each individual contributed their personal experiences or “stories” as they remembered them; this reflection is both a common method used to share ideas (Feldman *et al.*, 2004) and is a critical aspect of meaning-making within a phenomenological perspective (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). The process of sharing stories also serves as a method to clarify and recompose particular understandings of past interactions (Feldman *et al.*, 2004). As the events of the past were loosely reconstructed with the inclusion of experiences and action, they formed into a cohesive collection containing both plot and direction creating a personal narrative of past experiences (Franzosi, 1998) for each participant.

The interview, as a qualitative method, was chosen to probe in greater depth the experiences of junior researchers in academic conferences. According to McCracken, the interview method “can take us into the mental world of the individual” (1988). By questioning each participant on past experiences, an opportunity was provided to uncover intricate details that are extremely difficult to expose with quantitative methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Trocchia & Berkowitz, 1999). As these doctoral candidates look back upon past actions, they work through an understanding of past experiences by reflexively analyzing key elements in the sensemaking process (Weick, 1995). With interviewing, the value of exploring past activities with a broad scope provides greater value than mining any one particular experience (McCracken, 1988).

“I WAS CONSTANTLY CONFUSED AND TERRIFIED”

During the interview process, the conceptualization of the academic identity was probed in an effort to situate experiences within a time frame, creating a temporal flow from ‘then’ until a closer ‘now’. This created the framework for sequencing the narrative format (Franzosi, 1998). Graduate students have been involved in the university system for many years up to the point of entering a PhD program; associating with professors is a common experience. Yet, if indeed a true understanding of both the construction of reality and the corresponding institutions is developed through negotiation among participants, junior academics may not have a clear vision of academia prior to entrance. Not only has exposure to the academic world been limited in scope in the years before doctoral studies, entrants into the academic world have not been embedded within the construct of the academic. This absence of embedded involvement becomes a barrier to meaning-making (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Reybold, 2003).

“Well, I guess I would characterize it as two, two main areas...one would be teaching. I thought of academia as being about teaching, first and foremost... That was what I understood it was to be an academic and why I would pursue a PhD I guess. The other aspect I was aware of was this research notion, but quite frankly at the time...just prior to going to ASB and then around that time, my concept of what research was is pretty narrow.” – (Jacob, PhD Candidate)

The concept that academics actually produce knowledge was missing in the initial understanding of professional identity. Those entering this new world saw the transmission of information and skills training as holding the seminal position of the professorate. The role of the researcher within the academic construct lacked a level of tangibility up to this point.

“I defined the role much more as a teacher, as an educator, than I did necessarily as a researcher. And I don’t think

at the early stage ... at the beginning of my career...that I appreciated the role of the research component and the construction and recreation of knowledge, and all that kind of stuff. I just thought of myself as sort of an educator, a conduit of someone else's knowledge to students" – (Cynthia, PhD Candidate)

The metaphor of the conduit removed the pressures of knowledge creation as a variable in the forward movement into a new identity, minimizing the number of unknown characteristics of expected behaviours to be adopted. When reflecting back to their entrance into graduate studies and the activities involved in that endeavor, it seemed to be easier to compartmentalize the identity characteristics of the senior academic as 'teacher' or 'conduit'. Preconceptions of the world of the professorate were described and then quickly challenged as surprising discoveries were made. These surprising discoveries forced doctoral students into the negotiation process with their new realities.

"I think I thought it was much more pontificating and people selling of ideas. I thought this guru would standup there and everybody would bow down to them and think, "Oh, the god of...some new invention or some new wonderful theory." I didn't realize it was just regular people that shared ideas." – (Tom, PhD Candidate)

"HOW DID I FEEL THAT I FIT? UMM...I DIDN'T FIT"

The unexpected discovery of professional characteristics and roles created tensions as the realization of entry into something unknown had begun. Movement into the doctoral world requires socialization into a set of practices and perspectives already entrenched by existing members (Reybold, 2003). Through the involvement in conference activity, the junior academics are invited to participate in the creation of their new professional identities. Yet the beginning of this process does not come without certain trepidations.

"The first one, I don't even know that I really remember a lot about it, I just didn't understand. I was constantly confused and terrified, and I wasn't even certain I was going to become an academic." - (Jacob, PhD Candidate)

"That's developed over time. First one real scared; second one, I felt a little better. I think I look forward to going to the next one even more." – (Tom, PhD Candidate)

Others saw this period as a true moment of discovery, seeing for the first time the depths of a professional world they had been surrounded by for years, yet not actually ever seeing in full detail. Entrance into the doctoral environment and participation in the events of that process revealed greater detail and depth in academic activities, and provided access to a world held in privilege.

"How did I feel that I fit? Umm. I didn't fit. I didn't really see myself as part of that world. I wasn't part of it... I just saw a completely different world, the world that I, to me until that time, had been submersed, hidden almost you know. " – (Brian, PhD Candidate)

Once gaining access to the academic world, a metaphorical seat at the table in the negotiated reality of this construct, identifying markers were sought by doctoral students to facilitate their understanding of new 'reality'. How does an academic professional behave? What are the tangible pieces of legitimate evidence in their trade? The novelty of this environment was different than past industry experiences, yet the progression of socialization in the eyes of the junior academics appeared to follow a familiar course of action.

“I had to certainly relearn new ropes and understand new processes and meet new people and recognize that there are...very unique networks and histories and all that kind of stuff that I needed to become personally more aware of. I think that’s an ongoing process. I still...it’s a...learning a bit more about academic life certainly and the politics of it, the bureaucracies of it, the sort of ‘rights of passage’ and all of that are still somewhat, you know...I’m learning as I go.” – (Cynthia, PhD Candidate)

Identifying the rights of passage established a linear progression in understanding and involvement, moving from the point of confusion at first entry into the replication of traditional actions and habits, ending in acceptance within a community of professionals. The interaction at the ASB revealed particular ways that actors display themselves after working through the intersubjectivity of peer interaction.

“I think it’s common practice...when you’re put into a group of people who have common experiences and a common interest and they work together and they share, they collaborate, they talk...they develop their own jargon, they develop their own jokes maybe. I really think that that community, through time, develops a sense of being...which contributes to this whole notion of a belonging to that particular community...in the sense that whether you accept that way of being or that group.” – (Brian, PhD Candidate)

Merton (1957) stresses the interaction among peers at the graduate level as one of the most critical factors in committing to the academic world. The ASB has provided junior academics with the opportunity to share experiences. During these exchanges, distinctions became apparent between subgroups and an intra-cultural constructed hierarchy was revealed. Junior academics, based on low positional power and a need to display credible actions (Beech, 2006), created distinctions with those embedded in the academic environment.

“When you’re working towards your PhD, and there’s other people who have what you so greatly desire to possess, if you wish, calling them peers is somewhat problematic. They have something you don’t have.”
- (Jacob, PhD Candidate)

“IF YOU LOOK LIKE A DUCK...”

For some junior academics during their identity construction, the balance of competing roles between peers and established academics created a conscious divide between socially-defined status levels within the academic network. Established members of academia play a large role in the subjective evaluation of doctoral students as they move to join the professorate. However, peer relationships compose the professional support network for doctoral students; they assist the students when navigating the cognitive and affective issues of graduate school. As such, negotiation of identity may also embody an intentionality within specific interactions, based on the social level of the participants in each specific social exchange.

“Your peers, it’s really cool. You really talk about what’s going on, what’s going down. You ask, “What does that big word you just used mean?” and you can talk and you can understand, and you get to understand what they’re really talking about. Whereas, people who are well published, or better published than I’ll ever be, there’s a lot of reverence. There’s still a lot of stroking, ego stroking. You know, kind of, potential for joint papers some day or...it’s politicking. It’s politicking.” – (Tom, PhD Candidate)

Recognizing multiple role levels and patterns of behaviour reaffirmed the acknowledgement of existing bureaucratic structures within the conference history and its institutionalized products (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Although the interaction with conference participants was hailed in all interviews as supportive and safe, the awareness of role levels was tangible. Those at higher status levels provided training in methodology to doctoral students; these new researcher skills were used on occasion to specifically examine the question of professional identity. At times the behaviours and interaction at the ASB conferences themselves became the focal point of research, facilitating intentional understanding of the academic community through participation and selected isomorphic replication.

“I took it as an ethnography. I specifically sat down and said “If I am to understand what academics do, I need to try and become a participant observer in the academic life.” Thus, I went to ASB; I determined that I should present there...also determined that I should get involved in the...professional services aspect of things...So, I went with the express concept that I would begin to learn what it was to be an academic by using, at least partially, this ASB experience to, sort of, observe what academics did and then try to mimic it in such a way as I could learn what it was to be a real PhD student-type.” - (Jacob, PhD Candidate)

By actively implementing this style of engagement, the involvement in the conference events and creation of key artefacts, including conference presentations and research papers, junior researchers began to create a history and structure suitable to facilitate the sense-making process (Weick, 1995). Participation within the structure of the ASB conference assisted construction of professional identity (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and a greater understanding of faculty responsibilities (Merton et al., 1957). However, hesitation in commitment to a particular course of involvement may remove the junior academic from an entrenched position, exposing the hegemonic tendencies of institutional habituation.

“I have a belief that has been strengthened by the ASB experience that he who allows, or she, who allows themselves to be cloned in the usual ways will get farther. This is the way we’ve always done it; this is the way it’s supposed to be done. If you look like a duck and walk like a duck, we’re going to call you a duck, and give you a job as being a duck. So I know that, and I’ve seen it. And if you act too much like a swan, or an ugly duck, well, you’re not going to get anywhere; you’re not going to make any changes.” – (Tom, PhD Candidate)

Thus, participation in conferences such as the ASB provides many differing cues for understanding a multi-layered profession. Not surprisingly, the cues found upon reflection often contradict each other, or are open to paradoxical interpretations. The mimetic reproduction of artefacts and practices was mentioned by those questioned as a vital tool in understanding academic life, yet at what point does this replication transition from an educational tool of meaning to a loss of individual voice and style? I cannot claim to have discovered an answer to this issue during my investigation of the identity process, knowing only that it remains a process of discovery. Within the Atlantic Canadian academic community, exploration is embraced through events including the ASB conference.

“Everyone seems to be genuinely interested in who you are...you know we’re all members of business schools, so what area do you instruct in, what are some of your research interests and areas. There seems to be a genuine sense, regardless of seniority, of community building within the Atlantic Provinces.” – (Cynthia, PhD Candidate)

Involvement within a community of practitioners can provide cohesion during the moments when junior academics feel a disjointed sense of identity and belonging. Institutional support, in the form of encouraging conference participation at the ASB, creates an environment of safety where the symbolic productions of the professorate are both attempted and evaluated.

“It’s the place where I got to do a lot of stuff without fear and rejection, and not being ‘rigorous enough’ and those things, so it’s been as important to me in terms of my development as an academic as the Academy or ASAC, or a couple of other places.” – (Genevieve, PhD Candidate)

“As doctoral students...it contributes towards the legitimation of us as members of an academic community...it’s a good place to go to get experience, to get a little bit of practice, to get some comfort with that type of presentation and defense of an idea or a paper...the utility from an academic perspective is probably the greatest for doctoral students” – (Cynthia, PhD Candidate)

“THIS WILL BECOME MY WORLD”

Ultimately, doctorate students and junior academics negotiate a unique professional identity in this new frontier. Reflections on first-time participation in academic gatherings brought to the forefront feelings of novelty and confusion. Basic questions of action, speech and dress from past conferences highlighted the quest for understanding, or personal fit as a professional, within the academic community. Roles and responsibilities, including “becoming” a researcher, signaled a change in how junior academics recreated themselves in both their own eyes and in the view of peers. Learning the politics of academia revealed pressures towards behavioural adjustments, stemming from intersubjective identity negotiation (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), into what was uniquely described by one subject as “duck-like behaviours”.

Through conferences such as the ASB, junior academics will find opportunities to rehearse the scripts of their profession in a relatively safe environment under the guidance of those in positions of mentorship. With experiences to reflect upon and stories to tell, reflexive data is now available to satisfy Weick’s sensemaking process (1995) and help create their identity within the professorate.

“That was the first time I felt like I belonged to the community, and to be honest, I really think that going to a conference, to ASB specifically, made me feel like, you know, I’m participating in this world. This is become...this will become my world.” – (Brian, PhD Candidate)

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