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Behind the Scenes in the Identity Laboratory

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Behind the Scenes in the Identity Laboratory:

Participants' narratives of identity transition through group coaching in a leadership development programme

By

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Abstract:

This study examined written narratives of 28 participants' experience in one executive leadership development programme, to shed light on the way they explore and experiment with new working identities in the leadership development identity laboratory. It adopted a mixed-method approach. A series of six programme-related case studies per individual was analysed, written over a period of 15 months. Findings from this study were presented to the group after the end of the programme. As the author was also a participant in the programme, the methodology was qualitative and hermeneutic, with the author using "self as instrument". The narratives were studied through a conceptual interpretation approach. They show participants moving through an epigenic process similar to group psychotherapy. The study shows that group psychotherapy can be adapted to create an identity laboratory experience for executives, and that the process of writing can be a critical success factor in executives' passage through an identity lab experience.

Keywords: identity laboratories, identity transition narratives, leadership coaching, executive coaching, leadership development, evaluation of leadership development programmes, group psychotherapy.

Identity and the world of work

Transitions in working identities, while common, can be quite destabilising—particularly for those in positions of organizational leadership. It can be very difficult for leaders to find time for self-reflection, to gather honest feedback from a group of trusted peers, and to take the distance and perspective needed to evaluate options and test new alternatives. One response to this problem has been to create executive leadership development programmes that have a component of identity work as a part of the process.

In general, executive programmes are designed for mid- to high-level professionals in their early thirties to late fifties, who are contemplating career change or advancement. Thus, it should come as no surprise that people join executive education programmes not only for the content but also for another, often undeclared, motive, which is to create the time and space to take stock of their life and explore their personal agenda (Kets de Vries and Korotov, 2007). Indeed, taking a class in an educational institution can be seen as an example of transitional space (Carson, 1997). Although this may not be apparent as they enter the programme, many participants find that what was originally seen as an educational opportunity eventually becomes the first step in developing a new working identity (Ibarra, 2003, 2005), particularly if they are able to set aside "central, behaviourally-anchored identities"—their internal compass—and experiment with provisional selves shaped by task, social and emotional feedback (Ibarra et al, 2008). Mirvis (2008) makes a similar observation that executive programmes may be, under some circumstances, "consciousness raising" experiences which cultivate participants' self awareness, deepen their understanding of others, and help them to relate to society.

While questions remain about what exactly happens inside this transitional space, in fact it is very difficult to prove that anything happens at all. Leadership development programmes are certainly popular, and everyone wants to believe they are getting their (considerable amount of) money's worth. Studies of leadership programmes have shown that experiential learning can be quite profound when it stretches boundaries and takes participants to the limit of their comfort zones (McCauley, Moxley, & Van Velsor, 1998). But the design of most "transformational" programmes

is fairly new and the results have not yet stood the test of time, not to mention other empirical measures. True, participants tend to rate executive leadership development programmes highly—a phenomenon arguably related to the fact that, to a certain extent, those who attend such programmes are self-selected and then pre-selected as good candidates by programme directors. Given their high degree of motivation and expectation, participants are predisposed to seeing a positive outcome. They are top performers before the course even begins, and at the end, when the evaluation forms are filled in, they are in a "feel good" phase. But what happened to them during the programme to make them feel this way?

With the objective of enriching knowledge about the identity laboratory outcome, the research described in this paper is based on a qualitative, interpretive paradigm. It focuses on the identity transition experience of participants in a 15-month, seven module executive development programme at INSEAD, a global business school with campuses in Fontainebleau France, and Singapore. (I was also a participant in this programme, but I did not work on this research question until afterwards.)

The programme, Consulting and Coaching for Change (CCC), is designed to help senior executives to improve their coaching and leadership skills. My fundamental research question—Is there any indication that identity work occurs during a multi-module executive development programme?—has been asked before, so to add to the existing body of knowledge, I searched for insights in a different kind of dataset. Twenty eight of the 35 participants in the 2007-2008 CCC agreed to let me use their written case studies for this research (I did not include myself or my case papers). This consisted of a series of six papers (one after each module 1-6) each person was required to write during the programme.

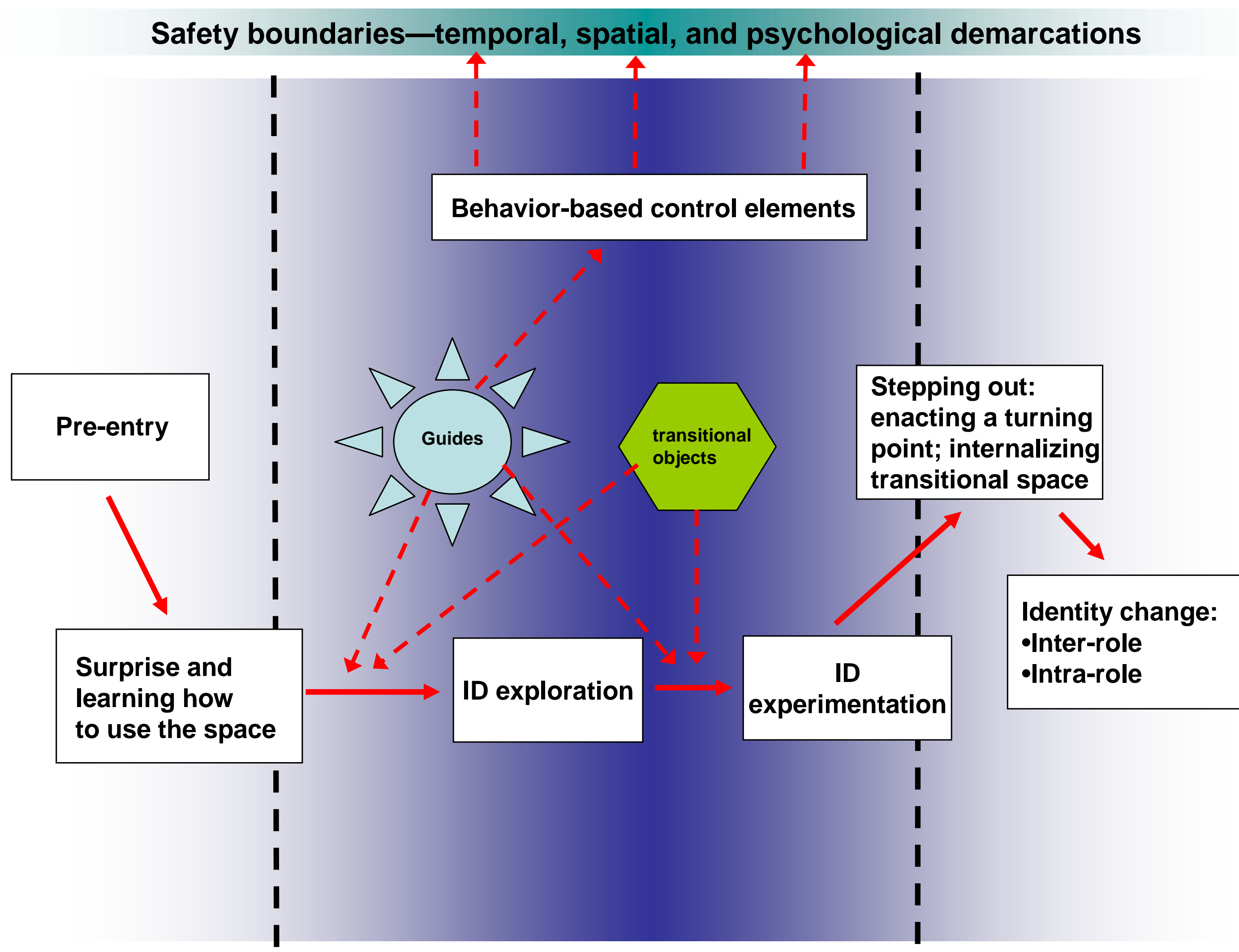
The focus of the programme remains on the world of work—in this holistic, systemic approach, both the micro (the individual) and the macro (the organization) are considered to be equally important. A psychodynamic framework is taught and a clinically-oriented form of executive coaching (Kilburg, 2004) is applied, as essential concepts in the pedagogical design. The clinical paradigm has been recognized as a solid foundation for the study of organizations (Zaleznik and Kets de Vries, 1975; Kets de Vries and Miller, 1984; Kets de Vries and Korotov, 2007; Kilburg and Levinson, 2008). This lens allows participants to dig deeper into their own identity, to

decipher the reasons underlying irrational behaviour, and to seek out and understand the ambiguities inherent to any change initiative (Miller and Rollnick, 2002).

Building on research and practice focused on applying the clinical paradigm to organizational dilemmas and leadership development, and on Ibarra's (2005) model of identity transition, which describes the process of liminality or the state of being "between identities", Korotov developed a theory of transitional environments which he called "identity laboratories" (Korotov, 2005, 2007). He hypothesized that in some leadership development programmes such an identity laboratory is created. Participants enter the laboratory and, at some point, begin to experiment with new roles and behaviours. This transitional space is enhanced as participants learn to watch for the irrational, intra-psychic and interpersonal undercurrents that may influence the way people behave in dyads and groups.

Korotov suggested that the identity laboratory is a safe space that is both physical and mental, the boundaries of which consist of a temporal demarcation, a spatial demarcation (a consistent use of the same physical space), and a psychological demarcation (guidelines are set to establish trust). Once inside the identity lab, he found, people are accompanied by, and experiment with, guiding figures and transitional objects. In interviews he conducted after the end of the programme, participants reported that not only had they identified and experimented with new possible identities, but that they had also developed a belief in their ability to implement these new ideas.

Figure One: Korotov's model of identity laboratories (Korotov, 2005)



And yet key questions remain. The concept of transitional space environments is still ill-defined and poorly understood, rooted in individuals' personal experience, complex and conceptually difficult to relate, and delicate, sensitive, and sometimes intangible (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). Participants who have attended a clinically-oriented leadership development programme or group coaching module often describe the experience as "life changing" or "a powerful personal transformation". But how can we be sure that the transformation is more than skin deep? Although these questions are rather ambitious, the scope of this study is more modest: it is intended to be a conceptual interpretation of participants' here-and-now experiences in one clinically-oriented executive leadership development programme. This paper is not meant to be prescriptive; it is simply descriptive of what I saw behind the scenes in one particular ID lab.

The Consulting and Coaching for Change programme design

Although Consulting and Coaching for Change (CCC) candidates are pre-screened in that each one has an entry interview with a programme director, and in addition must answer a number of essay questions that require a certain amount of self reflection, these activities are only a warm up. Virtually from day one of the programme, the CCC participants are thrust into the strange and awkward state of learning and applying new theories and coaching tools, and at the same time detaching themselves from the frontline of the action to fine tune their own observing ego.

From the beginning, the temporal and spatial demarcations of the ID laboratory are set. The course is always taught in the same classroom, and each module begins with a reflective space open only to the participants and the faculty coaches. At the end of each module, the subsequent module is evoked, reminding participants that, step by step, they are progressing through a programme that will one day come to an end.

Another critical element of this ID laboratory is the psychological demarcation. The programme directors, who are also the faculty coaches, are not only business school academics but are also trained and experienced psychotherapists. They have a high level of skill in coaching competencies, including knowledge of organizational and

group dynamics, leadership, strategy and economics, and family systems. In addition to their capacity as teachers, they are the guiding figures described by Korotov. Their presence helps to create the ID lab boundary of safety and containment. They also serve as role models for the nascent coaching and change experimentation of the participants—and finally, they provide a constant reminder that the guiding philosophy of any reflective change agent must be: *Do no harm*.

In the first and second modules, the faculty coaches introduce the clinical paradigm, and basic skills, like effective listening, are tested. Here, participants step into the ID laboratory and learn to use the space. In addition, in module 1, participants form small groups and each person is asked to tell the others in the group about an event, personal or professional, that changed his or her life in a significant way. This early experience of self-disclosure serves to set the ID lab boundary of trust and encourages self-reflection. The faculty are not present for this exercise and so the participants are forced to seek safety and comfort in their small group. (Not all small groups have a positive experience, however; there are sometimes personality clashes, which the small group must learn to deal with.) Although participants subsequently change groups several times during the programme, most of them are able to quickly recreate a feeling of security in their new group. (There is some intentional overlap, in that an individual will always find him- or herself with one member from the previous group.) Thus, from the earliest days of the programme, the participants become accustomed to what is in effect a group therapy design.

Although a great deal of informal one-to-one coaching occurs during the programme, most of the coaching interactions take place in small groups, as the above description indicates. Within the context of this programme, the term “group coaching” refers specifically to a psychodynamically informed and highly personal developmental process in which a group of executives are coached in each of the seven modules by the programme directors (the guiding figures in the ID laboratory), and by their peers in small coaching groups. Themes presented in lectures are taken out of the classroom into the group sessions, where they are immediately discussed and later tested in the working world. Examples of themes include human and organizational lifecycles, family systems, emotional intelligence, and group dynamics. In addition, in module 4 each small group works with an executive coach trained in the group coaching process

for an intensive leadership 360° feedback coaching day. This approach is both didactic and applied, as the participants *coach* and *are coached* within each module. There is an emphasis on both the individual and the system, as groups discuss lifecycle issues (Levinson, 1977) and organizational role analyses (Newton et al., 2006).

Like group psychotherapy, group coaching in this context helps to establish a foundation of trust, commitment to change, and accountability. Within the boundaries of the programme, as individuals work together and observe each other over time, the group becomes the pillar that supports coaching work; the relationships among learning partners become, and remain, very meaningful. Through discussion with faculty coaches and peer coaches, and by reflecting on their peers' life stories in small group sessions, participants become more aware of the interpersonal role(s) in which they consciously or unconsciously cast themselves. They begin to see patterns from their childhood or experiences from young adulthood reoccurring in their workplace relationships.

Later, as participants work on action plans for leadership development in small groups of trusted peers, three powerful motivating forces—shame, guilt, and hope—come into play. Participants initially feel shame as they admit to certain behaviours, and this prompts them to make a declaration of intent to change. The sense of guilt they anticipate if they disappoint their peer group is a strong motivator to continue on the path of change. Knowing that their peer group is supportive and empathetic instils in participants a sense of hope that they will be able to meet their goals.

To be sure, some groups work better than others. The process sometimes breaks down, which can lead to even further insights and learning as the group examines the dynamics of that particular situation. Generally, however, all of the emotional experiences that come out of the group setting—in particular as people share and discuss their own feedback on 360° survey instruments and their action plans for future development—help to facilitate change (Kets de Vries, 2005).

During and after each module, participants explore—in case papers, small group meetings, and conference calls—what lies beneath the surface, and use what they discover there to help them re-evaluate the authenticity of current life experiences.

After each module they go back to the "real world" and often begin to experiment with new behaviour or identities. In a feedback loop, they return to the next module, where very often the topic of case papers and conversations will focus on their discoveries and their identity "experiments."

By the third module, in which the focus is on family and family business, people's emotions have become engaged in the learning process. This is where the hard work begins, as people have a natural tendency to resist the ever-tightening focus on their own motivational drivers and behaviours. Defensive reactions continue—for example, challenging the faculty's competence or commitment to the programme, or by not writing case papers or engaging fully in small group discussions. The fourth and fifth modules are less lecture-oriented and more experimental. In module 4, results of participants' leadership 360° feedback surveys are discussed during a group coaching day. In module 5, a two-day simulation on group dynamics forces participants to confront the sometimes uncomfortable experience of regression in groups, and other group processes. The faculty coaches begin to withdraw to the sidelines in a metaphorical sense, as people turn to their small group peers for support and deeper insights—indeed it is more likely to be a peer than a faculty member who provides the catalyst for deep identity work in these modules. Here many participants talk about disorientation, confusion, doubt, failure (their own or programme design), or messiness—for a period between modules that lasts several months. Then, after the fifth module, participants realize that they have progressed more than halfway through the programme and the temporal aspect of the ID laboratory becomes more concrete. The sixth and seventh modules are designed to be periods when people consolidate their insights and create narratives to help them describe their identity work and their identity discoveries. As this description of the different modules indicates, the design of the CCC programme incorporates a short-term dynamic psychotherapy orientation (Yalom, 2005)—not only as a concept to be studied, but also as a pedagogical framework.

An overview of the dataset

Twenty eight of the 35 CCC Wave 7 (2007-2008) participants agreed to allow me to use their cases for this study. There were 14 men and 14 women of diverse nationalities; most were European (Belgian, British, Danish, Dutch, German, Greek,

Irish, Russian, and Swiss), but the sample also included a Canadian, an Indian, two South Africans and one Zimbabwean. The ages ranged from 32 (one participant) to over 50 (six participants), with nearly half the group (11 participants) between 46 and 50 years old.

Participants were required to write a case paper after each module 1-6; there was no paper required after module 7. Twenty four provided a complete case series (N = 144 cases). Three participants did not write a case after one or several modules; one of these told me he was stuck at first, and I did not ask for an explanation from the other two people. I considered the fact that these cases were never written to be revealing in itself, and I counted these participants' series as valid (N = 12 cases). One person lost her first case; as I did not find a high level of identity work across the other module 1 case studies in my dataset, I considered her case series to be valid (N = 5 cases). The total number of cases I collected and read for this study therefore was 161.

Why study written texts?

A study of written texts produced during the limited period of such a programme provides a new and different lens because the case studies capture the experience of the participant as it unfolded. The participant is not responding to a set of interview questions, nor trying to recollect and reconstruct events after the fact, and has not produced an evaluation of the CCC programme upon demand. The case study *assignment* was never to write about the group coaching experience or a personal developmental journey, or even about identity work. In fact the only guideline, after all six modules, was simply: "Write a case study showing how you have applied the concepts or topics learned in this module to your professional or personal context."

Participants in the CCC were asked to write a case study for several reasons. First, the papers help the writer to consolidate theory and practice from the preceding module. Through writing, participants capture what they are feeling and experiencing. The case papers become focal points for debate, exchanged and commented on by members of each small coaching group. Finally, as previously described in the psychotherapy context (Pennebaker, 1999), and here in the classroom, the act of writing helps participants to uncover and organize complex emotional experiences.

Participants had a great deal of freedom to interpret the assignment in any way they wished, with very few rules: the paper should be about seven pages long and should be given to the small group peers before their conference call, which was typically scheduled for several weeks after each teaching module. The papers could (and did) take almost any form the writer felt comfortable with at the time. Participants did not know that they would later be asked for permission to use their collected case papers in a research study. Finally, the degree to which the researcher (me) influenced the participants' writing was minimal, since I was a participant myself, had no control over what was written, nor any research-oriented interaction with fellow participants during the course of the programme.

Another advantage of the CCC written texts is that they capture the participants' here-and-now experience of the group psychotherapy process. Group members' reports are a rich and relatively untapped source of information; however, "there is an art to obtaining clients' reports. … The more the questioner can enter into the experiential world of the client, the more lucid and meaningful the report of the therapy experience becomes." (Yalom, 2005, p. 4). By using texts that were not initially written for research purposes, I was able to enter this experiential world.

Although they were not written to be reflection papers, the case papers were rich and revealing narratives on four levels. On the first level, quite a few of the cases written after modules 1 and 2 followed the assignment fairly closely, recounting incidents at work and reflecting on them. On the second level, many individual cases were life stories, and some resembled myths or fairytales, with dangerous or life-changing events. This level appeared in most (but not all) cases after module 3, the module on families and family business. At the third level, a few of the cases were ID labs in and of themselves: the individual seemed to be playing and experimenting with a new writing style and/or describing a possible new identity. Reading yet another kind of case on this level, I felt like I was like joining the person on a joyful or fearful exploration of a very private *jardin secret*. Finally, I discovered a fourth level which was a surprise to me: reading an individual's case series 1–6 in order, straight through, very often revealed a coherent and complete narrative arc, from prologue, through dilemma, tension, new insight and understanding, and finally reaching a state of denouement and completion. I found this to be true for virtually all 28 of the case

series, although clearly none of them had been written with an overall narrative arc as a fundamental objective.

Many participants reflected in their texts on the central importance of the stories they had to tell, an experience that was sometimes accompanied by anxiety:

> F8-3[*] "Writing case stories for CCC is about writing something meaningful to me at this moment in my life. Something both business and personal related and something where I can connect both my ongoing experiences and personal challenges into the theory related to the modules."

> M9-3 "[Previously] I found the constant changing of my story unnerving and puzzling. I saw a sort of embarrassment with my close others when I tried to give words to the process and expected outcome of my transition. This made me insecure and I felt very inconsequent and irrational. … After reading Ibarra [Ibarra, 2005] I changed this completely, seeking active feedback and reactions on my experiences and stories. This made my transition far less lonely than my earlier transitions …"

One participant (M28-2) included a passage from Omar Khayyam that summed up his impression of the narrative creation process (and underlined another important characteristic of written narratives—their permanence):

> "The Moving Finger writes; and having writ,
> Moves on: nor all your Piety nor Wit
> Shall lure it back to cancel half a line,
> Nor all your Tears wash out a word of it."

Knowing that their small group peers would read their narratives and give feedback created a sense of urgency, responsibility and accountability for participants to move forward and face the confusion. Shame, guilt or hope, the work had to be done, but then they had an empathetic group to help them make sense of it. This pushed people to experiment and refine their identity exploration. As one participant wrote about a

[*] Participants' quotes are identified by gender and a number I assigned, followed by the number of the case from which the quote was taken, thus F8-3 is female participant number 8, case 3.

new project he was developing: “I could use the work to write cases for CCC”. Some used the cases as a means to collect their thoughts, looking for insights or deeper reflection. Others were forthright in admitting that as they started writing, they weren’t sure where the case would end up—an indicator that it was not just a report of ID work in the real world but that *the case itself* was a sort of ID lab. There was evidence of playing *in*, or playing *with*, the case studies in cases that followed all six modules:

> F11-1 “To bring this exercise back to the here and now, I felt comfortable experiencing and thinking about this case, but uncomfortable writing about it. … I found myself seeking for at least a little truth which would make my essay satisfying.” [NB: the case as an experimental place in and of itself].
>
> F25-2: “It’s a big relief to write everything down and look at it from ‘outside’ and by doing so try to get answers on some open questions.” [NB: writing helps bring new insight].
>
> F11-3 “I am writing my essays as lived – from the start onwards.” [NB: the case as an experimental place in and of itself].
>
> F14-3: “What became very clear to me in writing this down [are] pattern[s] I had not been aware of.” [NB: writing encourages a deeper level of reflection].
>
> F12-4 “This paper is has also help me to step back. It has been cathartic.” [NB: the act of writing brings some relief].
>
> F3-5: “This case is special. Not that the other cases were not, this is special because here I attempt to confront my fears.” [NB: writing encourages a deeper level of reflection].
>
> F2-5: “There was no opening to this case and there is no closure. It is sort of a circle, a merry-go-round.” [NB: the case as an experimental place in and of itself].

> F14-6: "But where should I begin? [in exploring the topic chosen for this case] … I will try to follow my own development over time and try to figure out what brought me to where I'm standing right now. Even to me that sounds like a feeble journey. Let's see what will become out of it." [NB: the case as an experimental place in and of itself].

A search for meaning and understanding

The narratives showed that identity experimentation and exploration, as described by Korotov, was taking place in this programme. Patterns emerged in the narratives over the course of the modules that could be used as evidence that change was occurring (Polkinghorne, 1983), and these patterns pinpointed what was happening when I looked for meaning in these texts through a hermeneutic, interpretive approach, allowing for "ambiguity, reflection that integrates several interpretations, and double meanings, of living with opposed meanings (ambivalence), both of which may be consistent with a given situation" (Loewenberg, 2000, p. 106). The goal of this kind of interpretive social research is to focus on what events and objects mean to people, on how they perceive what happens to them and around them, and on how they adapt their behaviour in light of these meanings and perspectives (Rubin and Rubin, 1995).

In addition, an interpretive approach requires the researcher to engage and participate in the context that she is studying in order to understand it (Schwandt, 1994). To accomplish this, I drew on my familiarity with the phenomena (as a participant myself) to determine their meaning in an act of fusion of the researcher's situation and the phenomena (Dilthey, 1990). Through the lens of an interpretive paradigm, I examined my own experience in the CCC ID lab in parallel to the point of view of the subjects in my study. I was concerned with capturing a *subjective reality* through a prolonged process of interaction, first as participant myself, and then later as I read the texts.

One of the participants (F4) commented on using her 'observing ego' in a work context, writing: "I did not use a rigid, structured interview in order to be able to standardize my answers, but [decided] to go for free-floating attention and listen

carefully." Similarly, my approach to delving deeper was to apply, as I read, the art of listening, not directing my observation to anything in particular and maintaining the same "evenly suspended attention" in the face of all that I came across (Van de Loo, 2007, p. 230).

Reading the narrative arcs of the six case studies, I did not feel I was being fed an interpretation or recreation of events, but that I was living through the events with the participant in a tranquil, private world confined to the two of us. These were tragi-comic tales told in words that are not common in the business school classroom: confusion, catharsis, surprise, anger, pain, fear, disillusionment, discoveries, ashamed, worthless, autonomy, hope, freedom, delight, a lifting of heavy burdens, acceptance, serenity, honesty, transparency.

I listened with my third ear, and not only to my partner on this intimate journey but also to my own emotions. Over and over, as I read through the six cases in a series, I would have real, sometimes disturbing, sensations of sadness, frustration, tension or stuckness. Occasionally, I found myself skimming through the first few case studies in a series, feeling somewhat detached or even bored. In the 'middle' cases, I would sense a tension building up, as if the writer had more to say but was not ready or willing to express it. Then in the last cases, perhaps case 5 or maybe not even until case 6, there would be a dramatic change as the writer turned away from a structured, rigid writing style toward a free-flowing exploration of deeply personal issues. Although there was often no clear-cut, narrative conclusion, I had feelings of relief, and I realized I had been anticipating and even desiring that particular denouement.

In other instances, after reading case 5 or 6, in which the tone changed or the participant wrote about feeling relieved, unstuck, happy, or maybe still confused but optimistic about the future, I would find myself almost euphoric, as if I had lived through the long year that led to this state of grace and resolution *inside his or her head*. The authenticity of the sensations (sadness, fear, boredom, frustration, relief, optimism…) that I picked up from reading the six written texts as a fully developed story, are, I believe, evidence that the case reports allowed me to enter, at least to some degree, the experiential world of the participants. In some cases, I watched as identity experimentation took place on stage; other times, it was like watching kabuki theatre or simply hearing "voices off".

Some of the participants had a similar writing style all the way through, showing either a high level of poised, calm reflection on self and context from the beginning, or an energetic self analysis from page one. In many cases there was self-reported evidence of identity work, that is, people wrote about new projects they had designed, or a new working identity they were considering. For some, there was a dramatic tipping point when they switched from a typical business case study to a deeper level of self reflection. A few even completely changed their writing "voice" in later case studies, as if a new identity was emerging without their being fully aware of, or in control of, this phase of identity exploration.

What struck me as I read the case series was that, taken as one narrative, they had a real and coherent logic. I had not predicted, even after re-reading my own case series, that what appeared to be a collection of six random essays about individual insights and events would turn out to be one story—not rewritten or reframed as an explanatory narrative in retrospect, but a complete narrative in and of itself. Many cases circled deeper and deeper around one meta-theme as the authors looked for identities that they had somehow lost or had never fully understood. The unifying narrative theme of these stories seemed to be to search for, or *rediscover*, one's true self.

For the most part, cases 1 and 2 were introductions or prologues, taking the form of typical business cases with varying degrees of linking theory to practice. Case 3, which followed the module on family systems and family business, seemed to take people deeper, where doubts and fears lay. Defences (in some cases) began to break down or (in other cases) were reinforced. As F2-3 wrote: "This case was very difficult for me to write and that's why it probably took so long. It still doesn't feel to me as a case, but rather a collection of reflections. The topics mentioned are touching the core of my personality and thus are extremely difficult to work with." The "low point" typically began here as people felt that they were prisoners of their past. Cases 4 and 5 were quite diverse, but almost all demonstrated or reported some evidence of identity experimentation. Case 6 was often what I thought of as the "epilogue or denouement" for most, as they consciously ended their story and talked about their (specific or open-ended) plans for the future.

The case papers of M15, a lawyer, were particularly reflective. His first case is a free-flowing but introspective case about listening and family history.

> "During one of the exercises, it became clear that I think in terms of solutions. I hardly gave the other person an opportunity to tell his story. How did I develop this behaviour? I grew up in an entrepreneurial family, the second son in a family of five children …"

In his second case, M15 begins to think more deeply about the irrational reasons behind human behaviour, and the theme of *illusion* comes to the fore:

> "What moves a human being? What is the reason for behaviour and reactions? In this case I describe a number of situations which lead to the conclusion: the illusions of life. It is a confrontation with myself, and very sobering."

In case 3, M15 picks up the theme of his family again:

> "During module 3 it became clear that my personal, lifelong battle to change my family structures is not realistic and therefore a waste of energy. But what is more important: I can change myself."

In case 4, M15 reflects on his 360° leadership behaviour survey feedback. Here again, he mulls over illusion and reality. He brings up a new theme:

> "Why do I care about other people's opinions?"

Then in case 5, M15 reports that he has "broken through a wall" and now feels free to be his true self, even though this would have a considerable impact on both his professional and personal identity:

> "I have lost an illusion and I have come another step closer to myself."

In case 6, he confirms that the programme itself has been a significant catalyst for his new way of thinking about himself:

> "The CCC programme has given me insight into what it takes to come closer to your true self. I am no longer attached to the truths of others."

At the end of case 6, he brings closure to the theme of illusion:

> "We are not captured in the iron grip of the past. We are captured in the iron grip of the illusion that we have to protect ourselves from what has happened in the past. When we experience the present like it really is, it is surprisingly unburdened most of the time."

Another person, M20, had a very different style and approach. His level of self reflection was subtle and played out on a larger stage. His first paper is a formal case study of the clinical paradigm and how he might apply it to his executive team. In case 2, M20 writes at length about leadership in his organization. Case 3 begins as a formal report on his interest in strategy and its application to family business; once again, there is little evidence of personal reflection. In case 4, however, it is clear that a tipping point has occurred. The title, "Leadership, power, rank and authority - and the collusions of my competing commitments" pulls the themes of the previous cases together and brings them to a very personal level. In the opening lines of the case M20 writes:

> "These themes crystallised to become very clear messages for me to work with. I was surprised how much the feedback from module four affected me this time. It was as if the time was ripe to really do more about it."

For M20, understanding begins to emerge in case five. He writes about marginalization of people, communities and nations, and describes the recent history of his own country. In closing case 5, he writes:

> "Strangely, when I started to write this case paper I thought I could communicate some elements about marginalisation and of my own people's plight and struggle in being marginalised. I'm not sure I succeeded and I don't actually care anymore. Through this paper I was coming to terms with my own past, trying to understand it."

Case 6 brought M20 closure, as he connects his national heritage with his reservations about leadership:

> "Writing this paper helped me deal with my heritage and identity. It was painful, yet it was immensely satisfying. When it was finished, I felt relieved, peaceful, whole and thankful. It was a cathartic experience and a work of reconciliation and integration."

A narrative of a future self

As I read the case series, I had the perception that the individuals had been writing chapters in a narrative of their future selves, informed somehow by a deeper, subconscious source that connected it all together before the individual was able to articulate it as one story. In other words, the cases were not presented to me, the researcher, as a narrative that described or validated an identity change. They were simply class homework assignments—supposedly. But they were not simply an exercise in sense-making but rather, observed at a meta-level, an exercise in *unmaking* elements of the writers' identities that they now believed to be *non-sense*—no longer authentic patterns imposed upon them by figures in their 'inner theatre'.

There were outliers among the writers. Some seemed to have an inherently greater self awareness, or were more able to control their defensive reactions, or had a stronger motivation to enter the ID lab earlier on (losing a job or strong desire to change careers). This was apparent even in cases 1 and 2—they never wrote typical business cases. A few showed evidence of other kinds of tipping points earlier than most for various reasons (one person lost her wedding ring after module 2). A few people did not write one or more of the cases at all, which simply served to confirm the eloquence of silence. At the other extreme, a few case sets remained at cognitive, "reported" level until case 6, but it was possible to feel tension building from case to subsequent case as I read between the lines. Here, people who had written thoughtful but very focused and structured reports ("on task" in terms of the original assignment) "suddenly" had a complete change of writing style and topic in case 6—the 'hand on the doorknob' effect—sometimes, as they admitted, after hard pushing from their small group peers. This usually took the form of a peer saying: "Who are you really?"

In some cases it was possible to tell almost from the beginning what the person was searching for: emotional freedom and expression; freedom from rigour; freedom from certain responsibilities; an exploration of rank and power—these themes would be repeated over and over again in different forms as the writer looked both forward and backward in subsequent cases. Sometimes people wrote very movingly about exploring or recovering a part of themselves that had been lost or hurt when they were younger—F8-2 wrote: "His words felt like sharp knives and the look in his eyes made me feel a pain similar to the pain I remembered feeling when my mother verbally punished me for not living up to her expectations during childhood. I felt attacked, ashamed and worthless. Not being good enough, not doing what was expected from me"—and, like F8, later wrote about ways to find resolution: "The intention of my life, in this present moment, has to do with living my identity. And by doing so, the intention is to assist others in living theirs. It is about inspiring and helping others, both individuals and organizations in understanding and in living their authentic identity." (F8-4)

To summarize, the six case studies in each series gave me six snapshots of the way people perceived and experienced their time in the ID lab. The meaning that emerged case by case often became understanding in retrospect, when the cases were reframed as aone set of evolving ideas. As McAdams et al observe: "Sometimes there is an awareness of a state of being in the transition. At other times, people are unaware of having undergone a time of change until they look back and see that they and their lives are inexorably changed. They may wonder, "How did I get here?" (2001, p. xvi). Read at a meta-level, the cases series helps to answer the question of how the participants "got there"—even though "there" was a very individual point of reference.

At the same time I was sensitive to the fact that just because I did not see dramatic evidence of ID experimentation, this did not prove that it had not occurred. Yalom cautions: "Keep in mind that it is the subjective aspect of self-disclosure that is truly important. … What appears to be minor self-disclosure may be the very first time [a person has] shared this material with anyone. The context of each individual's disclosure is essential in understanding its significance" (p. 131). This is where having access to the full case series was also valuable. For example, when in case 5, M16

wrote “even the writer himself may be ‘stuck’ in a number of other ways”, I considered it to be, in context, as a subtle but significant self disclosure.

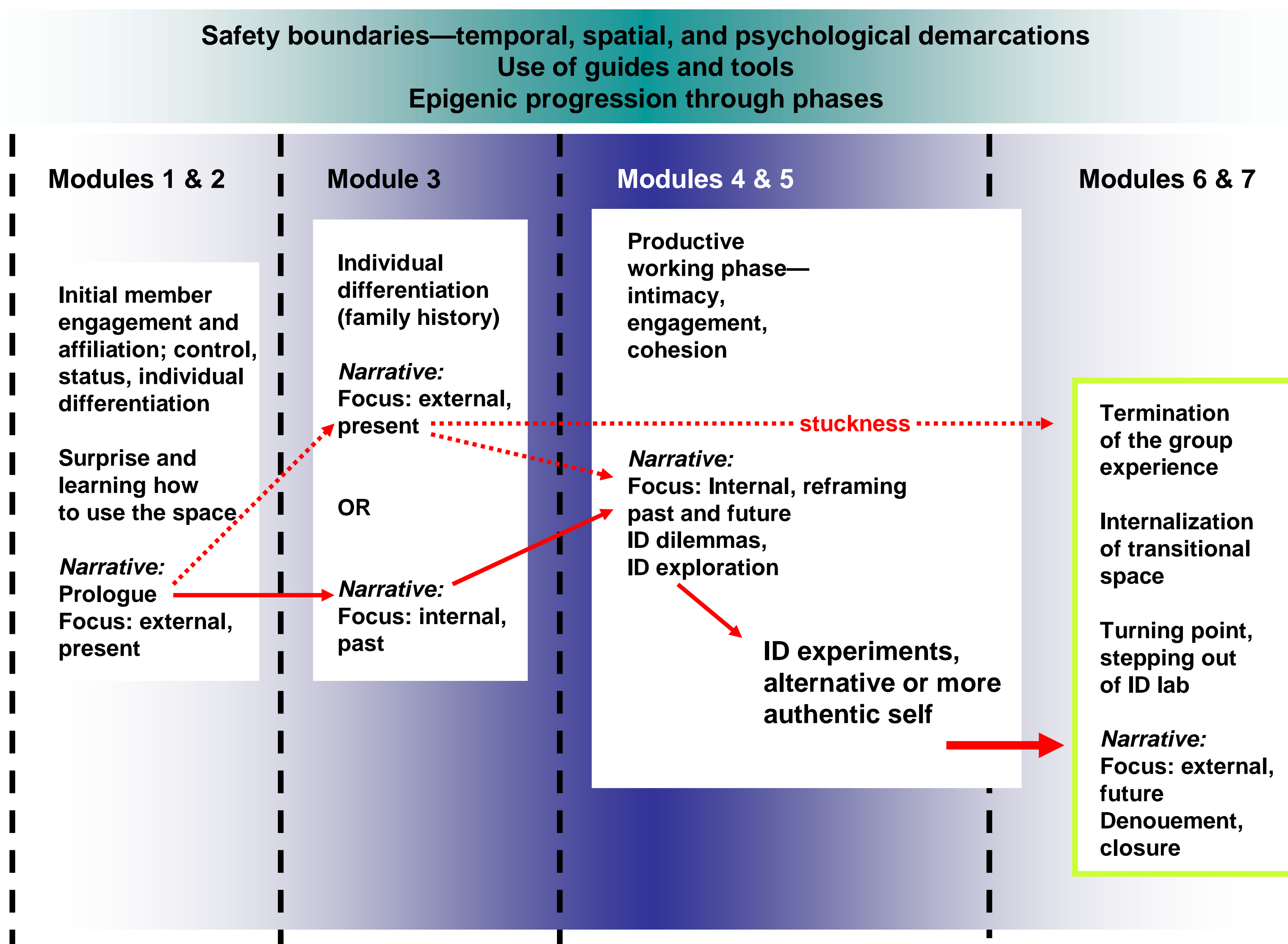
The lab report

As Korotov predicts in his model of ID laboratories, I also found numerous examples in the case studies of surprise, confusion and defensiveness after modules 1-3. The cases that followed modules 4 and 5 reported and/or demonstrated ID experimentation, with many mentions of the importance of the peer group. Case 6 typifies the termination or stepping out experience. In addition, I noticed two turning points in terms of narrative orientation: the first most typically in case 3 from “external, present” to “internal, past”; and the second typically in case 6, from “internal, past” to “external, future”.

Comparing the emergence of themes in these narratives to a framework of group psychotherapy gives us a further indication that the CCC modules/intervention phases have successfully integrated an epigenic group psychotherapy process, and have a similar direct influence on participants. People were indeed moving through epigenic stages in their small groups: 1) initial member engagement and affiliation; 2) focus on control, power, status, competition, and individual differentiation; 3) a long, productive working phase marked by intimacy, engagement, and genuine cohesion; 4) termination of the group experience (Yalom, 2005).

It also appears from reading the case packages that there is a secondary epigenic *narrative* process that takes place during the programme: 1) prologue; 2) introduction—focus on external, present; 3) identity dilemmas—focus on internal, past; 4) identity exploration and experimentation—internal focus on reframing past and future; 5) consolidation and denouement—focus on external, future. Most significantly, there seems to be some relationship between *not developing* through the epigenic phases of writing cases in parallel to the development of the group psychotherapy progression from module to module and *stuckness* in terms of epigenic progression through the ID lab (see Figure Two, below).

Figure Two: Inside a multi-module leadership development ID lab



Although the case papers indicate that individuals move through these phases at a different rate, the narratives show that, for most people, identity experimentation begins after the fourth module. However, it appears that the foundation for the deep change which occurs in modules 4 and 5 is laid in modules 1 and 2, with an intensification in module 3. For some participants, experimentation does not begin until module 6. This suggests that longer, multi-module executive development programmes are well-suited to identity transition.

Peer support and feedback is reported and demonstrated to be a key factor in identity experimentation. For most participants, the obligation to write a case study to be read by a small, trusted group of peer coaches seems to prompt, reinforce, and enhance experimentation in the ID lab. Participants themselves describe cause and effect relationships between their own tipping points and 1) module contents; 2) insights that emerge while writing cases; and 3) peer feedback. This implies that the groundwork of training participants to be effective peer coaches in the first modules is worth the time and effort.

The texts also show evidence of internalization. If internalization is said to occur when people accept the influence of a change situation, environment, or other individuals because the content of this change and the ideas and actions behind it are seen as intrinsically rewarding, congruent with one’s value system and useful to meeting one’s needs (Korotov, 2005), then, based on an evaluation of the themes in their papers, we can conclude that internalization of behavioural change is indeed occurring for many participants inside the CCC ID lab. In addition, because there is solid evidence that people are progressing through an epigenic psychodynamic process of group therapy in CCC, we can posit that this will also correlate significantly with enhanced productivity and achievement.

For triangulation, this paper and my findings were presented to the November 2008 CCC alumni conference. The audience included approximately 60 CCC alumni, about one third of whom were included in my research. The findings and my ID lab model (Figure 2) were well received, with the group giving a high degree of confirmation.

Future research

This brings us inevitably to a question that cannot be side-stepped: What do we mean by enhanced productivity and achievement in the context of executive leadership development programmes? It would be interesting to conduct a content analysis of the CCC texts that would test the thematic interpretations in this exploratory paper—and search there for evidence of drivers such as desires for affiliation, power and achievement that would deepen our understanding of the motivational levers that support identity work and sustainable behavioural change. This may have some relevance to studies on motivation to lead, and whether or not this affects willingness to embark on identity transition. Further, a content analysis might show that the ID lab experience directly results in the development of self awareness, self efficacy, increased emotional intelligence and team orientation, as suggested by this current exploratory study. A test-retest quantitative longitudinal study could be conducted, using the same 360° leadership behaviour survey that this sample of CCC participants completed. This retest study could be compared to a test-retest study of a group of similar executives undertaking a leadership development programme that did not have a clinical orientation. Linking the results of these studies to the emotional intelligence research stream might show that increased emotional intelligence implies better emotional capabilities and leads to transformational leadership.

Limitations

On the one hand, this study is like an archaeological reconstruction: it is possible from studying bits and pieces of people's lives to understand them a little better, but much of their social environment can never be known. On the other hand, as a researcher examining the CCC ID lab, I had the advantage of knowing the context intimately, since I was also a participant and went through the same process of case writing as the other participants. Therein lies both a strength and a weakness: I have undoubtedly projected some of my own realities into what I read. To draw richer insights from the 'pottery shards' I have collected, a content analysis should be done and triangulated.

After this meta-level exploration of the 161 case studies, the only conclusion that can be reached is that, for most participants, some degree of self reflection and indication

of identity exploration and experimentation can be found in their written case studies. However, we cannot draw the reverse conclusion, that is, if there is no written evidence of experimentation then this must mean that no experimentation took place. Similarly, although a tipping point may not be apparent in the arc of a person's six written case papers, it nevertheless may well have occurred.

I did not have a 100% participation rate and I did not ask for reasons from the people who did not wish to participate. One person explained that the sooner his cases were forgotten, the better. However, even if we conservatively assume that the non-participants never entered and played in the ID lab (which I intuitively do not believe to be true), *all* of the participants in my sample report or demonstrate change in their case papers. The very diverse spectrum of case writing styles, from classic business case to free-flowing personal reflection, indicates that there was not really an issue of self-selection that prompted people to share their cases with me. On the contrary, I felt an extremely high level of trust among the group as manifested by their willingness to allow me to read papers in which they often expressed self doubt and very private family matters.

A final word on the act of writing

For many participants, talking over their case with peers was a real call to reflection and action—writing plus discussion proves to be a very effective way to engage the powerful influence of peer groups. The cases also served as "objects" that connected group members and helped to maintain those connections. For example, the group conference calls were often followed by informal telephone calls among specific group members who wanted to elaborate on a point or ask further questions about the case study. In addition, group members would also send their case studies for comments to other participants who were no longer, or never had been, in the current peer coaching group.

The tremendous importance of the reiterative process of writing in the here-and-now about identity experiments and then discussing the case with trusted peers after each module, is an element of leadership development programmes that has possibly been

underestimated. In their case studies, participants were not *polishing* identity narratives, they were *capturing* emerging narratives, stories which were often very surprising even to the writer. The act of writing the cases seemed to force people to think about themselves more deeply, and over a much longer period of time, than they ordinarily would do in our sound-bite, elevator-talk world.

Surprise, surprise—it turns out that the writing process in and of itself plays a critical role behind the scenes in the identity lab. Writing—something, anything—for most people seemed to be a key pathway for emotion to emerge and be reframed or transformed into something actionable through exactly the process Loewenburg (2000) described; a longitudinal repetition in mode or content of themes indicated a *latent unconscious scenario* that, for many CCC participants, was indeed heard and interpreted. In other words, it seemed that they *already knew*, at a subconscious level, who they wanted to be, and where they wanted to go. But this reality emerged slowly, piece by piece, through a long and sometimes painful process of internal detective work, shaped by feedback from guiding figures. The new identities were not a *result* of the narratives; they already existed. As M23 wrote: “Odysseus is you. And me. We all make his voyage, we travel from life to life, experience to experience. We taste the sweet fruit of Lotus, ease into the oblivion of the Sirens, struggle between Sckila and Charividi, with nostalgia. But at last we return to our real home.”

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