

**Becoming Yourself:  
Identity, Networks and the Dynamics  
of Role Transition**

by

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**Abstract**

This paper consist of three essays. In the first, I develop empirical and theoretical support for the three identity mechanisms involved in the process of becoming: doing, identifying, and narrating. I argue that continuous processes of learning about oneself by doing new things (crafting experiments) and by building new network relationships (shifting connections) are punctuated by turning points that serve as occasions for crafting new narratives about oneself (making sense). I conceptualise these three dynamics as the core processes of *working identity*. In the second, essay, I elaborate on the second of the three mechanisms, the process of *shifting connections*. In the third essay, I build on the notion of *transition* as leaving one thing, without having fully left it, and at the same time, of entering something else, without being fully a part of it (Levinson, 1981) to argue that *playing with one's possible selves* is an essential part of the identity change process.

## **Essay 1: Becoming Yourself: Identity, Networks and the Dynamics of Role Transition**

Many scholars have noted the environmental turbulence that has changed the employment contract, produced boundary-less careers, and, as a result, increased the number of likely identity transformation over the life-course (Albert, et al. 2000). As scholarly work on identity shifts accordingly, from that which is core, enduring and distinctive about a person or group, to identity as relatively fluid and frequently unstable, the dynamics of identity change and self-reinvention remain ill-understood.

A fundamental assumption is that people construct identities and acquire professional skills and preferences through repeated practice and social interaction with significant others (Ibarra, 1999; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Making a career transition, like learning a new line of work, is a social learning process in which people become active participants in the practices of a social community, constructing new identities in relation to this community and its members by participating in initially peripheral yet legitimate ways (Lave and Wenger, 1991). But, at mid-career and beyond the process of assuming a new professional identity unfolds in parallel with a process of “becoming an ex,” and transition is rarely a simple matter of adaptation to an existing and easily observable role but rather a process of identifying or creating one’s own possibilities. Most research on identity construction, however, concerns early career socialization, status passages that are well institutionalised, and easily identifiable role incumbents. As a result, our theories do not fully capture the dynamics of changing well-entrenched professional identities and making work role transitions in which both the destination (i.e., what career do I want next?) and

processes for getting there (i.e., how do I get from my current role to something I cannot even yet envision?) are relatively undefined at the outset.

The three essays that compose this paper build on a qualitative study of 39 mid-career managers and professionals who considered making a major career change, defined as a change of context (e.g., company, industry, sector), content (i.e., what one actually does on the job) and a subjective assessment of deviating from the previously chosen path (Ibarra, 2003). I use the term *working identity* to refer to the process of identifying and experimenting with possible selves (Markus and Nurius, 1986) that compete with older, more socially and historically established identities. I propose that working identity consists of three related (but distinct) identity reconstruction mechanisms -- learning by doing, by building relationships with people who are what one is trying to become, and by constructing (and reconstructing) life stories. I use my study as well as existing accounts of role transitions to argue that small alterations in a person's work activities, professional relationships and networks, and self-narratives cumulate over time to produce major work role and identity changes.

**Mechanisms.** By doing new things and interacting in different networks, people make new meaning of who they are and who want to become, thus, rework "their story." These activities, relationships and narratives improve their knowledge about, and capacity to assume, new possibilities. At the same time, an eroding commitment to the old career, its professional norms and referents unfolds with decreased social activity contact in that sphere. Each of three mechanisms --doing, interacting and story-telling -- help the person in transition with the dual tasks of

disengaging from old, outdated identities while at the same time fleshing out still-unformed possible selves.

**Dynamics.** But, career change is not a smooth, linear process of disengaging from the old while moving towards the new: In between exit from an old role and full participation in another, is a transition period in which identity is multiple, ill defined and provisional. I argue that during an extended period of time, people are “between identities,” trying on many and varied possibilities, including remaining in or improving the old role. Turning points, conceptualised as instances of retrospective sense-making (Weick, 1979), escalate as the salience and intensity of relationships and activities premised on possible new directions and provide the narrative pegs on which to build one’s a reinvention story. People use these stories to make sense of a potential career change for themselves and to enlist the support of others (Gergen, 1997; Lave & Wenger, 1991; McAdams, 1997).

## **Essay 2: Shifting connections: The role of relationships in career transition and change**

Relationships shape our expectations about what a career can and ought to be (Gersick, Bartunek and Dutton, 2000). Once in a career, we develop through our relationships with others—the master teaches the apprentice a new craft, the mentor guides a protégé through the passage to an inner circle, the council of peers confers status within the professional community (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Although these critical roles are well documented in early career socialization and organizational entry research, how relationships affect later career processes has been virtually unstudied. Yet relationships have a potentially greater impact at mid-career, when transition is rarely a simple matter of adaptation to an existing and easily identifiable position. At

mid-career, relationships affect whether or not people remain tethered to outdated roles as well as their ability to explore and create new alternatives.

This essay identifies and defines the process of *shifting connections* --developing connections with people and groups who can help a person in transition explore new possible selves -- as a critical task of career transition. Career change is viewed as a transition process in which people linger between old and possible new identities for an extended period of time, before grounding a deeper change based on their own experience and practice in the new realm. Throughout this process peer groups, role models, guiding figures and professional communities (defined below) play key catalytic roles, by embodying possible selves, fostering “learning to be,” guiding the passage, diluting the strength of ties premised on the old role, and providing a safe base.

My central thesis is that career transitions are facilitated by dual relational tasks: forging new, high quality working relationships while at the same time ending or diluting the strong ties within which outdated identities had been previously negotiated. These two relational tasks – developing new professional relationships while at the same time weakening the old – form the process of *shifting connections*.

### **Functions of Shifting Connections in Career Transition**

**Embodying or shaping possible selves.** Possible selves, our images of who we hope to become, think we should become, or fear becoming in the future (Markus and Nurius, 1986), steer the person in transition to role models and help benchmark progress towards those ideals. The more vivid possible selves become, the more they

motivate change. One of the primary ways people make possible selves more vivid is by seeking role models that embody future possibilities (Ibarra, 2003).

Levinson (1981) noted the key role of “guiding figures” in helping the person in transition to endure the ambiguity of the transition period by conferring blessings, giving advice, and most importantly, believing in his or her “dream.” Much like a possible self, the dream “has the quality of a vision, and imagined possibility that generates excitement and vitality. At the start it is poorly articulated and only tenuously connected to reality.” The guiding figure embodies that possibility and shapes it through his or her efforts as teacher, critic, sponsor, or mentor.

**Facilitating a “learning to be.”** Learning any line of work is a social process in which we become active participants in the practices of a social community, constructing new identities in relation to this community and its members (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Apprentices do not learn a craft by going to school to learn abstract, textbook knowledge; rather, they learn to function as a part of a community in which their initial participation is legitimate but peripheral. People change careers in the same way: through side projects and extra-curricular activities they gradually increase their social interaction and involvement in a specific context with specific people (Ibarra, 2003).

**Guiding the passage.** Beyond inclusion and participation in a new professional community, the counsel of an elder (Strauss, 1968:93) or guiding figure also figure prominently in the process of “learning to be” because the person in transition cannot see what lies over the horizon: “He needs guidance not merely



because in the conventional sense he needs someone to teach him skills, but because some very surprising things are happening to him that require explanation...because the sequence of steps are in some measure obscure, and because one's own responses become something out of the ordinary, someone must stand prepared to predict, indicate, and explain the signs.”

**Diluting the strength of the old.** Even relationships that are patently destructive can keep a person tightly anchored to an activity or organization. People who know us well may want to be supportive but they tend to reinforce—or even actively try to preserve—the old identities we are trying to shed (Baumiester, 1998). Most people who consider a major career change face doubt, skepticism, conservatism and pigeonholing on the part of friends, family and close work associated (Ibarra, 2003). The classic example is the mentor who remains too invested in an outdated image of an unsure protégé to give him or her room to grow. But, it is difficult to detach from such relationships and therefore, identities, without substitutes that can attenuate the sense of loss that accompanies all transitions.

**Providing Safety.** To come up with a creative solution for a next career, a person has to be able to test unformed, even risky, identities in a relatively safe and secure environment, an incubator of sorts in which premature identities can be nurtured until a viable possibility emerges (Louis, 1996). While close relationships create such an environment of psychological safety (Kahn, 1996), it is difficult to implement a new way of being within the context of a relationship premised on a previously negotiated identity and role. New connections allow people to negotiate new, trial identities, providing a safe space within which they can imagine and try out

possibilities and in which they feel free to “try out” new personas without violating old expectations.

### **A Frontier Safe Base**

The idea that people construct identities in relationship with significant others is not new and neither is the notion that a transition, by definition, requires a break with the past. What is new and potentially generative is the notion of building a safe base on the frontier of the future. Network research has long argued that people find new jobs and possibilities by venturing into unknown networks via weak ties. At the same time, traditional research on mentoring relationships has emphasized the developmental role of strong, enduring bonds characterized by history and mutuality (Kram, 1996). The arguments presented here suggest these are not mutually exclusive. The strong bond that develops between the person in transition and the guiding figure or new community creates a transitional space within which a possible self starts becoming a real possibility. A necessary feature of this relationship is that it develops outside the web of routine professional interactions in which the person has been embedded (and may be trying to break out of).

This line of argument contributes to theory and research in organizational behavior in several ways. In research on career decision-making, a prevailing person-job fit model has led to excessive emphasis on self-awareness as disembodied knowledge garnered in solitary introspection or from abstract, general-purpose personality profiles. The ideas suggested here contribute to a growing relational perspective and extend it by linking relational dynamics to processes of identity construction and change. More generally, because relationship formation is so

intimately tied to processes of identification and identity construction, relationships can be used as concepts, frames or tools in this growing area. If the dynamics of identity need to be better understood (Albert, Ashforth and Dutton, 2000), then the study of relationships is one key tool for improving our understanding.

### **Essay 3: Identity Play/Identities in Play: Transition, Experimentation and the Process of Career Change**

To be in transit is to be in the process of leaving one thing, without having fully left it, and at the same time, of entering something else, without being fully a part of it (Levinson, 1981). A career transition is rarely a smooth process of disengaging from one role to assume another: a period “in between” identities, between old and new roles as well as between fantasy (possible selves in our minds) and reality (social identities enacted daily) defines the process of career change (Ibarra, 2003). In between, people experiment with a variety of provisional selves that serve as trials for possible but not yet fully elaborated professional identities (Ibarra, 1999; Markus and Nurius, 1986).

Once identity is *in play* (i.e., open to question and change), a playful (rather than “rational” or “efficient”) posture facilitates transition. In this essay I build on research on rites of passage and transitional phenomena to conceptualise this *between identities* period and frame the crafting and trying on of possibilities as *identity play*. I develop the link between play and transition and identify factors -- space, time and guiding figures -- that encourage playfulness with one’s selves.

#### **Liminal Experience and Transitional Phenomena**

**Liminality.** Van Gennep (1908) distinguished three phases in a rite of passage: separation, transition, and incorporation. During the middle, transition phase, called “margin” or “*limen*” (threshold in Latin), “subjects pass through a period and area of ambiguity, a sort of social limbo which has few of the attributes of either.” Turner (1969) defined liminal rites as experiences when the normal rules of everyday life are suspended for a concentrated period in which “anything goes,” and curiosity, exploration, frivolity and *joie de vivre* govern behavior.

In the organizational world, liminoid (liminal-like) experiences share a dedicated time and space, and the help of guiding figures, such that the person in transition can “violate the rules” or experiment with new identities, recombining or changing the tried and true without fear of sanction. Sabbaticals, vacations and leisure activity, for example, are temporal means of gaining freedom from institutional obligations and, therefore, freedom to play with new ideas. Neutral spaces or privileged areas like laboratories and skunkworks are set aside from the mainstream in order to encourage departure from existing norm and operating procedures. Off-sites and executive education programs are combinations of time and space designed by guides to facilitate playful reframing.

**Transitional Phenomena.** A different perspective on transition stems from the pioneering work of Winnicott (1959), who identified transitional periods in between more clearly defined stages of a child’s development. In these periods, children imagine various possibilities for themselves in the future and play out these possibilities via imagination and make believe. This play world is a boundary region, between an objective external reality and the entirely subjective internal world of the

child. “Transitional objects” such as toys and blankets are the bridges between the external and internal worlds of the child. “Transitional figures,” initially the mother, provide a safety zone in which the child can give rein to his or her imagination. In the space demarcated by the mother and play objects, the child can gradually define and test out a newly emerging self, protected from any danger.

Adults also discover principles and develop skills that are relevant in reality beyond play through experimentation with transitional objects in microcosms such as those defined by simulations, scenario planning, role-play (Schrage, 1999). A dedicated time and space, and the help of guiding figures create safe ways of exploring new and different ideas without incurring the risks of directly putting those ideas into practice in the real world.

### **Being Playful with One’s Selves**

In both liminal experiences and transitional phenomena, play or playfulness is the primary mechanism for transition to the next phase. As defined March (1977), “play” has several key attributes that distinguish it from “work:” 1. enjoyment and discovery rather than purpose drive behavior; people detach temporarily from serious means and ends, 2. once purpose no longer channels behavior, the value of efficiency plummets, replaced by the pleasure of taking the circuitous route , 3. rationality loses primacy as a guideline for decision-making, replaced by intuition, emotion and creative leaps, and 4. the normal rules are suspended, freeing people from the requirement of consistency. Entering a time and space *legitimately* dedicated to exploration makes it easier for people to rehearse possible selves, and therefore, to

create a different path for themselves. Below I outline how space, time and guiding figures facilitate career transitions by encouraging identity play.

**Space.** To make a successful career transition, a person has to be able to test unformed, even risky, identities in a relatively safe and secure environment. Two defining features of “safe havens” “protected milieu” or “holding environments” – firm boundaries that keep out the world, so that one may remain open to what will unfold within the protected space (Louis, 1996) – characterize many of the side-projects, temporary assignments and extra-curricular activities that people use to test possible selves (Ibarra, 2003). Experiments like these allow people to suspend “real world” requirements for consistency and rationality, testing unformed even risky or conflicting identities in a secure environment, until it is safe to claim an emerging identity -- publicly and privately -- as truly reflecting one’s self.

**Time.** Taking time, stepping back or switching to a less goal-oriented activity promote creativity and allow for innovative leaps by interfering with habitual behavior and by creating separation and safety from the everyday world (Staudemeyer, et al.). Time-out mechanisms like an executive programs, sabbaticals, or extended vacations improve a person’s capacity to find a new career direction by fostering experimentation (Ibarra, 2003). These breaks force the individual to step back from the daily routine while engaging them with new people and activities. Because the suspension of normal rules is temporary, a sabbatical or protected time imposes a time frame within which people can safely toy with possibilities, knowing they will have to come back to reality again.

**Guides.** The guidance of elders is an essential component of most transition rituals “because some very surprising things are happening to [the person in transition] that require explanation, because the sequence of steps are in some measure obscure, and because one’s own responses become something out of the ordinary, someone must stand prepared to predict, indicate, and explain the signs.” (Strauss, 1968:93). In career transitions, guiding figures make room for play by creating a safe zone within which the change idea can be nurtured and by providing separation from, and suspension of, the rules defined by the web of routine professional interactions in which the person has been embedded (Ibarra, 2003).

Career transition require experimenting or playing with possible selves. Liminal or transitional experiences allow people to try out new professional roles on a limited but tangible scale without compromising current jobs or leaping too quickly into the unknown. By crafting a side project or attending an executive education program people often achieve the safety, separation and suspension of the rules features of play, demarcating a boundary time and space within which they can safely explore new ideas, rethink priorities and find guides for the transition.

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