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## 35<sup>th</sup> EGOS Colloquium

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### Contribution for Sub-theme 18 *Enlightenment, Freedom and Work in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

**Title:** Learning the academic profession: positioning the self across relational fields and contexts of action

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**Learning the academic profession:  
positioning the self across relational fields and contexts of action**

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**Abstract**

This paper is focused on understanding how identity work unfolds along the learning trajectory of PhD students. The objective is to find out which processes play a role in the construction of the “researcher” identity. The paper assumes that academia nowadays is characterised by neoliberal discourses, which impact on PhD students’ identity work. Two main views emerge from literature on PhD students’ experiences: PhD students as needing peculiar forms of support since they are newcomers to the academic profession and shall get socialised to it; or, PhD students as active agents, who purposefully shape their own path and draw on different resources in order to thrive. This paper adheres to the second view to relate it to the debate about the neoliberal turn in academia and, more broadly, to the debate about professional careers in a changing landscape. Data collected in a longitudinal study on the experiences of a small cohort of PhD students in a UK university support the arguments. The findings allow drafting a novel conceptual framework which links identity work, positioning and learning, and proposes knowledgeability as a potential way to shape professions against the neoliberal discourse. Thus, this paper is relevant to the Sub-theme Enlightenment, Freedom and Work in the 21st Century; in particular, it helps to understand how neoliberal values are internalised and how workers can escape the neoliberal mindset.

**Keywords**

PhD students; academic profession; neoliberalism; identity work; positioning.

**Wordcount: 3086** (including references)

## 1. Introduction and rationale

This paper is focused on understanding doctoral students' identity work. It is claimed that this topic can significantly help to comprehend the dynamic between freedom and control characterising more professions in the neoliberal era.

Traditionally, the trajectory of PhD students has been conceptualised as "learning to fit" in a specific environment, i.e. academic institution and discipline (Gardner, 2010; Golde, 1998). However, recent literature shows that PhD students are active agents, well-committed to shape their own path, which might go beyond a specific institution or discipline (McAlpine, Amundsen, & Turner, 2014). This is not surprising when considering that a longtime ago Baruch and Hall (2004) have convincingly demonstrated that the academic career has been showing traits of the protean or boundaryless careers characterising more professions nowadays. Given that the number of PhD graduates is much higher than the number of available academic positions (van der Weijden, Teelken, de Boer, & Drost, 2016), early career researchers are more and more aware of the need to build a diverse portfolio of knowledge and skills, and might behave strategically (Teelken & Van der Weijden, 2018). Thus, PhD students might be more agentic than mainstream literature studying their experiences suggests.

A considerable amount of literature shows that academia is characterised by neoliberal discourses, where, as argued by Ball and Olmedo (2013, p. 91), "Results are prioritised over processes, numbers over experiences, procedures over ideas, productivity over creativity". These discourses comprehend: managerialism and accountability (Deem & Brehony, 2005; Shore, 2008); a market-orientation in relation to attracting students (Molesworth, Nixon, & Scullion, 2009); increasing entrepreneurial drive (Etzkowitz, 2013); a benchmarking culture, and the consequent pressure on academics to perform to win the battle towards getting to the top of world university rankings (Pontille & Torny, 2010; Teelken, 2015). These discourses impact on how academics shape their own careers (Clegg, 2008; Teelken, 2012), often by restraining their choices (Archer, 2008a; Leathwood & Read, 2013), and hindering the achievement of equality (Teelken & Deem, 2013).

Thus, it is interesting to understand how the trajectory of those who are working on getting the credentials for a full access of the academic system (i.e. PhD students) unfolds among the neoliberal discourses, and particularly the meanings attached to this trajectory. The concept of identity work is helpful, because it focuses on the meanings that people attach to their

selves when reflecting on their relations with the surrounding world (Beech, 2008; Brown, 2015; Somers, 1994; Ybema et al., 2009). Following Brown and Lewis (2011), identity work comprises both agency and power (subjects discipline themselves by identifying with specific professional practices). Interestingly, the concept of identity work is very used when discussing how academics respond to the neoliberal discourses (Archer, 2008a, 2008b; Clegg, 2008; McAlpine et al., 2014); however, the concept itself can be considered a neoliberal construction, since it stresses on the primacy of individual agency and individual accomplishments (Knights & Clarke, 2017). To overcome this problem, this paper defines identity work as a social process where individuals make sense of their own experiences through positioning themselves and others in their context of action. Positioning is a discursive process, which brings power relations to the fore and stresses that people are immersed in a web of relations (Davies & Harré, 1990). When applied to identity work, this concept implies that identity should be seen as a social process (rather than an individual one). Furthermore, literature using the concept of positioning is well aware that identities are a narrative construction (i.e. they might be performed for a specific audience). Therefore, the concept of positioning helps enriching the study of identity work.

This paper studies PhD students' identity work to understand how a professional trajectory unfolds, how subjects internalise and reproduce power relations, and if / how they are taking a particular stance upon the neoliberal discourses characterising their context of action. The remaining of this paper will introduce the research design for this study, a summary of the findings, and conclude by discussing contribution and limits.

## **2. Research design**

This paper aims at answering the following questions:

RQ1: how does the process of identity work unfold along the doctoral journey?

RQ2: how does the current neoliberal environment characterising academia shape the process of identity work outlined above?

The broader aim is to better understand the dynamic between freedom and control in professions nowadays.

A longitudinal study has been conducted: three rounds of biographical interviews took place between 2015 and 2017 (October 2015, March 2016, and January 2017) with a group of 7 PhD students coming from the same University (a research-intensive institution in the UK),

but two different disciplinary areas (natural sciences and psychology). At the time of recruitment, the PhD students were in their first year (or beginning of the second). Among them, 2 are part-time mature students, who rely on their own funds. Recruitment occurred through formal channels, and the participants were unknown to the author. Interviews had a narrative form, and resembled an informal conversation. Interview sessions could take from 45 minutes to 1 hour and a half; they were documented via notes, and transcribed verbatim. Analysis focused first on each individual narrative; cross-comparison followed.

### **3. Main findings**

The PhD students interviewed have made a well-thought through choice and are aware of the challenges they might meet along the doctoral path. Interestingly, all the PhD students showed to regularly reflect about one's own motivation to do a PhD and position in respect to their friends, peers, supervisors and mentors. Because we defined identity work as a social process, where individuals make sense of their own experiences through positioning themselves and others in their context of action, the analysis focuses on investigating positioning and context of action. The findings are challenging to summarise, given the multiplicity of experiences PhD students go through along their journey. Consequently, some typologies characterising the positioning processes and the context of action in which identity work unfold have been identified.

To study positioning processes, it is necessary to understand who are the *meaningful others* for the research participants. The PhD students participating in this research are immersed in a diverse constellation of relations, including: supervisors, mentors, department colleagues and peers, PhD students in other institutions, close friends and relatives, colleagues and superiors at other institutions (for part-timers especially). The work of positioning depends on these meaningful others, who act as models (to reject or to get inspiration from). This paper claims that positioning the self among meaningful others brings to a work of modelling one's own identity: this work of modelling depends on the characteristic of the relation with the meaningful other; particularly, it depends on the actual strength of this relation (relation which is reputed highly important and to which the individual is especially committed), and practical relevance for the accomplishment of one's own PhD. When considering strength and relevance together, four different typologies of relationship, which support positioning processes, are proposed (see Figure 1 below). Relations high on both relevance and strength are highly nurturing relations providing intense learning experiences: these relations are

powerful in modelling PhD students' identity. However, these relations are also the more likely to be subject to power and politics. Relations which are highly relevant, but weak, might be potentially problematic (this is exemplified by the case of students having issues with the supervisors). It is worth stressing that strength and relevance change along time, this making of identity work a continuous, unfinished process.

**Figure 1:** network of relations which model positioning processes.

### Relational fields

+	Playing field	Garden field
-	Disco club	Mine field
	-	+
	relevance	

Positioning processes feeding identity work depend not only on relational fields, but also on their context of action. This might include their research group, the institution in which they are formally enrolled as PhD students, their disciplinary community, but also other organisations. Moreover, the context of action depends on the type of expertise that the PhD students want to develop. Thus, the context varies in breadth (local, national, international) and diversity (depending on the variety of the knowledge and skills that subjects want to nurture); following this, four different profiles can be elicited (see Figure 2 below). Identity work in the case of the PhD students implies positioning themselves and others in one of these four profiles. The privileged profile is influenced by the relational fields exemplified in Figure 1 (especially by relations high on both strength and relevance). Each positioning profile assumes specific power relations. The label given to each profile is meaningful: for example, comets have high visibility, and they might serve as role models as well.

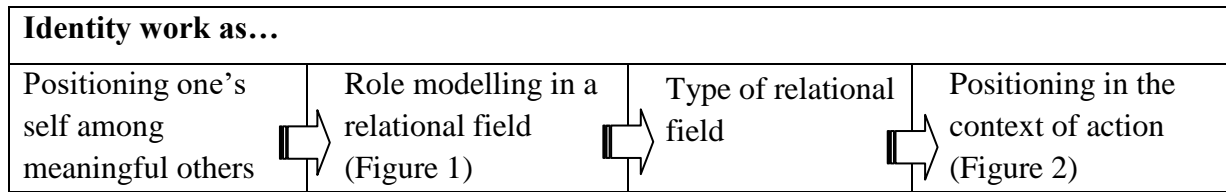
**Figure 2:** positioning strategies in doctoral students' context of action.**Context of action and positioning**

breadth	+	Comet	Traveller
	-	Follower	Challenger
		-	+
		diversity	

The comet might be considered as the embodiment of the neoliberal (academic) subject: a subject who has deep knowledge in one specific area, and whose context of action has a large reach; they have high visibility and are looked at as role models (this typology and its label have been inspired by one of the research participants). It is not suggested that all the comets are necessarily neoliberal subjects; instead, it is suggested that in the current academic environment the neoliberal subject is better embodied by individuals whose profile resembles that of the comet. For some of the students this represents an ideal, and it is embodied by some of their role models (e.g. supervisors). Since comets have high visibility, neoliberal discourses might be more likely to be diffused (even involuntarily) by comets through role modelling. Often PhD students, especially the youngest ones (who have limited life experiences) embody the position of the follower: their action is limited in reach and they observe their environment in search of models. They might aim at becoming comets (as more of our participants do), or challengers (cultivating different experiences in order to find their own way).

To summarise, this paper argues that identity work unfolds through a process of positioning one's own self among meaningful others. This process depends on a relational field (Figure 1), which is going to impact on how individuals position themselves in a context of action (Figure 2). Relational fields characterised by high relevance and commitment have a stronger impact on identity work, and they are the ones in which the discourses characterising a profession are typically reproduced; neoliberal discourses in academia are more likely to shape the comet type (and then being reproduced again by this type). The model is exemplified in Figure 3 below.



**Figure 3:** a new understanding of identity work

The process of identity work, when understood as above, represents a learning process: it allows subjects to nurture their expertise in different ways (put it simply, by aiming at depth of knowledge or at diversity of knowledge). Thus, comets have knowledge depth, while travellers have knowledgeability (Wenger, 2010), i.e. they are able to grasp diverse knowledge in complex landscapes and across communities. In our data, this was particularly true in the case of the part-time students. Interestingly, the part-time students seem also to be the ones who less embody the neoliberal (academic) subject: despite they have highly internalised the routine of time management, they are less worried about output quantity and they seem to be the ones who more nurture their own interests and creativity, and feel free to cross professional boundaries. It might be suggested that cultivating knowledgeability has the potential to overcome the constraints of the neoliberal discourses, thereby challenging the neoliberal mindset.

#### 4. Discussion & conclusion

This study shows that identity work is both a social and a learning process: it unfolds through a process of positioning, which depends on modelling one's own identity in a context of action (Figure 2); the modelling process is best impacted by the strongest and relevant relationships (e.g. the garden field, Figure 1). As a learning process, identity work might bring individuals to work on their own knowledgeability (RQ1). Also, it is showed that the current neoliberal discourse might better thrive in the case of comet individuals, while the travellers are the ones who can better overcome the potential constraints created by the neoliberal environment thanks to their knowledgeability (RQ2). Figures 1 and 2 presented above have no ambition to generalise, instead they aim at exemplifying a very complex web of relations, and stressing the social nature of identity work when learning a profession.

These findings are based on a very small sample in one institution. However, they allowed proposing a model (Figure 3) which originally stresses the link between identity work, positioning, and learning, and might be used to study other professions. This represents a

considerable development in relation to studies on identity work. Furthermore, it is suggested that knowledgeability might represent a possible way for individuals to overcome neoliberal discourses and shape different paths. This means that individuals' autonomy is not simply about creating one's own space, as argued by Clegg (2008), but it is about reshaping one's own social context of action.

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