

“Identity and Contested Concepts of Professionalism”

Centre for Professional Service Firms hosts first workshop for academics

The recently launched Centre for Professional Service Firms at Cass brought together over 30 academics last month to present and discuss current research on the relationship between identity and professionalism. Richard Gillingwater, Dean, Cass Business School, opened the workshop by welcoming the distinguished visitors to Cass. Professor Laura Empson, Director of the Centre, outlined the significance of the topic, particularly at a time of traumatic change within the professional sector and highlighted the substantial interest that this workshop had generated.

Professor Mats Alvesson (Lund University, Sweden), one of the world's leading researchers in the field of identity and professionalism, presented a forthcoming article which questions conventional explanations of why professionals appear willing to submit to demanding working conditions. Together with his co-author Dan Kärreman, he argued that professionals do in fact resist the pressures that their employers place upon them, but they internalise this resistance. In other words, rather than jeopardise their position in the firm by expressing this resistance openly, they develop an internal discourse which embodies their conflicting desires (which Alvesson and Kärreman term “counter-resistance”). Whilst employers may perceive that the professional is consenting to the organizationally-imposed demands, the suppression of this resistance may ultimately give rise to sudden and unexpected resignation.

Professor Yiannis Gabriel, Royal Holloway, University of London, gave an emotionally powerful presentation on the identity crises faced by managers and professionals in their fifties who suddenly find themselves unemployed. He explored how the trauma of unemployment is incorporated into identity construction, showing how some professionals cling to their old professional identities long after they have lost their jobs and how this lack of flexibility can make it very difficult for them to find new work.

This harrowing exploration of disorganized, diffused and fragmented identities was followed by Professor Laura Empson's presentation about the identity challenges faced by full-time functional managers in professional service firms (such as Heads of HR, Marketing, Finance etc.) who may find themselves labelled as “non-professionals” by these organizations. She explored how the lack of respect and appreciation shown to these “non-professionals” may have a significant and detrimental impact on their identity, as well as their ability to perform their roles. The workshop participants explored parallel problems in the health service, technology industries and universities.

Professor Cliff Oswick, Queen Mary, University of London, presented Professor Maxine Robertson and Audrey Cook's research on the relationship between performance and identity for workers in the investment banking industry. Their findings suggest that the abilities of workers to perform aesthetic and emotional labour are as important as their technical skills and, perhaps surprisingly, that this applies equally for men as well as for women. The paper explored the tension for these workers between the requirement for behavioural and presentational conformity and the need to distinguish themselves as unique and invaluable.

The final presentation of the day was by Professor Andrew Brown, University of Bath, who presented his paper entitled, 'Being regimented: Aspiration, discipline and identity work in the British Parachute Regiment'. He explored how the aspirational identity of being a 'real' Paratrooper is constructed by the Regiment through the socialization rites of new recruits, as well as the ongoing rituals of storytelling and the culture of surveillance. He argued that the aspirational identities are for many Paratroopers ideals that can never be fulfilled however well they perform, and that this unrealistic aspiration represents a form of discipline and control. As with Mats Alvesson's study of consultants, while the Paratroopers spoke of resistance to hierarchy and the working environment, they still retained a strong desire to conform and be accepted according to their professional norms.

Workshop participants noted the surprising parallels between the identity work of members of the Parachute Regiment and lawyers in elite firms.

Professor David Sims concluded the workshop by outlining three themes arising from the workshop: how identity work varies over time, so that we “moan on Monday, groan on Tuesday and comply on Wednesday”; how identity work involves thinking several different things at once and whether thoughts of rebellion and compliance are ever truly separable; and how professionals seem to be particularly vulnerable to insecurity and narcissism and that this can be used as a powerful force for discipline and control within the professions.

Thanks to Imogen Cleaver for helping to write this report.