



4

Researching Identity *A Critical Realist Approach*

Abigail Marks and Joe O'mahoney

INTRODUCTION

This chapter is slightly different from the others in the book because it deals with a substantive topic of investigation (identity) rather than a type of research method (say, interviews or ethnography). There are two reasons for this. First, the prominence of identity as a topic in (especially critical) management studies has led to methodological polarization between those who see identity as a rational, cognitive, and objective artefact and those who see it as a highly fragmented construct of language. Thus the (re)definition of identity that we attempt first in this chapter has strong consequences for the methods by which it is studied, which we tackle subsequently. Second, the nature of social research means that the identity of the researcher, in our view, must be considered in relation to the subjects which they themselves seek to study. A clearer understanding of identity will, we hope, support the researcher in assessing their own constructions when undertaking any form of study. Many of the methods that we later identify as suitable for the study of identity are covered elsewhere in the book; the present chapter connects them to a substantive approach.

From the 1980s onwards identity studies have been one of the most prolific movements in social science. We use the word movement instead of topic because, for the most part, its teaching and study has involved a transformation in thinking that has divided conservatives and liberals as to its utility (Bawer 2012; Windschuttle 2000). Much of the division has come down to ontological assumptions about what identity actually is (Olson 2007) and how consequently it can be researched and studied. We argue that the two dominant but polarized positions in this field—social constructionism and social identity theory (SIT)—have significant limitations which are based



upon ontological weaknesses. We subsequently argue that a critical realist ontology can provide a strong alternative to these approaches and, illustrating this argument with an example drawn from recent research by one of the authors, draw out the methodological implications of our argument. In doing this, we do not seek to build a specific 'domain level' theory of identity (see O'Mahoney and Vincent, this volume) but instead to provide a broad sketch of how critical realism can be used to build bridges between seemingly incompatible positions, and assess the implications of this middle position for methodology.

DOMINANT POSITIONS ON IDENTITY

Within identity studies, two dominant positions can be traced. They are social constructivist, or postmodern, positions drawing on philosophers such as Foucault, Derrida, and Lacan, and empirical or positivist standpoints, in particular social identity theory (SIT) which builds on the work of Tajfel (1971; 1972).

The former, those which give primacy to the constructive power of discourse, are now dominant. These studies, which deny a non-discursive reality (in their 'strong' form) or refute any possible knowledge of such reality (in their 'weak' form), have done much to highlight and question the power relationships which generate and sustain social categories such as 'disabled', 'immigrant', or 'terrorist' and the meanings with which they are associated. For post-structuralists, who embrace an ontology which rejects either the existence or the possibility of knowledge of a non-discursive realm, there are three philosophical issues for a critical analysis of identity. First, in seeking data about identity, constructivist accounts need only rely upon describing discourses, primarily through interviews with the subjects. As constructivism is incapable of judging between the validity of different texts, interviews are necessarily taken at face value. The possibility of subjects being incorrect, or untruthful, about their own identities is logically impossible under an ontology which puts terms such as truth, objectivity, or reality in inverted commas. Second, an account in which all conceptual tools must ultimately be reducible only to discourse weakens the theoretical potential of social constructivism in explaining how identity is created, altered, or destroyed (Bhaskar 1989: 60). Third, as a strong discursive approach dissolves all notions of the individual into language games, it generates an anti-humanism which is impotent in explaining how resistance is possible in the face of discourses generated by organizations, professions, or governments. As a consequence, the emancipatory potential of constructivist identity studies is diminished by a failure to engage with, or even recognize, the embeddedness of identity in social

structures, such as class, where distributions of power can, according to realist positions, limit the resources available for building stable or ethical identities.

On the other hand, understandings of identity from a social identity tradition are also subject to limitations. SIT (e.g. Ashforth and Mael 1989; Turner 1982, 1984) looks at the degree to which people define themselves in terms of their membership of a collective and how their feelings of self-worth are reflected in the status of the collective. The approach was originally devised by Henri Tajfel who was seeking an understanding of discrimination and fascism. Tajfel et al. (1971) set up a group of experiments—the minimal group studies—using school children to examine the mechanisms through which people who were previously unaware of each other formed a collective identity. However, because SIT is derived from experimental studies rather than actual empirical phenomena, the body of work has focused less and less on the 'real life' instances of discrimination and fascism that were so close to Tajfel's heart and could be argued to have limited relevance to actual situations. The minimal group studies involved a particular experimental situation and therefore it is problematic to generalize sufficiently to form a theoretical position. As Hacking (1995: 47) notes, 'the fact that a given phenomenon is tractable enough to serve as an example of a theoretical position does not in any sense lend weight to the theoretical argument, since it is likely that such a phenomenon may prove equally tractable to other opposing positions.' According to social identity theory and self-categorization theory, individuals can develop two principal identities. People possess a personal self, which encompasses unique, idiosyncratic information about themselves in addition to a collective self (or social identity), which encompasses information about the groups to which they belong (Tajfel 1972). Social identity is concerned with the extent to which individuals feel attached to a specific group in addition to the status and characteristics of this group relative to other social categories (Tajfel and Turner 1986). Despite the acknowledgement of these two identities social identity is viewed as the dominant driver for behaviour.

When discussing social identity, Tajfel and Turner focus on the collective properties of social identity and how activity within a social setting is determined by social identity. Yet, they take a rather confused position in suggesting that the individual then takes discrete action in terms of decisions to move between similar social groups based on individual choice. Whilst there is a clear position on the abstracted tendency for an individual to assimilate with collective forms of understanding, there is an artificial separation of the individual as a rational agent and the individual as a social actor within a group. SIT also tends to separate individual behaviour from the subtleties of the social context and fails to understand how processes of both individual and social categorization and representation are embedded in a complex context comprising wider cultural practices and material settings (Billig 1985; Condor 1996; Michael 1990; Wetherall and Potter 1992). Whilst SIT acknowledges the

individual self, most action is described in terms of social relationships and membership of social groups. As Brown and Lunt (2002) suggest, an individual may leave an organization not only because of a discredited social identity, but also as a result of processes of globalization, flexibility, and temporal specialization as well as their own individual role and position within the labour market.

The weaknesses of both the constructivist position and the social identity approach to identity emerge, primarily, from their ontological commitments. In relation to post-structuralists, the failure to distinguish between ontology and epistemology (see O'Mahoney and Vincent, this volume) results in an 'invisible' self that can only collapse into discourse, resulting in explanatory weakness and emancipatory impotence (Fairclough et al. 2002). For SIT, individual identity appears to be solely determined by group membership with little variation in the individual characteristics held by group members. Hence, all that is left are essentialized properties. A critical realist (CR) account of identity addresses these weaknesses.

IDENTITY'S UNDER-LABOURER

In this section we do not seek to promote a specific CR model of identity and focus instead on illustrating the general implications of CR for identity research. We do, however, assume both a distinction between social and personal identity, and also promote the role of reflexivity in generating agency, both of which are consistent with CR (Archer 2003) and are accepted in a broad range of critical literature. Thus, in analysing identity, researchers will need to either develop their own domain-specific meso-level constructs or draw upon existing authors who have developed frameworks that are explicitly or implicitly consistent with a realist ontology—such as Goffman (1972), Archer (2003), du Gay (2007), Polanyi (1958), or Bourdieu (1977). Caveats complete, let us examine the principles of critical realism as they apply to identity research.

Stratification and Emergence

A stratified, emergent ontology allows realist researchers to conceptualize different levels or entities upon which identity construction may be dependent, but irreducible to (for example, memory or reflexivity), or levels or entities which may be dependent upon, but irreducible to, identity (for example, culture). Emergence is important for two reasons. First, such a position is conceptually more sophisticated because it avoids collapsing identity into discourse

(downwards conflation) or assuming that identity is simply as assemblage of component parts (upwards conflation). Second, without the existence of identity as a distinctive entity, humanity (and the rights associated with it) becomes either an assemblage of parts or is 'disappeared' to mere fantasy 'suspended betwixt and between... subject positions' (Musson and Duberley 2007: 160). Second, through retroduction, emergence helps bridge traditional divides between disciplines which study different levels of reality. For example, one might feasibly ask 'what must the mind be like in order to help structure the dynamics of identity that we see?'¹ Even social constructionist accounts often imply that people have memories, emotions, interests, histories, and imagination (O'Mahoney 2011). What critical realism provides is an opportunity to retroduce such properties without the inconsistency of an ontology which denies the possibility of (the knowledge of) their existence.

Depth Ontology

Critical realism's depth ontology distinguishes real generative mechanisms² from actual empirical occurrences, and both of these from what researchers believe they observe. For research into identity, these distinctions are vitally important for two reasons. First, contrary to (constructionist) discourse analysis, a depth ontology allows for the possibility that a text (for example, an interviewee's account of their identity) is factually incorrect, either through mistake or deliberately. Second, a depth ontology allows 'actual' events to be associated with generative mechanisms that have real but contingent effects, an approach which, in turn, helps conceptualize how identities change. For example, if one represents discourse as a causal mechanism (Banta 2007), one can theorize its (lack of) effect upon identities at an empirical level as tendencies which are contingent, not only upon conflicting discourses, but also upon other mechanisms and entities, including the agency and interests of the subjects themselves (Marks and Thompson 2010) and social structures such as class or organizations (Sayer 2005).

This depth allows identities to be researched as embedded within wider class or economic structures. For example, Marks and Thompson (2010) use Thomas Frank's (2004) account of why many of the poorest citizens of Kansas vote for

¹ One might replace 'mind' with 'society' or even with a new term altogether. Indeed, the latter statement is an important consideration when assessing the epistemological relativism of critical realism (Al-Amoudi and Willmott 2011): one should be reflexive and critical of the language one uses in seeking to describe reality.

² The 'mechanism' language employed by many realists is unfortunate because it conjures images of a deterministic relationship between cause and effect. However, even a brief reading of realist texts show this to be a misunderstanding (Danermark 2002: 199). We have reluctantly adopted this term for the sake of consistency with other chapters and the wider CR literature.

a right-wing Republican agenda. Frank argues that the conservative movement managed to turn class differences into a cultural war that involved a 'systematic erasure of the economic,' providing a 'ready-made identity in which class is a matter of cultural authenticity rather than material interests' (p. 259). Conservatives won the 'heart of America' by convincing inhabitants of Kansas to vote against their own economic interests through a perception of the defence of traditional cultural values against radical bicoastal elites. Yet, it is argued that 'all they (the people of Kansas) have to show for their Republican loyalty are lower wages, more dangerous jobs, dirtier air, a new overlord class that comports itself like King Farouk—and, of course, a crap culture whose moral free fall continues, without significant interference from the grandstanding Christs whom they send triumphantly back to Washington every couple of years' (p.136). A simple constructionist position would have assumed a naive ideological acceptance of conservative values and ignored broader cultural and structural determinants of identity. A realist analysis may allow the extraction of the complexities of the interplay between interests and identity. So, whilst the people of Kansas held interests which could be argued to be in line with conservative voting, such as a belief in religious conservatism, there were other material factors which they had no control over: the media and the wealthy have the power and resources to mould interests or perceptions of interests as the less wealthy do not have the resources to oppose or resist.

Entities and (Potential) Powers

From a critical realist perspective, discourse and identities have properties and powers that can be retroduced from empirical observations. Analytically, this allows the researcher useful distinctions between entities, their properties, the potential powers they possess, and the actual powers that are exercised. With this framing, discourse has a number of properties, such as signs and meanings, and a number of potential powers, such as the ability to construct identities or create categories of meaning. However, due to the constraints of the empirical context, potential powers may not be exercised: identities might not be constructed because there are counter-discourses or because an agent chooses not to engage with that discourse, or because they believe a discourse is misleading or untrue.

The identification of entities and their properties enables critical realists to be more precise when specifying the distinctions and relationships between different parts of a system. For example, a common distinction that is made by realists concerning the entities of identity is that between personal identity and social identity (Archer 2000). Personal identity emerges from the embodied, reflexive self, in part forged through the interests³ and actions of

³ The critical realist account of interests is not one where they can be 'read off' from economic (or other) structures, and thus does not fall prey to the charges of essentialism or determinism which characterize the post-structural critique of Marxist interests (Marks and Thompson 2010).

that individual. Personal identity is shaped by the experience of being held accountable by others and is a result of conscious thought and reflection as well as practical experience and tacit understandings (Webb 2006). Realist interpretations of personal identity have a strong focus on internal process such as reflexivity, agency, habitus, or memory. Personal identity is often represented as a project to attempt to escape experiences of anxiety and uncertainty, where individual moral judgements result from personal preference or feeling rather than from external authority or positions (Jenkins 2004).

Such a perspective is closely bound to Marx's alienation or Durkheim's anomie—where norms (expectations on behaviours) are confused, unclear, or not present. Constructionist positions however, would articulate that the autonomous self or subject is nothing more than an ideological notion that deceives individuals into misunderstanding their own domination as self-determined and therefore accept their own subjugation. This presents a passive notion of man and of personal identity. Such a deterministic account of identity is inconsistent because it confuses organizational prescription with the diversity of practical experience and misreads the connections between macro-levels of political economy and the micro-level of everyday life and its meaning (Giddens 1991; Webb 2004). It is far more profitable to look at individual relations with and within organizational power structures and what Jenkins (2004) and Goffman (1983) call 'the interaction order' where the individual interacts with the macro.

Social identity, as articulated through a critical realist lens, is the navigated position between personal identities and the way in which people believe they should be perceived in a social setting. Social identity concerns the actual embodiment of the roles and categories that are generated in social structures which 'occurs at the interface of structure and agency' (Cruickshank 2003: 23). Whilst personal and social identities are separate, there is a dialectical relationship between them as the individual is constrained in her choice of personal identity by the social identities that society makes available, but by occupying, or acting out, a social identity, both the social identity and the individual are changed. The distinction between personal and social identity is an important one because without it what the individual understands and wants their identity to be becomes conflated with the opportunities that society offers.

Agency and Structure

Agency is central to the critical realist conception of the social world as it is the point by which the person and social structure, and therefore, personal identity and social identity are reproduced and transformed (Figure 4.1). Such an account enables a richer and wider explanation than might a purely discursive account. To take an example, Holmer-Nadesan's (1996) account of university workers

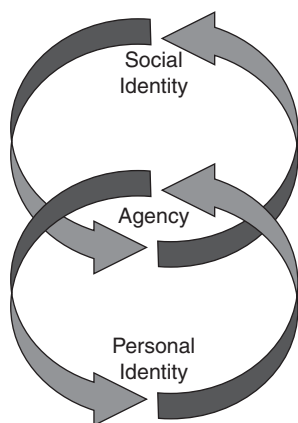


Figure 4.1 The Transformative Capacity of Agency

illustrates how the discursive controls experienced in their work generated acts of resistance, such as articulating alternative identities and dis-identification. Yet the focus on discourse, rather than social structure and the person, limits the wider implications of the workers' resistance. To take social structure first, we are not told how the workers' disidentification with their workplace identities affected their workplace performance, and thus their bargaining with their employers. Moreover, we are not told how their action (or absence of action) as a collective, or in relation to other collectives (for example unions), might influence the social rules and norms which govern their activities. In short, a focus on micro-politics and discourse elides the connection with structural power and the institutions which this might generate.

Further, the social constructionist derision of any personal properties as 'essentialism' also limits the consequences of the workers' agency for their current and future selves. For example, the workers' experiences of resistance, exploitation, or the effectiveness (or otherwise) of solidarity may have changed their plans, interests, and future strategies—concepts highly problematic for a constructionist position. Moreover, some workers also may have experienced stress, depression, or anxiety, again, concepts often derided as 'psychologizing' by constructionist authors.

Of course, the transformative capacity of agency⁴ is a human potential, rather than an actuality, and the potential of that capacity to be actualized is constrained, not only by social structures but also the human's position in that social structure at their birth: 'we do not make our personal identities under the circumstances of our own choosing. Our placement in society rebounds

⁴ Many critical realists adhere to Bhaskar's transformational model of social activity (TMSA). For more details on this, see Bhaskar (1989), Joseph (2000), and Collier (1994).

upon us, affecting the persons we become, but also, and more forcefully, affecting the social identities we can achieve' (Archer 2000: 10).

Historical Materiality

Contrary to constructionist accounts which 'deny the body' (Barnes and Mercer 2010: 68), realists adhere to an intransitive material reality which is independent of the transitive knowledge by which it is described. The material aspect of identity is not simply its physical performative aspects in the empirical world (such as wearing clothes, going to concerts, picketing corporations), nor even the material resources that enable and constrain identity construction (for example, wealth, freedom of movement, information architectures), but it is also the embodiment in a physical person: with a sex, a colour, or forms of disability. Such physical characteristics do not determine identities, either social or personal, but they are not simply social signifiers, the meaning of which is unconstrained and free for the writing. Our materiality is unavoidably packaged with our practice in the world.

The human body, like society, is held within a stratified, emergent reality. 'Our' neurons, and their relations, constrain and enable emergent properties such as memory, learning, imagination, and reflexivity, in a parallel manner to that in which our cells and their relations constrain and enable our actions. Moreover, these emergent properties have consequences for social identities through our agency which feed back into our personal identities through experience and reflexivity (Elder-Vass 2010: 89). For example, the poor memory and spelling of one of the authors led to a dyslexia diagnosis⁵ which led to finding coping strategies which, in turn, facilitated their entry into academia.

The temporal aspect of materiality is also evident in the generative processes which (can) impact upon the body and its emergent properties (Williams 2001). This concerns not just the physical (children tend to grow and aging cells tend to deteriorate), but also the mental: memories, for example, tend to accumulate and fade. Statements which locate our selves as emergent from, but not determined by, our physical and mental structures are not essentialist, certainly less so than positions that assume these levels are constructed only through discourse⁶. Personal identities are rooted, partially, in our physical

⁵ This is not to suggest that dyslexia, or the meanings associated with it, are not a product of twentieth- and twenty-first-century discourses and power relations, but that they cannot be disassociated with the practices of the embodied self.

⁶ Some go further in this respect and argue that the body has emergent properties which respond to, and interact with some aspects of the (aesthetic) world, in a non-discursive (though not unmediated) way. For example, Randley (1995) argues that the body's response to music draws on 'pre-verbal' constructs—an argument developed by Burr (2009) to include art and sex: 'experience is primarily given through the body and not through language' (p. 121).

and mental structures, and, importantly, our reflections upon those structures and the discourses that seek to locate these in social identities. The inclusion of reflexivity in the transformational cycle means that the tendencies generated by our physiology cannot be framed as determinants. The self is a product of emergent historical processes, but its reflection upon these means that its future is not determined by them (du Gay 2007; Parker 2009).

Criticality

Finally, a critical realist ontology provides greater scope for a critical, emancipatory agenda for identity studies than that provided by either constructionist or empiricist accounts. It does so in four ways. First, in distinguishing between the real, actual, and the empirical, researchers can differentiate between espoused and actual identities. For example, if, in 2009, an environmental activist was interviewed about their identity, a researcher may have assumed they had (inhabited, constructed, displayed, etc.) an identity associated with this position. However, when, in 2010, it was revealed that the activist was an undercover police informant this is not simply a matter of ironic juxtaposition or a collage of conflicting identities, but a discovery of an untruth—an important discovery in all but constructionist science.⁷ Second, the location of identity in an emergent stratified ontology allows the consequences (and antecedents) of identity to be located and better described. In the example above, the policeman's identity (and claimed identity) has consequences for both the reproduction of state power and surveillance, and, perhaps, the psychological tensions which might emerge from maintaining two conflicting identities simultaneously. Third, by identifying the enablers and constraints of potential identities, critical realists can better describe the psychological and social barriers to the construction of emancipatory identities and the agency with which they are enacted. Finally, the location of discourse and identity within a framework of structural power and inequality allows critical realists to link the ideology of power relations with social and personal identities that emerge from that power. Of course, constructionist studies drawing on Foucault have successfully demonstrated how this is achieved at a micro-level, but they often forget that Foucault was a realist who sought to locate discursive effects in a wider structural framework of power (Al-Moudi 2007; Pearce and Woodiwiss 2001). As such, 'critical realism shifts

⁷ This is not to say that the earlier account was not important and did not have causal effects. In the recent case of this occurring (Evans and Lewis 2012), the police officer admitted developing sympathies for the activists.

the direction of discourse analysis away from a single stranded focus on the symbolic representation and communication of constructed worlds towards a much broader concern with the political economy of discursive formation and its long-term institutional effects' (Reed 2000: 528). This commitment to structural positioning enables critical realism to reveal how interests of social groups might be the result of ideological conditioning without dismissing them as 'false' (Marks and Thompson 2010).

The critical potential of the realist position can be evidenced with reference to the debate around authentic identities. As many workplace studies have found, workers exposed to cultural or normative controls by management often 'act out' their roles (Collinson 2003), maintaining a cynical distance between their 'front stage' and 'back stage' selves (Goffman 1963). Yet, for many social constructionists, this smacks of an 'authentic' identity, which is, for them, just another form of essentialism (O'Dougherty and Willmott 2009). Thus, any claim by a worker to a real or authentic identity is necessarily 'imagined' (Costas and Fleming 2009) and, in any case, appropriated by organizations as another more insidious form of normative control, where workers are encouraged to 'be themselves' (Fleming and Sturdy 2010; Roberts 2005). As a constructionist ontology cannot distinguish between the validity of discourses, and cannot accommodate the distinction between a personal and a social identity, all identities are necessarily embedded in dominance relationships. However, the realist promotion of human agency and its distinction between personal and social identities enables a conceptualization of authenticity which is more sophisticated than the relativist version for two reasons. First, it allows the researcher to accept 'acting out' as precisely that—a refusal on behalf of the employee to engage their personal or social identities with workplace demands, even if their actions are strictly controlled. Second, it also allows the researcher to verify some of the claims of a participant as to the validity of their claimed authenticity. For example, if a worker claimed the identity of an anti-managerialist, left-leaning, unionist but consistently acquiesced in management demands and broke the picket line, then a researcher might reasonably suspect that their claims were problematic. It may, therefore, be assumed that there needs to be some degree of mutuality between acted-out and believed-in identities. Richards and Marks (2007) found several examples of cohesive teams which resisted managerial control strategies by enactment. Furthermore, Leary and Kowalski (1990) suggest that although impressions created by people may reflect internal thoughts (e.g. individuals who seek to be viewed as dedicated to their organization may truly be dedicated), on other occasions the impression maybe entirely false. Individuals can distance themselves from organizational scripts. So what they are feeling is separated, or can be separated from their performance.



THE CONSEQUENCES FOR RESEARCH

Research Questions for the Identity Researcher

A critical realist study of identity will concern itself with more than a description of identities and the discourses that describe them. Whilst this might prove interesting, empirical descriptions reveal little about the underlying mechanisms about why these identities and discourses exist, upon what they might be contingent, and the power relations which sustain them. Of course, many constructionist accounts have, *de facto*, achieved by implying real constraints to the power of discourse; *de jure*, a constructionist ontology is incapable of making such statements (O'Mahoney 2011). The ontological precision of critical realism allows a clearer description of identity, which in turn, has implications for the types of questions a researcher can ask in seeking to understand it. Table 4.1 provides a summary of the key principles of critical realism, their implications for identity studies and the types of research questions that CR researchers might seek to answer when examining identity. The questions are not meant to be exhaustive and the categories overlap significantly; however, it is hoped that the table will provide a useful prompt for those tackling a relatively new area for critical realist research.

A final, important point, is the inclusivity of critical realist research agenda. It can ask 'traditionally' constructionist questions about the discursive effects on identity at the micro-level, and research these in a similar manner—but can locate these findings within a wider framework that retroduces information about both social structures and the self and the relations between them.

There are few specific consequences of critical realism for types of data collection because 'methods do not uncover reality (relativist epistemology) but rational analysis of phenomena can uncover it (realist ontology)' (Pujol and Montenegro 2009: 85). However, there are three general caveats to this statement. The first is the focus of data collection. Whilst critical realists might use the same categories of methods as any other research position, they will seek to move towards understanding the processes that enable and constrain identity construction and discursive activity. This means that within any method, say interviewing, the interviewer will focus on more than eliciting information about discourses, but, where relevant, will also seek to uncover biographical and structural information related to the questions in Table 4.1 (see also ch. 3).

The second and consequential caveat is that a realist study of identity will usually incorporate a multi-level analysis where identity construction is framed as an interplay between people, groups, organizations, political and economic systems, and social structures. Data collection, therefore, will not rely solely on interview data to either elicit descriptions of identities and



Table 4.1 Ten Realist Principles and their Consequences for Identity Research

Critical realist principle	Application to identity studies	Questions for empirical studies of identity
1. Causal mechanisms	<p>Social structures, such as class relations, organizations, and cultures influence identity construction through various mechanisms, one of which is discourse.</p> <p>Identity construction mechanisms are enabled and constrained by empirical conditions.</p> <p>Humans engage in identity-seeking activities which draw on social identities to construct personal identities.</p>	<p>How are personal identities and social identities produced in this context?</p> <p>Which social structures relate to which discourses (semiotics, forms of language, descriptions)?</p> <p>What processes and mechanisms enable this production? Empirically, what enables and constrains the working of these mechanisms?</p> <p>How generalizable are these mechanisms? How might these be explored in other contexts? This concerns both the workings of a specific discourse (what mechanisms reproduce homophobic identities in Uganda?) and discourse more generally (how are discourses resisted?)</p> <p>How is discourse created, modified, and dissipated? How is discourse sustained? What material and social resources and structures enable this to happen?</p>
2. Depth ontology	<p>Talk about identities and actual identities are not necessarily the same thing.</p> <p>Empirical tendencies concerning personal and social identities are generated by causal mechanisms.</p>	<p>Do interviews and other methods of data collection elicit similar findings about social and personal identities? What might explain any differences? How are social and personal identities related in this context? What accounts for differences and similarities? What empirical tendencies are evident in representations of social and personal identities? Which empirical tendencies relate to which causal mechanisms? What are the transitive and intransitive features of your analysis?</p>
3. Entities and powers	<p>Personal and social identities are distinct, but dialectically and relationally intertwined.</p> <p>Entities have properties (which distinguish their nature) and (potential) powers.</p>	<p>What empirical and abstract properties and (potential) powers can be associated with your analytical categories (e.g. social identities, rules, organizations, discourse)? How and why do different entities interact in the ways they do? Are existing descriptive categories (entities) adequate in enabling explanation? If not, can you improve on them? What are the conditions under which an entity's power is exercised? Are the effects of this power contingent on contextual factors?</p>

Table 4.1 (Continued)

Critical realist principle	Application to identity studies	Questions for empirical studies of identity
5. Emergence	Social identities are emergent properties of social structures. Personal identities are emergent properties of the self. Retroduction allows findings about identity to imply properties and powers of the self and social structures.	How are social identities constructed through discourse, rules, organization, or social structures? How do people construct personal identities? What other levels or entities are drawn, or relied upon, in this construction? How do memories, imagination, emotion, reflexivity, and action, for example, enable or constrain the construction of personal identity? What psychological or biological structures does such activity imply? Given what the empirical findings concerning social and personal identity, what might researchers retroduce about the nature of the self and/or society, or the mechanisms that link society/the self to identity?
6. Agency and structure	Agency is an emergent property of humans which reproduces and modifies social structures. Reflexivity and agency are distinct from discourse.	What forms of agency are related to the generation, modification, and reproduction of social and personal identities? How does the agency associated with personal and social identities reproduce or modify social structures and power relationships? How and why do historical, long-term changes take place in social structures?
7. Materiality (embodiment)	Personal identity construction is enabled and constrained by the physical body.	How does the body enable or constrain the construction of personal identities or the occupation of social identities? How do physical (such as disability, race, or sex) or psychological (such as memory, imagination or reflexivity) properties impact on the construction (or otherwise) of identities? Are traditional categories and descriptions of physical and mental structures sufficient explanation for the empirical findings?
8. Materiality (other)	Material and virtual structures, such as architecture and ICT enable and constrain social and personal identity construction.	How do material and virtual structures impact upon social and personal identities?

(Continued)

Table 4.1 (Continued)

Critical realist principle	Application to identity studies	Questions for empirical studies of identity
9. Temporality	Different emergent levels of identity are associated with different temporalities.	How does the social biography of individuals relate to the identities which they construct? How have personal and social identities changed over time? Why are these identities being constructed <i>now</i> ? What types of time or lifecycle are associated with the identities that are constructed and the processes that enable and constrain them? What temporal dynamics characterize the activity of other structures, entities or discourses at play in this environment?
10. Criticality	Power	What forms of power are exerted through the mechanisms (including discourse) which construct identities? How do humans seek to resist the discourses that might generate compliant or normative identities? How does this resistance modify the structures of dominance in the empirical context?

discourses, or understand the processes that underpin their generations, but instead seek a number of different sources of information to understand which entities or levels are important in identity construction and how they influence each other.

The third and final caveat is the relationship between the different methods used for data collection. Within a critical realist framework, multi-level and multiple methods of analysis have different intentions from 'traditional' mixed methods research. The conventional rationale for usage of mixed methods and the purpose of triangulation is to use a range of methods in order to validate findings (Erzberger and Kelle 2003). Originating in geometry, the view of triangulation is that a position is determined in relation to an objectively verifiable reference point (Modell 2009). Denzin (1989) presents crystallization rather than triangulation as an alternative metaphor for data 'validity' which demonstrates no single truth and the self-validity of different forms of data. Crystallization and triangulation each then represent the polarized positions of interpretive and functionalist paradigms respectively. If reality is multidimensional and subjectively constructed by those being researched then the meanings attached to different empirical phenomena will vary considerably;

however, true to a critical realist position, the complexity of empirical phenomena could be compromised by attempting to find convergence (Modell 2009). As Fielding and Fielding (1986) note, converging and diverging causal explanations originating from different methods may merely obscure or mirror the co-existence of competing accounts inherent in a complex and conflicting world.

In order to tackle these contradictory positions on triangulation, and to acknowledge openness to the idea of divergence of information from different methods (which can be argued is one of the reasons for using email data, below), Modell's (2009) critical realist interpretation of triangulation should be mentioned here. Modell argues that converging or diverging meanings informed by mixed methods enquiry should only be a starting point in interpretation. So, for example, organizational documentation and focus groups need to be viewed as distinct from any narrative created during a research interview or via a questionnaire, where a participant potentially has the time to present a position that they feel comfortable expressing.

Consequences for Data Analysis

A critical realist study of identity will seek to reveal the mechanisms that enable and constrain identity construction. This will involve implicating specific social structures and their influence on identity and, implicitly or explicitly, suggesting the properties of the individual that are involved in the production or alteration of these structures. Furthermore, the research might give an indication of the extent to which these entities and their powers are generalizable and the extent to which the empirical context is important in enabling or constraining these powers.

The most common route to achieving this is retrodution. Moving from empirical findings to causal mechanisms by asking 'what must the world be like in order for these findings to be possible?' However, in reality, such a step can be presumptuous or unrealistic. Depending on the research questions, a researcher might, from an inductive perspective, seek first to develop codes which provide some abstraction which can make retrodution easier. Others, taking a more deductive approach, might begin with a theorization that they find convincing, for example that of Bourdieu or Archer, and use this to provide an explanatory framework for their findings. Others still might compare their findings against an array of different theoretical explanations and abduct a 'best fit' for their data. Again, the specific methods by which data is analysed will rarely differ from those from other ontological perspectives, but their direction and purpose may differ significantly.

IDENTITY IN VIRTUAL TEAMS

This section will report on the process and outcomes of research that looks at identity in virtual teams (see Au and Marks 2013), with a critical realist approach to triangulation. This research examined four organizations and seven teams across seven different countries and followed forty-two employees. As this chapter is focused on methods rather than outcomes we only report on data from one organization. The company concerned is an international shipping firm based in Asia. The head office of the organization is located Singapore. The employees within these teams operated between the UK and Singapore. In total, there were twenty-eight employees across the four teams, working on sales and marketing, trade, customer service, and fleet management. The organization was studied over a period of three months. Non-participant observation was undertaken in both the headquarters in Singapore and in the London office. This process involved sitting in meetings, listening to interactions between project members, and observing videoconferences and teleconferences. Twenty-seven of the participants were interviewed and the full portfolio of email exchanges between the virtual team members were gathered, covering the three months of data collection.

One of the key tools in the process of triangulation was the analysis of email exchanges. Email can potentially reveal insights into informal interactions and concealed attitudes. Yet, email can also be a formal presentation of a position and deliberately constructed to be a written record of a particular event or action. This research employed email alongside other forms of data—interview and observation—so that the particular biases of each can be understood and compared. The analysis of the data looked at the presentation of identity and located key events to illustrate the enactment of identity for particular individuals and teams. There was no attempt at convergence of explanations, as is conventionally the case in triangulation, as such a process is incompatible with a realist position: triangulation views reality as unified, readily observable, and objective and hides important differences in situated meanings (Modell 2009). The interview process explicitly asked participants to discuss their identification with the virtual team. The responses to this question were generally positive. For example, Frank and Chris, team leaders on the same project attested to the unity of their working relationship and strength of the team during the formal interviews.

'I am happy and feel proud to work with (the organization) as now people like to work for us—they like to work for our ships. I have a good team now... they give us ample support so we can drive things' (Frank).

'I can identify with my (virtual) team because the team identifies with us' (Chris).

The interviews reflected a presentation of identity which appeared to be as the interviewees wished to present themselves or a perception of identity that would be favoured by the interviewer. A social identity perspective would take these comments as a literal account and, ironically, a constructionist account would also adhere to the truth of the text. Whilst there could well be a literal explanation for these statements, a critical realist interpretation opens up a number of possibilities which are hidden by the two dominant positions on identity. The team identity could be the presentation of a social identity that may differ from a personal identity and could be the product of collective interests being represented as a function of structural pressures. If the presentation of such attitudes is a reflection of personal identity, then it could be argued to be a product of the anxiety of moral judgements resulting from a personal preference. As a presentation of social identity there is the possibility of anxiety of the moral judgements placed by the researcher.

Importantly, by using multiple methods we can realize the critical realist potential for the analysis of a stratified, emergent reality. If only interviews or possibly interviews and an organizational survey had been used, there would likely have been a fairly positive display of identity with the virtual team. This was probably perceived as reflecting well on employees and the organization. Yet, by using Modell's (2009) position on triangulation and a variety of methods, we can see many potential levels of interpretation and account for phenomena. Observation notes taken in the Singapore office (and incorporating Chris and Frank) present a very different story to that presented during the interviews.

Abridged Observation Record from 12th September:

Frank (Project Two, Singapore Office) was engaged in a discussion with a UK colleague regarding the allocation of space in shipping vessels. Frank wished to fill the vessel and to maximize profit. However, Chris (UK Office) was looking for the lowest freight charge that he could offer to his customer.

Frank picked up the phone and it was Chris. Chris asked about reducing the quote from \$1300 to \$1100. Frank refused. Conversation ends abruptly. Frank rushes into his manager's office. After twenty minutes Frank emerges and rushes to the water cooler. He looks angry and frustrated.

When Frank was back at his desk I asked him what happened. He said he was 'frustrated'. 'Sometimes I wonder how come they cannot understand and we have to explain again and again. In the whole day I will get emails discussing the same thing again and again.'

After 10 minutes Frank opens his email and starts to reply to Chris. He mentions that 'our team guideline is "never put your emotion in email"'. When Frank finishes his email to Chris he states that he rejected Chris in a polite way. He says to me that replying to an email showing your negative emotions by writing in a sarcastic way is unprofessional.

When asked about electronic communication in an interview, a member of Frank's team from Singapore stated that 'Working with people from the UK,

we face problem in communication. They are not following rules and procedures... They often change things without notifying us... I would highlight their shortcomings in two lines but they would come back with twenty lines. Maybe this is a cultural problem. My impression is that UK people are laidback so I have a bad impression towards them.'

Much of the data from this project revealed a gap between individuals' articulation of workplace relations in an interview situation and practice as identified by observation and via interactions over email. While some of the interview participants admitted that perceptions of cultural differences impacted on working relationships and importantly on identity, the majority claimed no such effect and maintained that virtual team identity was strong and salient. Yet, email exchanges were frequently tense. They further suggest that individuals, as a critical realist interpretation would allow, either present an impression that may represent internal thoughts or deliberately present an entirely false impression (Leary and Kowalski 1990). Either way, individuals are separating the presentation of identity from internal thoughts.

Below is an extract of an exchange between Tim (a Portuguese employee in the UK office) and Sarah (a local employee in the Singapore HQ).

After waiting for some weeks for a special rate for *Customer X*, I had to say in the end to our customer that we are not interested in his cargo. It is now your turn to tell us where you need the boxes and the rates that you can offer. (Written by Tim, 19th December)

We can all be anxious to secure shipments but on the other hand I do appreciate email ethic where tone is concerned. Where there is urgent matter, there's always a phone. (Written by Sarah, 22nd December)

You are right! Ethic is quite important.. But please explain to me why we have to wait for such a long period of time. Why do we have to send reminder and reminder? Is that ethic as well? We did call around, did friendlyly ask our customer. On 09/01 we gave you the details. Today we are 14 days later... Do you really think I can do this more often? I remember the last issue where you disappointed me as well and we did not get a reply at all... Maybe we should discuss ethics in the other way round? With very friendly greetings from a frustrated agent which will not be able to arrange bookings and to claim any commission which would be our income... (Written by Tim, 23rd January)

Nonetheless, it should be noted, that in the formal interview, Sarah was very positive about working with people from different cultural backgrounds and about her identity with her virtual team.

When interacting with people from overseas I get to know their culture, working style and the experience gained broadens my knowledge. Also, I get a change to meet up with the members once in a while so to me, it is quite an eye-opening experience.. I can identify with virtual teams as well as teams in the HQ.

This evidence points to a dialectical relationship between social and personal identity and suggests that social identity maybe a result of either impression

management or the pressures of social structures on identity formation and presentation. Through the research interview, the process of 'acting out' identity can be observed, not just for the sake of management but for the purpose of a more general 'front'. Yet, cultural differences mediated through ICT and other modes of remote working indicated high levels of conflict and limited identification with the team. If there had been a total reliance on one method, the outcome of the research would be very different. The interviews would have presented a corporatized self (constructionist interpretation) or a successful project of social identity creation (social identity perspectives). The use of multiple methods allows a context-specific analysis via attempts to position theoretical insights through variations in context-specific meanings.

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has identified weaknesses in the two dominant approaches to identity studies and argued that they are, at root, weaknesses of an ontological nature. Subsequently, we argue that critical realism offers opportunities to promote a non-determinist, non-reductionist version of identity, which distinguishes between social identity, the roles in social structure which humans imperfectly inhabit, and personal identity, the individual's own beliefs. There is, we argue, a dialectical relationship between these two phenomena, mediated through agency. These are high-level commitments which researchers can draw upon to create their own, domain-specific models of identity.

The example we have offered here provides an insight into one of the authors' attempts to do just this. It highlights that a realist approach enables the researcher to identify claims of identity which might be 'front stage' or even misleading—an important commitment that constructionist approaches would find problematic. It also suggests an important distinction between the formal roles that organizational structures might demand and the individual beliefs and norms—a distinction that is difficult under social identity theory. In short, we hold that the sophistication and sensitivity of the concept of identity requires an ontology that is of equal rigour.