

# **IDENTITY LABORATORY: THE PROCESS OF GOING THROUGH AN EXECUTIVE PROGRAM**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Literature on identity has indicated a need for a better understanding of identity dynamics (Albert, Ashforth, & Dutton, 2000; Ibarra, 2004; Dubouloy, 2004; Cerdin & Dubouloy, 2004). In taking the challenge, Ibarra (2004) suggests that there may be special environments or transitional spaces that create opportunities for identity experimentation, discovery and rediscovery, and a search for new self. Executive education programs are thought as one of the environments where identity experimentation leading to subsequent change is possible (Ibarra, 2003a).

It remains unclear, however, how such identity experimentation unfolds in the process of executive educational programs. Research is lacking in the dynamics of the process of executive education from the standpoint of its ultimate consumers, i.e. executives attending programs, starting from the very reason of attending such programs. Only recently the self-serving reason was added to the previously identified motivators for taking executive classes conceptualized as a desire to advance one's career outside the current employing organization or a desire to take a break from current work responsibilities: "fundamentally, executives attend [executive education programs] mainly for personal reasons, not organizational ones" (Long, 2004: 711). Dubouloy (2004) has suggested that individuals attending an executive program may be using the environment and the conditions of the program for finding their true selves, clearing themselves from the unauthentic layers imposed by life or work circumstances. The work presented here takes these findings and suggestions further and looks at how executives attending the program experience being in it and turn it into a transformational opportunity for themselves.

## **TRANSFORMATIONAL EXPERIENCES**

I draw the foundation for my research from literatures developing and expanding a psychodynamic concept of transitional space (Winnicott, 1953, 1982) and those investigating an anthropological concept of liminality (from *threshold* in Latin) (van Gennep, 1909; Turner, 1969). Ibarra (2003b; 2004; 2005) brings these two literatures together as a foundation for examining radical career changes not based on institutionalized passages. In Ibarra's (2005) model of identity transition process associated with such changes there is special room given to liminal experiences and transitional phenomena. Liminal (in-between) experiences are characterized by a feeling of being between identities, being suspended, being in no man's land, and ugliness of being in the middle (Ibarra, 2003a, 2004; Ashforth, 2001; Ebaugh, 1988). Regardless of their possible negative sides, such experiences also give opportunities for people to imagine new alternatives to their current situation, failure to do which is often the biggest stumbling block on the road to personal and professional transformation (Ibarra, 2003b). Transitional phenomena (e.g., transitional objects in Winnicott (1953, 1982)) provide resources and conditions for people's putting identities in play (i.e., opening existing identities to question

and change and trying out new possible selves) (Ibarra, 2005). Recent literature on transitions (Bouwen & Hosking, 2000, Sengun, 2001; Wastell, 1999, Kets de Vries, 2005a, Kets de Vries & Korotov, 2005; Amado & Ambrose, 2001) draws researchers' attention to the concept of transitional spaces, or, as Turner (1982) puts it, a special privileged area that is set apart from mainstream activities and has a legitimate status of a place for creativity.

There have been some suggestions about what may be the conditions creating conducive identity exploration and experimentation spaces, including specific indications that adult educational programs can serve as such (Ibarra, 2005; Carson, 1997; Dubouloy, 2004; Kets de Vries, 2005a). Still, the literature remains fragmented and incomplete with regard to the features of such transitional spaces and their influence on people in transition, and our understanding of the actual process of going through or using such identity play-conducive spaces is still rather vague. To move in the direction of covering this gap, I've conducted research on experience of participants in an executive education program that claims to offer transformational features to its participants. I attempted to provide an account of experiencing the process of executive education as perceived by the people in the program, the participants themselves.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Based on the grounded theory principles (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), I intended to look at patterns in the experiences of people who, in their opinion, and, in accordance with the program advertisements, were going through some kind of transitional experience and identity experimentation. In order to explore the phenomenon of identity exploration and experimentation in an executive education, I looked for a case of a relatively long-term executive program. I chose to study the experience of participants in a one-year long part-time program in a European world's leading business school. The transitional, experiential nature of the program was assumed based on the evidence from the program documentation, such as faculty and alumni statements.

I studied a class of the program that consisted of 35 participants of 14 nationalities, with three of the executives dropping out in early stages of the program. Out of the 32 program graduates, 30 people of 12 different nationalities participated in my research. Out of those thirty, 17 were women and 13 were men. The nationalities in my sample were: American, Argentinean, Belgian, Brazilian, British, Dutch, French, Irish, Italian, Norwegian, Polish, and Swiss. The age distribution was between 34 and 55, with the majority of the participants (66%) being between 35 and 45.

My main research methods included interviewing the participants about their experience in the program, observing them during the modules of the program, and using, when given access to, their written materials and final theses reflecting their program experience. Additional sources of data included interviews with program faculty and staff, as well as participants' accounts of their experience in publicly accessible internet blogs, personal web-sites, testimonials, and corporate publications reflecting program experience. Data triangulation procedures were also used.

## **THE PROCESS OF GOING THROUGH AN EXECUTIVE PROGRAM**

Going through the executive program involved pre-entry experience, initial surprise of getting into the executive program's space and learning to use it, engaging in identity exploration

through examining past and present identities, staging identity experiments, and, finally, stepping out of the executive program.

Before describing the elements of the process, it is important to mention the findings regarding reasons for joining the program. By far the biggest common one, reported by 70 percent of my respondents, was the idea that such a long-term program can be used as an opportunity to get away from where they were at a particular moment in terms of their professional and/or personal situations, and have some structured space for making a successful transition to a new identity or a new stage in their lives. Participants were also interested in exploring new opportunities and even occupations for their near or remote future. In Ibarra (2005: 21) we find that individuals contemplating a career change go into a “psychological zone in which [they] remain intensely involved in the old work role..., yet they are still unsure about what the future holds.” Apparently, one of the reasons for joining the program was a search for a safe environment where rules influencing old identities get suspended, and testing of new identities is possible without the risk of exposure to the outside world (cf. Ibarra, 2005).

### **Pre-entry Experience**

Before admittance to the programs, participants had to engage in a heavy dose of essay writing and an interview with one of the program directors. Officially designed to assess the fit between a candidate and the program offerings, these instruments per se triggered some of the initial learning that would later grow to a full-fledged dimension as the course unfolded. The questions revealed some of the elements of the course, and triggered participants’ curiosity about themselves and their future. The mandatory face-to-face acceptance interviews served as sampling of the unusual nature of the course and as a rule-setting mechanism. Interviews also served as individual psychological contracts and commitments to future actions (cf. Argyris, 1960), such as readiness to engage in the course both at the cognitive, behavioral, and emotional levels.

The pre-entry experience, apparently, is important for executive education programs in order to contribute to the formation of expectations and fantasies about their forthcoming learning and experimentation experience, including the initial feeling of psychological safety of being in the course. It also gives participants a preview of what is going to lie ahead of them in the program, as well as the rules in the program. As put by a program director at my research site, “Learning had started before [participants] came to the course.”

### **Surprise and Learning to Use the Space of the Executive Program**

Despite the development of preliminary expectations, the actual initial program experience turned out to be different from both the expectations and any kind of previous educational experience participants had had. The beginning of the program brought about surprise (cf. Louis, 1980a). Major dimensions of surprise were about the experimental nature of the program and opportunities that were perceived as opened by course, and not necessarily perceived as available in other parts of life. One of the types of surprise was associated with the need to engage oneself as an object of study, having self as a perspective through which personal and interpersonal, team, and organizational issues were to be understood, explained, and predicted. This was in line with the clinical approach (Kets de Vries, 2004) and with the overall executive inner-theater oriented approach, gaining significant momentum in executive and

leadership development literature (McDougal, 1989; Zaleznik, 1990; Kets de Vries, 2004, 2005b; Dotlich, Noel, & Walker, 2004; Wood & Pettiglieri, 2004; Rooke & Torbert, 2005) whereby organizations are seen as consisting of people who are viewed “not as rational agents, as passive functionaries, as economic beings or as cogs on a machine, but as distinct individuals, with emotional and fantasy lives, with histories and pasts, diverse emotions and developing identities” (Gabriel & Carr, 2002: 354-355).

After realizing the novelty, unusualness of the situation, which per se is a factor conducive for identity experimentation (Yost, Strube, & Bailey, 1992), it was necessary for the participants to learn how to use this new environment which hadn't been experience before. My analysis of interview transcripts has shown three types of issues that participants had to master:

- Managing the boundaries of transitional space;
- Identifying resources and instruments available and learning to use them;
- Figuring out the rules of behavior and the limits of those rules.

Thus, success of an executive program, particularly relatively long one, may require special efforts in helping participants learn how to use the program in the best possible way.

### **Identity Exploration: Examining Past and Current Identities**

An important part of the participants' experience was self-exploration which happened through a set of structured activities included into the program by design, as well as through individual's overall process of being in an unusual group, going through exercises, getting external and internal feedback (cf. Ibarra, 1999, 2003a), self-reflections, and interactions with other members of the class. The self-exploration process was built into the program as one of its core elements. Participants were supposed to learn about themselves before they could learn about helping others.

The process of exploration was part of a “multidimensional journey” as called by a participant in her final thesis. Various aspects of identities, beyond the professional ones, became salient and got intertwined in the process. This new knowledge, or a new angle of looking at oneself called for making sense of their overall experience and the information obtained. Gabriel & Carr (2002: 354), agreeing that people's identities are dynamic and subject to change, argue that “people's identities cannot discard or disregard early experiences (happy or painful)...In this sense, then, their experiences follow them throughout life.” Thus, for some of the participants it became clearer what had influenced their choice of a particular occupation or why they were trying to hold tight to a particular format of work organization such being a part of corporate life. For others, it became clearer, for instance, that they had been going in collusive relationships with their organizations, bosses, colleagues, or subordinates that were not healthy for either them or their companies.

Within the executive program the exploration activities gave a new light to the information about one's past, preferences, behaviors, likes and dislikes, etc. Ibarra (2005: 17) argues that “events motivate exploratory behavior by setting into motion mental processes whereby the person begins to more actively consider alternatives to the current situation.” Within the framework of the space provided by the executive program, the exploration activities suddenly made a lot of identity elements salient to the participants. A link was made between past identities and their elements and the present issues faced by the participants.

Identity exploration opportunities may come up in various forms during an executive program. Being an apparently premium feature of an executive course, they should be promoted and included in program philosophy and design.

### **Identity Experimentation**

Participants engaged in identity experimentation through both mental experiments where they were trying to see themselves in a new role or with a new identity or identities and in more tangible activities associated with experimenting with new possible identities. An important feature accompanying experiments staged by participants in the program was the perceived psychological safety of getting engaged in such experimentation. A lot of experimenting required preliminary discussions and getting “permission” to experiment from the guiding figures, the role of which was primarily vested with the program directors, the core faculty of the program. Although at certain points other participants played roles of sounding boards and advisors, in many cases endorsement for experimentation was sought from the faculty members. Endorsement often meant giving the individual the freedom of taking or not taking the experiment.

Experimentation in the course involved both professional and personal sides. It often included playing with options unthinkable or unimaginable before the course. But it also involved bringing to life some of the forgotten or repressed elements of oneself, such as past identities. From that standpoint, different from the viewing of liminal experience as unidirectional, forward-looking, saying good-bye to the past, “being neither here nor there” (e.g., Ebaugh, 1988), the experience of going through the Executive Program can be seen as more about being both here and there, retrieving things from the past and trying out things from a possible but not certain future. It is not by chance, then, that one of the participants has called her experience in the course a “multidimensional journey” involving elements of multiple identities getting questioned, fantasized about, explored and experimented with.

Executive programs may provide opportunities for identity experimentation as part of the participants’ experience. It is important to allow for such opportunities in the design and delivery of the programs.

### **Stepping Out of the Executive Program: Crafting Narratives and Internalizing Transitional Space**

The ending of the program also meant that those participants who had come for reasons of facilitating a transition had to reach a certain turning point. Enacting a turning point has been conceptualized by Ibarra (2005: 29) as a tool to reframe their confusion, frustration, search for change “as meaningful, as part of the personal odyssey required to find their true purpose or calling.” The program used as my research site did not end abruptly, however, but rather involved a thesis writing process. Writing a thesis is a form of telling a story. Ibarra (2005) asserts that identity narratives, or stories, serve as a means of reinventing oneself, whereby individuals tell a new story about what is happening to them, reinterpret past identities in the light of new experiences, and put together a coherent story about their new identity.

The program terminated with another important feature – that of realizing of the importance of the process that the participants had been subjected to for change-management efforts in general. This was an important take-away from the program, a learning outcome, for at

least two thirds of the participants. Executives left the course wondering about ways to implement elements of their experience within the course in their work projects and personal lives. Internalization of the process of the program, the identity laboratory, became one of the tangible outcomes for the participants.

## **DISCUSSION: EXECUTIVE PROGRAMS AS IDENTITY LABORATORIES**

Identity laboratories are conceptualized as special transitional environments demarcated temporarily, spatially, and psychologically from the rest of the identity-granting world. The laboratory is “equipped” with identity exploration and experimentation opportunities, guiding figures or facilitators, and tools, such as transitional objects that participants need to learn to use to go through the laboratory productively. Such an environment may be sought by people who are in a liminal stage in their identity change process, i.e. “neither here nor there” (Ebaugh, 1980): in the process of disengaging from the old identity without having fully left it, and in the process of developing a new one, without yet having fully embraced it.

The idea of turning an executive education class into an identity exploration and experimentation opportunity (e.g., Ibarra, 2003a, Dubouloy, 2004) finds further support in the research presented above. If an educational program serves as not just a source of additional set of facts but rather an opportunity to experiment with one’s identity, it may become an answer to a recent call for business courses that reflect the complex reality executives face and a way of helping businesses deal with often ambiguous conditions of current business practices (Abell, 2005; Bennis & O’Toole, 2005).

Paying attention to the stages of the process that seemed to be important to my research participants: pre-entry, initial surprise of getting into the executive program’s space and learning to use it, engaging in identity exploration through examining past and present identities, staging identity experiments, and, finally, stepping out of the executive program may bring extra benefits to both participants and providers of executive education. Each of these stages deserves a lot of attention from both academics and practitioners, and studying each of them in more detail will undoubtedly lead to interesting hypotheses and further findings. The purpose of this paper has been to identify those stages in broad terms taking the experience of the final consumer, an executive program participant, into account.

Bringing the identity dynamics perspective into research on management education suggests new possible links between the two domains with theoretical and practical implications for the question of “Who am I?” – one of the most challenging any executive (and, for that matter, a human being) will ever have to answer. From that standpoint, an identity laboratory perspective, i.e. looking for ways to facilitate finding answers to this question, may be very important for the identity of executive education as a field. Opportunities for further research also include investigation of the roles of elements of identity laboratories built into executive education programs at each of the stages of the process of going through it. Specific role of the faculty involved in creating identity laboratories also deserves further investigation. After all, we, as providers of executive education, also need to constantly invent and reinvent ourselves.

## **REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHOR**

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