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An Assault on Identity: The Male View of Being Made Redundant

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Abstract

Participation and success in paid work is a key element of identity for many men. The increased prevalence of downsizing, and the discarding of individuals from organisations, therefore has particular pertinence when considering men’s workplace experiences. This paper discusses findings from an exploratory study investigating the experiences of Australian executives who had been made redundant. Three themes related to male identity are presented: the impact on respondents’ positions as breadwinners for their families; a concern for being seen to be capable and in control; and perceptions of loss of status upon returning to work. These executives expressed feelings of anger, sadness, fear and embarrassment as a result of the assault to their identity. There is a need for continued focus on these experiences and their implications for both men and women, particularly as individuals report undergoing multiple redundancies.

Keywords: Downsizing, gender, identity, men, redundancy

Introduction

There has been increasing challenge to the traditional notion that managerial practice and organisational discourse are gender-neutral (Martin 2000; Ross-Smith & Kornberger 2004). When investigating various aspects of work and organisations, researchers need to be conscious of both the overt and implicit role of gender in this discourse. Previous studies have considered the impact of gender in such areas as career development (eg. Cassirer & Reskin 2000; Bailyn 2003), management style (eg. Hall-Taylor 1997; Kirchmeyer 2002), job satisfaction (eg. Groot & Van den Brink 2000; Burke 2001) and organisational culture (eg. Coates 1998; Mills 2002). However, amidst this increased research focus, feminist scholars have expressed concern that the term “gender”, especially when used in organisational life, is generally assumed to be about women. We agree that gender, and its impact at work, concerns both men and women. In this paper, we present findings from an Australian study which explored the experiences of middle- and senior-level executives who had been made redundant. Our focus here is on aspects of the male experience of being made redundant, specifically, as an assault on male identity.

In discussing the male identity, and issues of gender roles in general, it is important to recognise the social construction of gender, with individuals’ understanding being shaped from childhood through observing cultural norms in parents, teachers, peers and the mass media (Eddleston et al. 2006). The male, or masculine, identity is defined by the cultural setting in which a man is placed, and is constantly shaped and reinforced by the relationships
around him (Yeo 2004). These cultural influences mean that a single male identity cannot be defined, but that “multiple masculinities” exist (Collinson & Hearn 1994). Differing male identities are shaped by issues such as age, ethnicity, social class and sexual orientation (Ruxton 2004). Masculine identity is not homogeneous, and these other aspects of identity need to be taken into account when considering the male experience. In this discussion, we explore the experiences of nine male respondents in our study. All but one of these men was over the age of 40. Respondents tended to be middle-aged, middle-class men whose identities have been shaped by many similar societal and cultural contexts (Connell 1993). In particular, participation in paid work has been identified as a central attribute of male identity among Western middle-class men (McDowell 2003).

The concept of men’s workplace activities being a key definer of their identity has particular relevance when considering experiences of redundancy and downsizing in organisations. Downsizing has become a far-reaching phenomenon, now impacting an increasing cross-section of organisations, occupations and countries (Donnelly & Scholarios 1998). If masculinity is “forged” in the workplace (Yeo 2004, p. 129), and the male identity continually constructed and evaluated according to success at work (Rees & Garnsey 2003, p. 555), what happens to men who are involuntarily removed from organisations? While the impacted employees are often depicted as being “downsized”, “separated” or “unassigned” (Micklethwait & Wooldridge 1996, p. 11), their experiences are more accurately reflected in the literal meaning of being made redundant – being unwanted and discarded from their place of work. In this paper, we focus on the impact of this experience for men, both on how they view themselves and their emotional responses.

Exploring Experiences of Being Made Redundant

Individuals’ stories of being made redundant were collected during an exploratory study, which was guided by an interpretive phenomenological methodology. This approach was selected for its emphasis on lived experience (Oiler 1982, p. 178), and the meaning that experience holds for the individual (Drew 1989, p. 431). The value of this methodological approach is that learning about the phenomenon of interest comes from the participant’s perspective – by capturing the experience as it has been lived and sharing it with others (Vickers 2001, p. 33).

Purposive sampling was used to select respondents, with its concern for all participants having experience of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell 1998). As noted above, there were nine male respondents to the study, all middle- and senior-level executives. Of these, three had been made redundant once, four had experienced redundancy twice, and the remaining two spoke of being made redundant three times. Focused, in-depth interviews were conducted with each respondent, and these were transcribed verbatim. Interpretive content analysis was undertaken, involving identification of themes or patterns in the data (Taylor & Bogdan 1998), which revealed the meaning of individuals’ experiences (Benner 1994). This analysis aimed to both seek commonalities among respondents’ experiences (Leonard 1994), and uncover situations of difference or distinction which worked to enhance understanding (Benner 1994).

In considering these male respondents’ stories of being made redundant, three themes of relevance to male identity emerged: the impact on their position as “breadwinner” for their
families; a concern for being seen to be capable and in control; and issues related to a perceived loss of status upon returning to work. The following discussion presents exemplar stories from respondents which particularly capture the meaning of these situations (Leonard 1994). Respondents have all been given pseudonyms to maintain their privacy and confidentiality.

**Assaults on Male Identity**

**Being the breadwinner**

In many cultures, an important element of masculinity is through men providing for their families (Jackson 1999). For Western societies, including Australia, this role is particularly expressed as being an *income* provider (Eagly et al. 2000), the “breadwinner” to support the family’s existence. While such gender stereotypes are continually shifting and changing, and the concept of the “male breadwinner” is declining among younger women and men (Scott et al. 1996), the provider role still has a strong impact for the masculine identity, especially those of middle age. Certainly, for many respondents, being the main provider for their families was a key component of their identity. Their experience of redundancy centred upon their feelings of inadequacy and failure within these areas. Lewis expressed these concerns:

> Oh, yes. That was horrible. Yes, money was limited. I felt very un-, I didn't like to go out in the day. I remember my wife said to me, "Why don't you go and mow the lawn?" And I didn't want to go out there, because it’s interesting, you just felt that people are watching you. And you have this feeling of, "He can't even support his family. Look at him. He can't even provide for his family. You know. He's --, failing." We used to go out; we used to go and meet the kids at school. I think one of the parents --, I'd be one of the very few men. And I was very conscious of that. You get irrational thoughts of inadequacy, of failure. (Lewis, Interview #1)

Lewis’ comments indicated two key impacts on his identity as income provider for his family. Firstly, he noted his concern for the financial constraints which resulted from being made redundant. Other respondents shared these worries too, and spoke about the stress they felt in addressing both their immediate monetary demands (such as mortgages and children’s schooling) and their longer-term futures. However, the emphasis in Lewis’ story echoed that of many respondents – a concern for how he believed others viewed his ability to work and provide for his family. It was this focus on others’ perceptions which caused the greatest emotional response for these men, and the feeling of failure which Lewis expressed. Furthermore, respondents’ experiences of feeling inadequate are also pertinent to this discussion. While descriptions of a family’s main wage earner as the breadwinner place the focus on provision of income, the traditional provider role for men can also include provision of protection and guidance for their family (Jackson 2000). Without paid employment providing a key element of their identity, many of these men reported feeling at loose ends, of not really knowing what their place in the family was. In his second interview, Lewis reflected on this experience further, saying: ‘You lose, in some respects, your purpose of being able to provide for your family.’ These men expressed how even a temporary disruption to their provider role resulted in them feeling that others may question their ability
not only to provide for their family, but to control other situations around them, another important aspect of their masculine identity.

**Being strong, capable and in control**

The traditional view of men as strong, capable and independent is still prevalent today (Sheridan 2004), and shaped these respondents’ expectations of themselves. There was an implicit sense that they should be able to control not only their own behaviour, but situations and people around them. However, being made redundant presented the antithesis of personal control. We have spoken elsewhere of respondents’ shock at the point of being made redundant, and how many were totally unprepared for the news (Vickers & Parris 2004; Vickers & Parris 2005). Both their independence and control were completely removed. However, it was in the representation of their identity through demonstrating competence and capability where respondents felt the strongest assault. Again, this was influenced by their concern for others’ perceptions, as Jake shared:

> But it’s hard because, you know, I didn’t really want to tell my parents or my wife’s family or anything like that, because I thought I would have been seen as less a person or not really the person – the executive working in the company – that I had been put up on a pedestal, so to speak. Yes, that was quite hard. (Jake, Interview #1)

Other respondents shared similar concerns for what others might think and say about them, and many spoke about “getting into action” as soon as possible after being made redundant. Some contacted colleagues and other business acquaintances the next day to begin the search for new employment. Although this was partly driven by financial requirements, as discussed earlier, there also appeared to be a need to reaffirm their competence by demonstrating the ability to obtain work. While focused on these activities, however, respondents were also having to deal with their emotional responses. In reflecting back on their experiences, these men spoke of the myriad of emotions they felt, including anger at their organisations, sadness at leaving colleagues and staff, and fear for both their employment future and their families. However, few shared these emotions with others at the time. A number spoke of wanting to protect their wives from the full extent of their frustrations and worries, of not wanting to burden them further. However, there appeared to also be an unwillingness to acknowledge the degree of their fears, of wanting to again present as strong and in control. As Robertson (2001) noted, gender roles often mean that men need to ‘set aside much of their masculine socialisation simply to … ask for help’ (p. 148). Another common feeling described by these men was that of embarrassment, as Jake noted:

> And it was just the embarrassment around the circumstances. … I was very embarrassed about telling people what happened. I was telling people originally that I was on holidays. (Jake, Interview #1)

Again, this sense of embarrassment derived from these men’s emphasis on competence and ability at work as key measures of their overall sense of worth. If Jake were able to find work again in a short period, he need not tell other people that he had been unwanted by the organisation, that his abilities in the workplace were not valued. We argue that this embarrassment and the feeling of not being valued are strongly impacted by the manner in
which organisations conduct downsizing activities. In choosing individuals for redundancy, organisations frequently emphasise the rationality of their decisions, speaking of skills sets, job-fit and organisational direction. However, Tyson and Doherty (1991, p. 3) argue that the prevailing use of phrases such as “shake out”, “housekeeping” and “getting rid of dead wood” paint a different picture. These terms instead evoke a notion of inferiority, and present the executive as somehow responsible for his or her redundancy (Tyson & Doherty 1991). A number of respondents echoed this concern, such as Shen, who said:

I knew it was coming to our area, but I didn’t know whether it was coming to me or not. To be honest, I was surprised that anybody would want to make me redundant, despite all the differences that we had. I thought they would find me-, they would try to actually find me another role. (Shen, Interview #1)

Despite organisational platitudes such as “it’s not personal” and “it’s just business” (Stein, 2001), being made redundant was felt as a very personal assault on these men’s sense of worth. They were left questioning what might be “wrong” with them, and whether they were truly as capable and successful in their work as they previously believed themselves to be.

**Being – and appearing - successful**

In speaking to these respondents, it became apparent that the impacts for their identities were not always alleviated by a return to employment. These men indicated a need to both appear successful to others and feel successful themselves, that they had achieved a certain status in their work. This concern for status has also been found in other studies showing that the social creation and validation of male identity is formed around such qualities as success and self-reliance in the workplace (Rees & Garnsey 2003; McCarthy & Holliday 2004). Unfortunately, for many respondents, re-employment after redundancy resulted in work that was neither as challenging nor “prestigious” as the jobs they previously held. This too was an assault on their identity, and how they felt others perceived them:

I’ve got to sort of try and achieve the sort of, I suppose you’d say, status and respect that I had before … It’s not like you used to have when you had a hundred and fifty staff, and you used to look after twelve billion assets … And I say, ‘Yes’, and I’ve grown in certain ways and I’ve got to move on but, at the same time, I feel not as - [slight pause], as important, if you know what I’m saying. (Anthony, Interview #1)

In a study of both gender’s work orientations, especially the significance of paid work, Charles and James (2003) confirmed that most male respondents expected to ‘have a job which reflected their skills’ (p. 250). For Anthony, clearly, this was no longer the case. There was a reduction in status, and a sense of losing his ‘place in the social order’ (Sheridan 2004, p. 216). Some respondents spoke of how, fortuitously, they were able to secure better workplace positions. However, many others found themselves in a similar position to Anthony, having to take a step backwards in order to re-enter the workforce. Anthony spoke further about the personal impacts of this:

I’m probably a little bit bored. … The greatest loss for me is probably being recognised in the industry for what I think I should be recognised for. As being somebody that has
strategic leadership, and is ahead of the game in terms of putting processes and structures in place to meet the market. I know that sounds like something out of a textbook, but I’m fairly passionate about that sort of stuff, and I know how to fit it all together. (Anthony, Interview #1)

When consideration is given to individuals needing to accept a lesser position after redundancy, this is usually framed in the context of a reduced rate of pay or at a lower level in the organisation than previously held. However, Anthony’s story focused on his new job providing both reduced intellectual challenges and reduced recognition for his skills and competence in the workplace. It was this aspect of his re-employment which he found most difficult to accept. With meaning for these men coming from feelings of achievement and success in their work, a decreased capacity to demonstrate their skills inhibited continued reinforcement of their identity. This reduced level of skill utilisation has been identified as a form of underemployment (Feldman, 1996). With studies indicating that the psychological and emotional effects of underemployment can be just as harmful and profound as those of unemployment (Winefield, 2002), it is inaccurate to accept the negative effects of being made redundant cease once these men return to work. The ongoing impacts to their identity cannot be ignored.

Conclusion

Downsizing and other forms of restructuring which result in redundancies are now often seen as normal practice in organisations (Orlando, 1999). However, in considering the balance between such issues as organisational competitiveness and employee rights and wellbeing, it is imperative that attention is given to individuals’ stories of being made redundant. In particular, we have focused here on the male experience, and how this needs to be understood against a background of both gender roles and male identity. For the middle-aged Australian men who participated in our study, being employed – and being in “good” employment – was an essential internal measure of their success and self-worth as a person. A source of income was not the only thing these executives lost upon being made redundant. Their confidence and belief in their abilities were also severely impacted.

An important area of learning for organisations is that the negative effects experienced often continued even when these men returned to work. As redundancy becomes more commonplace, and many individuals experience it more than once in their working lives, all organisational leaders can benefit from understanding the experiences and emotions expressed by these executives. There is a need for continued focus on these experiences and their implications – for both men and women.

References available upon request.