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2009 : November 2009 - Fast Moving Fronts : David L. Collinson Discusses Employee Identities and Insecurities

## FAST MOVING FRONTS - 2009

November 2009



David L. Collinson talks with *ScienceWatch.com* and answers a few questions about this month's Fast Moving Front in the field of Economics & Business.

**Article: Identities and insecurities: Selves at work**

Authors: Collinson, DL

Journal: ORGANIZATION, 10 (3): 527-547 AUG 2003

Addresses: Lancaster Management Sch, Dept Management Learning, Sch Management, Lancaster LA1 4YX, England.

Lancaster Management Sch, Dept Management Learning, Sch Management, Lancaster LA1 4YX, England.

**SW: Why do you think your paper is highly cited?**

Dignity, respect, and identity lie at the heart of what it means to be human. The paper illustrates how employee concerns to create, maintain, and protect identity can crucially impact on their behavior and be shaped by workplace processes. Overall, the article reveals the significance and complexity—both in theory and practice—of identity dynamics for understanding employment, management, and organization.

**SW: Does it describe a new discovery, methodology, or synthesis of knowledge?**

The article highlights the multiple nature of identity, and the underlying insecurities that are frequently reinforced by employment in contemporary organizations. It argues that interwoven material (e.g., job loss) and symbolic (e.g., dignity) insecurities crucially impact on the identity dynamics that shape modern workplace practices. It also suggests that the search for security can be contradictory, narrowing people's perspectives, knowledge, and experience in ways that paradoxically reinforce their sense of insecurity.

**SW: Would you summarize the significance of your paper in layman's terms?**

Organizations not only create products and services, they also produce people by regulating and shaping their identities in numerous ways. In contemporary workplaces where performance monitoring seems to be increasing, employee insecurities about identity are also growing.

Whilst focusing on people's identities might appeal to managers and leaders looking for ways to enhance productivity, it can also be counterproductive as employees find alternative means of redefining their identities and surviving in organizations.

**SW: How did you become involved in this research and were any particular problems encountered along the way?**

The ideas for this article were developed through numerous research projects I have conducted over the past 30 years. Whether exploring shop-floor culture, gender at work, careers in financial services, safety practices on North Sea offshore oil installations, or leadership in the education sector, identity issues have repeatedly emerged as a significant concern.

These projects demonstrate that dynamics of identity and insecurity crucially shape many diverse workplace practices such as control, strategy, culture change, performance management, hiring, firing, promotion, dissent, and impression management.

**SW: Where do you see your research leading in the future?**

I am currently extending my interest in critical identity theory to the analysis of leadership, an area of research that has tended to produce rather simplified, "quick-fix" recipes about how to be an effective leader.

**SW: Do you foresee any social or political implications for your research?**


Identities and insecurities take numerous forms in different contexts and periods. In many ways, my article seems particularly pertinent in the current climate of worldwide recession which inevitably increases people's insecurity. In terms of policy implications, we need to find new ways of managing and leading that do not rely on targeting people's identities and insecurities as a way of seeking to motivate them.

**David L. Collinson**  
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KEYWORDS: IDENTITIES; INSECURITY; MULTIPLICITY; SELVES; SIMULTANEITY; SUBJECTIVITY.



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