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Friendly Phantoms: How do individuals use their feared selves to construct a positive work identity?

Stream: Identities and Employee Relations

"What do you do for a living?", is a question we often ask people to get to know them better. The underlying assumption is that someone's work identity is closely connected to who they are (Pratt et al., 2006). Work identities are individuals' subjective interpretations of who they are with regards to occupational roles and group memberships (Gecas, 1982; Dutton et al., 2010; Ibarra, 2005). An individual's work identities are part of their work-self, defined as who one is overall at work (Pratt & Foreman, 2000; Ramarajan; 2014). Research shows that one's work-self involves not only a person's current self (i.e., who one is now at work), but also their possible selves (i.e., one's imagined perceptions of self at work in the future) (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Higgins, 1987). These possible selves include who a person would like to become, i.e., desired or wanted selves (e.g., "own boss") and who they want to avoid becoming, i.e., feared or unwanted selves (e.g., "perpetual associate") (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

So far, research on possible selves has predominantly focused on how people continuously strive for their desired possible selves (Ibarra, 1999; Rogers et al., 2017; Strauss et al. 2012; Dutton et al., 2010; Ashforth et al., 2014; Wrzesniewski & Dutton 2001). For example, Ibarra (1999) described how newcomers experimented with their provisional selves by imitating their role models based on how they saw, and, desired to see themselves. While research to how people work toward their desired selves should be continued and expanded, it is surprising that the implicit assumption underlying most of the research is that individuals shape their work identities solely via their attraction to a desired self. However, social psychology research explored the self-regulatory role of both desired and feared selves. A very limited number of organizational studies examined the role of unwanted selves in the development of a work identity (i.e., Petriglieri & Stein, 2012; Vince & Mazen, 2014). These studies highlight the negative impact of leaders' unwanted selves. A question that still remains is whether people's feared selves may have benefits as well. For example, a feared possible future self to become unemployed may help to cultivate a work identity as a competent and

reliable professional. To this end, we ask the following research question: How do individuals use their feared and unwanted selves to construct a positive work identity?

To better understand how feared possible selves affect people's identity construction and positive identity outcomes, in this study we investigate the role of feared selves in shaping positive identity outcomes for individuals who work independently in the gig economy. Independent work is a relevant context to study our research question because individuals need to exhibit agency and take the lead in crafting their possible selves in the absence of the holding environment of an organization (Ashford et al., 2018).

In this study, we draw on qualitative data from 68 independent workers in the UK to build a model that takes some initial steps toward addressing our research question. Our findings show that workers' lack of having clear sense of self at work have stimulated the activation of workers' "feared and unwanted selves" – what they dread and do not want to be. We theorize that workers deposit these images in what we call a repertoire of "Feared and Unwanted Selves". This repertoire is a mental container in which workers accumulate all the work identities (or aspects of them) they enacted that are incongruent with their work self-concept. Workers proactively use the images to revise their work identity. Specifically, they engage in three identity work tactics: they embrace and integrate some of their feared selves (i.e., holism); rebuff some of these feared selves by developing boundaries and using these images in defining who and what they are not (i.e., identity deflection); or selectively separate their work self from the enactment of their unwanted selves (i.e., identity decoupling). By engaging in these identity work tactics workers develop a sense of identity growth that helps them to sooth their sense of identity precariousness.

Our study makes two main contributions. First, by tracing the role that feared and unwanted selves play in achieving positive identity outcomes, this study advances our

understanding of positive identity construction. Second, our study advances our understanding of the different ways independent workers shape their work identities. This enhances our understanding of independent work, suggesting that workers could benefit from defining what they fear and do not want to be to grow and feel free.

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