'Billy' - role and identity

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It's increasingly argued that we each have more than one identity. This is not about schizophrenia, it's about adaptability. It says we are each capable of developing a new self to meet each new situation. The thinking goes down well wherever self-belief, independence and individuality are applauded. Ideas of re-making self also accord well with contemporary calls for greater flexibility, creativity and risk-taking.

Among the most influential proposers of the idea is <u>Amartya Sen</u>. He tracks his life as Asian, with Bengali and British citizenship, as an economist and philosopher, and also a feminist, a secularist, and a scholar. He says that each of these aspects of his life enriches it with a new and different identity.

There is a much more extreme version of this line of thinking. It <u>denies the possibility of any continuing narrative of self</u>. It might mean, for example, that there is no point in agonising about what you did in the past, because that was someone else. I think Amartya Sen has a point, but this other account of re-created selves sounds to me less like a plea than a cop-out:

> *'not me governor, some other dude that I used to be - now long gone!'*

The evidence rejects the plea. That evidence is that much of identity is embodied - think of fingerprints and d-n-a. Identity can be ascertained by neurological and forensic examination. Our bodily tissue wears out, but not our genome. Identity is those not-to-be-got-rid-of realities which mean that 'I' am forever 'me'. And it represents that self in a way that no other secularist brit, conducting a neurological enquiry, can be. We need a term to refer to that continuing reality of selfhood - and I know no better term than 'identity'.

So, what about Amartya Sen? I find that sociology, not economics. offers the more convincing account of his point. Sociology has adapted the theatrical term 'role' to refer to the realities that Amartya describes - they are social, not neurological, facts. They speak of the social settings a person occupies, the tasks each of those positions takes on, and the companionships that each calls up. At its most basic, role is that three-fold social reality - *me...*

> *'...being here, ...doing this, ...with you'*

Roles are multiple: you might meet some other secularist, brit neurologist, but one who is also a daughter, a partner, a parent and - in any spare time she can find - base-guitar in a girl's band. But these are the roles that her identity takes on, they are not her identity. Finding life-roles does not multiply identity, and changing life-roles does not relinquish it.

Metaphors eventually break down; and one of the problems with 'role' is that its theatrical roots imply a script. Scripting people is not much-welcomed in contemporary culture. But I'm talking sociological role, not theatrical script. And multiple-roles mean not just role-assignment, but also role-strain, role-conflict, role-ambiguity - and role-achievement. We don't just follow scripts - we create roles. Thankfully my sons are not obliged to model their fatherhood on mine. Role-achievement is how each new generation's flexibility, creativity and risk-management bring about, not just personal, but social change.

One of the attractions of the idea of multiple identity is that it appears to be the liberating reality. Nothing, it seems to say, need be inevitable, the past need not predict the future. On-line virtual selves seem to hold out the promise. But virtual encounters are not with embodied realities. And not knowing who you are dealing with is as much a threat as a promise.

Careers work cannot disregard embodied realities. Philosopher <u>Daniel Dennett</u> also arrives at the conclusion that the past does not determine the future. He speaks of the 'evitability' of the human condition - nothing is inevitable. But he gets there by a more exploratory route - from embodied genetics to repertoires for action. There is no determinism in genetics. On that I go with Daniel.

But it is through our life-roles that we construct, and re-construct, each our own life. The multiplicity of roles that a person finds multiplies bases for action - setting up those strains, ambiguities and conflicts. And that kind of disturbance is where we find the coiled tension that drives creative role-achievement. Roles are not scripts, they are repertoires. There is no more determinism in sociology than there is in genetics.

So where does embodied identity belong in careers work? It is (just about) conceivable that the idea could suggest career-matching diagnostics based on observation of embodied posture, gesture and gaze. And (I would argue) such an invention might prove no less useful than the diagnostics we already use. So we are left with underlying questions for careers work....

...how far are we working towards a new client identity?
....and how far to an expanded client experience?

With this in mind I've put an example of posture, gesture and gaze on the home-page of my website. The embodied identity there is aged eight or thereabouts. Do you pick up any clues concerning his future?
I should tell you that this eight-year-old Billy, gives me a slight case of the jitters. I can't help wondering what - in some parallel universe - he would make of the way I've used that identity to occupy his subsequent life-roles.

'Is Billy still me? ...am I still Billy?"

All I can say for sure is that I will shortly take him off the home-page of my site, but I will never be able to discard him.

However, to get to the issue, I need also to tell you that Billy's dominant roles are son, cousin, mate, nephew and grandchild - not as impressive a list as Amartya's, but every bit as influential. You can see that Billy's also a pupil. So how will his identity engage with those roles?

In managing careers how far are people asserting new identities? And how far are they finding new roles -

>   from early settings - to new places to go?
>   from present tasks - to more things to do?
>   from start-in-life companions - to other people to talk with?

The relationship between identity and role is critical to careers work. We have made less use of the concept than we usefully could. It is, after all, a bridging concept - linking 'self' to 'opportunity'. There's more about role on the site [BL71 pages 1:6-1:12]. Well worth your thinking.