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**“IN IT, BUT NOT OF IT”
EXPLORING IDENTITY AND SOCIAL CAPITAL IN THE *THIRD SPACE***

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Abstract

The *Third Space* in higher education encompasses both identities and labor. This paper begins with a discussion of work-based and professional identities within higher education and the growth of the *Third Space*. Moten and Harney’s (2004) Undercommons is used to further explain the *Third Space*. We discuss how social capital and communities of practice are central to creating solidarity and end with a discussion of recommendations to better support *Third Space* professionals.

Keywords: Identity; Undercommons; Social capital; Communities of practice; Third Space labor, academic labor

“IN IT, BUT NOT OF IT”: EXPLORING IDENTITY AND SOCIAL CAPITAL IN THE *THIRD SPACE*

We are in a time of reckoning in higher education. This is not necessarily new, but has been exacerbated by COVID-19 and institutional responses to the pandemic. These responses (or lack of) highlighted systemic issues within higher education, led to students questioning whether the benefit of a college degree outweighs the cost, and a mass resignation among higher education professionals who are tired – tired of the uncompensated physical, mental, and emotional labor that is increasingly added to their jobs (Purcell & Lumbreras, 2021). While not a new strategy in higher education, the solution for many institutions is not to increase wages and improve working conditions, but to consolidate at various levels, which means that many professionals are simultaneously inhabiting academic *and* non-academic spaces as they try to support their institution’s mission and the students they serve.

Responses to COVID-19 added to the growing number of professionals who occupy the *Third Space* in higher education with many falling outside of the traditional binary (i.e., academic affairs and student affairs). As they navigate and negotiate their professional identities across academia, they may not be fully accepted in either space because they cross traditional boundaries in higher education and thus are seen as an outsider in some academic spaces. Navigating institutions as an outsider is exhausting, demanding, and traumatic. Akerman (2020) suggests that *Third Space* professionals may have feelings of invisibility that lead to imposter syndrome. These feelings come from social cues, gatekeeping, and direct interactions which reinforce that *Third Space* labor is not valued within a traditional organizational structure of higher education.

This paper seeks to add to the literature on *Third Space* in two ways: through *Third Space* identity and *Third Space* theoretical concepts. First, we begin with a discussion of identity within higher education and how we can situate a growing number of professionals within the *Third Space*, as we understand social change and social reproduction in higher education. This leads to questioning whether higher education is changing even with increased conversations around access or if it just reproducing the same exclusionary structure that it was built upon. We will then explain how this affects the identity of higher education professionals.

Second, we weave together insight from several theoretical concepts to frame a way that unifies *Third Space* labor and professional identities with particular attention to social capital and liberatory processes within the Undercommons (Moten & Harney, 2004). We explain how these concepts are helpful in conceptualizing how people navigate racist, classist, sexist, homophobic, and ableist institutions such as higher education while having more than one social identity (and perhaps in the *Third Space* having multiple professional identities), therefore making it difficult to develop a sense of self. We end with a discussion of ways to create solidarity between *Third Space* laborers.

IDENTITY WITHIN HIGHER EDUCATION

Identity is a multilayered concept and process. Identity as a concept refers to a sense of self as an individual and as a member of social groups. Identity as a process involves the development, maintenance, and balancing of who we are which is influenced by a variety of interactions, relationships, and structures throughout society (Goldie, 2012; Peneul & Wertsch, 1995). The question “Who are you?” may yield multiple answers because identities are active and constructed within personal and professional networks over time. The totality of our identities forms a global construct of general self-concept (i.e., thoughts and feelings that one has about themselves).

Scholars across multiple fields such as psychology, sociocultural anthropology, and management (e.g., Peneul & Wertsch, 1995; Super, 1996; Walsh & Gordon, 2008) have extended identity to consider the development of a work-based or professional self-concept that is shaped by work roles, choice of occupational goals, and organizational context. While work is just one aspect of a person’s identity, it gives people a sense of accomplishment, competence, and engagement (Ali Abadi et al., 2022). Work is also tied to self-efficacy, which Bandura (1986) described as a person’s belief about their own capabilities and capacity to achieve specific goals. Bong and Skaalvik (2003) distinguish between self-concept and self-efficacy by describing the former as representing “one’s general perceptions of the self in given domains of functioning” whereas the latter “represents individuals’ expectations and convictions of what they can accomplish in given situations (p. 5).

Within higher education, faculty and staff have their own existing and ongoing cultural and social identities that affect how they navigate and negotiate their professional or work-based identities. Professional and work-based identities for faculty and staff are tied to notions of expertise, success, and reward structures that are embedded within systems of authority and power relations in higher education (Clarke et al., 2013). Faculty acquire professional or work-based identities through an anticipatory socialization process in graduate school that often focuses on modeling the normative behaviors of their own professors as guides to the discipline or field (Austin & McDaniels, 2006). For staff, anticipatory socialization is more varied with some (e.g., student affairs staff) experiencing this in graduate school while others might acquire professional or work-based identities on the job. This is further reinforced through organizational socialization as faculty and staff enter into academia and their institutions, which are characterized by their own hierarchies.

Faculty and staff accumulate social and cultural capital through the socialization process and integrate this into their own personalities. It is important to note that *all* faculty and staff have social and cultural capital that they bring into academic spaces while in graduate school and/or as a professional – it may just not be what is valued in that setting. One way to maintain existing boundaries in higher education is to control access to social networks and to legitimize certain types of cultural capital (Schwalbe et al., 2000). Boundary maintenance can lead to a discrepancy between stated and perceived identities (Nasir, 2010), feelings of imposter syndrome (Bravata et al., 2020; Kets de Vries, 1998), and marginalization (Hunt & Rhodes, 2013; Patton, 2016) as faculty and staff explore ways to have a personal integrated identity with a strong sense of self and authenticity across multiple spaces (i.e., in and out of academia) (Emdin, 2021).

The development of professional and work-based identities within higher education has to be understood within the context of a bifurcated organizational structure (Rhoades, 2007) that is based on silos within and between academic affairs and student affairs. This is further nuanced by the relationship that faculty and staff have to their roles and work, the clarity and boundaries of their duties, and the ways in which they contribute to the institution and its mission (Whitchurch, 2009). This leaves people reconciling their identities with their organization’s identity, and organizational identity is hard to shift even when members want it to because of bureaucratic inertia (Gioia et al., 2013).

Changes in higher education also affect faculty and staff identities. The national decline in enrollment since 2010, continued underfunding, lack of resources, increase in early college students under the age of 18, and expanding

mental health needs of students have all changed faculty and staff roles and can lead to a loss of self. Livingston and Ling (2022) describe the current state of higher education as having a “disrupted character” that creates a “dislocated complexity” (p. 646) or a feeling of dislocation among faculty and staff. An identity crisis can occur when faculty and staff question or reevaluate their place, purpose, and roles within their institution. This is exacerbated if faculty and staff feel isolated within their institutions, experience habitual burnout, or have competing identities that impact work-life balance. Faculty and staff have to figure out a way to reconcile this, often without the assistance of a concerted institutional response.

Whitchurch (2008) applied the concept of *Third Space* to describe the blurring of boundaries and identities within higher education that has led to the emergence of blended professionals who transcend the binary within higher education. Whitchurch (2013) later expanded her earlier work and described a *Third Space* typology (e.g., integrated, semi-autonomous, and independent) that considered institutional structures and responses of individuals. This typology is meant to convey that the *Third Space* is not a static space and can serve as a space where work and identities are constructed and reconstructed. The *Third Space* in higher education has often been used to describe staff experiences, but this is increasingly applicable for faculty who have split appointments in multiple academic departments or who have additional roles within university centers or student services.

Whether it is faculty or staff, the notion of the *Third Space* reflects fluidity in identity, the changing nature of academia, and the multiple roles and duties that are increasingly expected of higher education professionals. Akerman (2020) cautions that the *Third Space* may exacerbate feelings of imposter syndrome because professionals occupy a space that is invisible. Imposter syndrome may also result from the difficulty defining roles since there is often no precedence for some of these positions and “mission drift” (Smith et al., 2021, p. 511) as new opportunities and challenges arise. On the other hand, *Third Space* professionals may take on identities that center more on collaboration versus solitary work and have more meaningful work experiences (Smith et al., 2021; Veles et al., 2019).

CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Third Space labor and identities can be conceptualized more fully through an understanding of critical theories and concepts related to marginalization that capture the promise and perils of higher education. Patton (2016) argues that higher education can serve as a “space for transformative knowledge production that challenges dominant discourses and ways of operating in and beyond the academy” (p. 335). This proposition rests on the assumption that education is inherently disruptive and that the university is a place of refuge (Moten & Harney, 2004) that promises critical thinking and enlightenment, which is what draws people to it. However, it is also a place of paradox and dilemmas. Namely, higher education is a marketized system tied to state and corporate powers (Webb, 2018); based on exclusionary practices and the exploitation of labor (Harris, 2021; Stein, 2022); and implicated in the reproduction of inequities and injustices at the interactional and organizational levels (Stein, 2022).

The Undercommons

The *Third Space* can be seen as a hybrid space – an Undercommons – where academics find refuge within an unjust system that does not fulfill its promise of enlightenment. Moten and Harney (2004) describe the Undercommons as a way of being *in* the university but not *of* the university. This realization requires what Du Bois (1903) referred to as second-sight and locating yourself in the system with an awareness of who you are and how others see you. Do you operate within the normative standards of respectability and professionalism or disrupt these boundaries, which are inherently connected to the regulation of discourse (i.e., what can be said, how it can be said, and who can say it) and actions? Moten and Harney (2013) argue for fugitivity within higher education and describe it as a state of being in motion as a way to subvert bureaucratic ritualism and inertia; finding ways to challenge systemic inequalities; and transforming and rebuilding the academy. This requires operating outside of the dominant notions of respectability and professionalism as a way to make space for those marginalized in higher education. It does not mean that you are giving up on the academy, but that you want more from it.

Numerous scholars have described academic identities and experiences in relation to the Undercommons. For example, Mccann et al. (2021) discuss second shift labor of marginalized and minoritized activist-scholars, Low and Martin (2019) highlight motherhood among early career researchers, and Hankins (2020) work focuses on mental illness within the academy. Smith et al. (2013) explores how to engage in justice work leveraging Undercommons enclaves while Loick (2018) poses the question of how critical theorists see themselves within academia. All of this research brings attention to how one can be simultaneously present and absent within the academy, how some work

is necessary yet excluded, how certain types of knowledge production are legitimized, and the dichotomies that exist within the university. This work is discussing *Third Space* labor even though it is not identified as such.

Hidalgo (2019) suggests one way to resist is to assume that you do not belong within the hierarchical structures of colonization, exploitation, and oppression in higher education that aim to “other” and change people into inanimate things or objects (Freire, 1970/2018). Hidalgo (2019) asserts that “just because we have some privileges within the system, does not mean we have to be loyal to the system...we should use the privileges these institutions have given us to help the people that the academic system marginalizes” (p. 87). It is about finding spaces of resistance (Webb 2018) and coalition building (Mccann et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2013) where “dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking” (Freire, 1970/2018, p. 92). This is a call to recognize and support *Third Space* labor and professionals.

Social Capital and Communities of Practice

The Undercommons is key to understanding *Third Space* labor, and that the way to solidarity and change is through social capital and communities of practice. Social capital refers to relationships within social networks, common values within these networks (e.g., trust and reciprocity), and how this constitutes a resource that becomes a form of capital. Social capital involves both social support and information (including professional development), which professionals in the *Third Space* may lack. Social capital can result from strong or weak ties, a mentoring constellation, enclaves (Mccann et al., 2021), or a community of practice. Lave and Wenger (1991) describe a community of practice as a group of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do, and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly. Essentially, a community of practice has its own identity, facilitates professional and work-based identities, and is based on collective learning and relationship-building. There is not a hierarchy, and knowledge is exchanged among all members as a form of consciousness raising rather than regulated by a gatekeeper.

Mccann et al. (2021) argue that the university promises collaboration while it delivers alienation and marginalization. This is especially relevant for Black women. There are unspoken expectations to support other Black women in the academy either indirectly as mentors and protectors (especially tenured faculty for non-tenured staff), but there is also an expectation that Black women will aide in the support of Black students and hold space for those individuals in the *Third Space*. Additionally, the tokenization of Black women ensures that campus equity offices appear diverse for their institutions’ fair treatment of people of color. This free and often unrecognized labor also means that Black women easily become the unofficial representatives for inclusion efforts, although not compensated or rewarded for their work. These kinds of experiences can result in *Third Space* professionals feeling overworked and unappreciated, and seeking support from others including allies within and across their institutions.

Third Space labor is situated at multiple crossroads, and *Third Space* professionals may see new opportunities for potential collaboration that others do not see and can be leaders in complex collaborations (Veles et al., 2019). It is through formal or informal communities of practice where coalitional work and strategizing happens, which is increasingly important in the face of neoliberal austerity measures (e.g., budget cuts, hiring freezes, merging programs and departments, and increased workloads). If we feel like we don’t belong in academia or that we are isolated in the *Third Space* is because administration wants us to feel this way – to feel like our labor is devalued – when in actuality the *Third Space* can function as an emancipatory space where status hierarchies in academia no longer dictate, where the focus is on liberatory practices (Freire, 1970/2018) not only for students but for those who work in the *Third Space*. The “goal to create critical reflective capacities.... and to begin a project of liberation through praxis...which requires consistent, never-ending critical reflection and action” (Freire, 1970/2018, p. 2).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

To be in but not of, often means acknowledging that the same institutions that create boundaries of limitations, can be the place for community where we find radical liberation. But the journey to liberation is often thickened with the plight of trauma, either through direct or vicarious trauma by supporting colleagues or students experiencing trauma. Crises such as COVID-19 can be a catalyst for growth in *Third Space* labor (Livingston & Ling, 2022), but these crises can also be traumatic for faculty and staff and increase their fear, stress, and compassion fatigue.

While recognizing there is cause for concern with the growth in *Third Space* labor and its sometimes-ambiguous boundaries, Denney (2023) argues for the power of the *Third Space*. Namely, that occupying the *Third Space* provides professionals with a lens that others do not have and that this is essential in creative problem-solving which benefits

the institution and community in a broader way. How do we then empower and support *Third Space* professionals in these endeavors?

This starts with being a trauma-informed organization, which the National Fund for Workforce Solutions endorses for organizational and workforce development (see Choitz & Wagner (2021) for more information). In the case of *Third Space* professionals, they need to feel physically and psychologically safe. In addition, ethical leadership is essential for equitable workplace practices and support for *Third Space* professionals. This includes a clear vision of *Third Space* roles (Smith et al., 2021), institutional support (e.g., professional development, mentorship, and affinity groups), clear promotion criteria, advancement opportunities, and adequate compensation for the entirety of the duties even those that are often invisible. *Third Space* professionals need to contribute to decision-making because changes are made throughout institutions without the input of those that have to execute those changes. These practices can help unify *Third Space* labor, strengthen professional and work-based identities, and address systemic inequities within higher education so that *Third Space* professionals can thrive personally and professionally and not merely survive.

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