

Bringing My Selves to Work: A Revisionist History of an Academic Career

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Abstract

In this essay, I revisit a choice I made early in my career to develop and segment different facets of myself: my work as a professor of organizational behavior and my deep interest in the theory and practice of counselling psychology and psychotherapy. While these may appear relatively compatible, I experienced them as very different worlds and lived in them quite separately, afraid my engagement in one might infect or disrupt that in the other. Despite such efforts to keep my worlds apart, however, I found myself inadvertently integrating them—in my research, my teaching, and to some extent in my emerging clinical practice. Yet I held back from fully owning or sharing my growing commitment to counselling psychology. In this revisionist reflection, I consider some of the consequences of this set of choices and what might have been different had I made others.

Keywords

careers, identity, tensions

In this essay,¹ I share a decision I made early in my career, and repeatedly since then, to develop and segment different facets of myself, and I reflect on how my work and life might have differed had I made other choices. The preference to segment or integrate identities is a prominent part of the work-family literature (Dumas & Sanchez-Burks, 2015; Kossek et al., 2023), and while I also managed that boundary through much of my career, the boundary that I found more complicated was between two other identities: an organizational behavior (OB) professor, and a student and subsequently practitioner of counselling psychology and psychotherapy.

At a glance, these may seem quite compatible activities, both social scientific endeavors fundamentally concerned with human behavior. Yet I experienced them as very different worlds and lived them quite separately. I also maintained a fairly impermeable boundary in my relationships with others in each world, speaking little about my academic experience and identity in the counselling psychology community, and even less about my psychotherapeutic interests in my academic life.

Over time, and despite efforts to keep these worlds and identities apart, and even periodic thoughts of jettisoning one or the other, I found myself inadvertently integrating them—in my research, and to some extent in my emerging clinical practice. But I held back from fully owning or sharing my growing commitment to counselling psychology. In this revisionist reflection, I consider the consequences of this set of choices and what might have been different had I made others.

Answered and Unanswered Callings

My academic career followed a conventional path: graduate school, 15 years moving through the ranks at one business school, and then a mid-career move to another. Starting out as a work psychologist and transmuting into OB, my research has focused on sensemaking, emotional processes at work, and, at the intersection of these areas, how people make sense of difficult, often painful, experiences in their working lives.

In parallel, and quite privately, I pursued learning in the fields of counselling psychology and psychotherapy. This began with an evening class in psychodynamic theory during grad school, and evolved into multiple trainings, workshops, and longer programs throughout my career. The academic outputs from this work included a master's degree in counselling psychology in Canada and a doctorate in counselling psychology and psychotherapy in the United Kingdom, but much of the learning was putting the theory into practice, first through course internships with clients in community agencies and then in private practice. It also involved the deep psychological work that is required to do that—in personal therapy, in process groups where trainee therapists discuss their own

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relational dynamics, and in clinical supervision. This was a very formative set of experiences for me but one that, for a number of reasons, I kept in the shadows.

First, as an untenured assistant professor, I did not want colleagues or the academy more widely to see me either as a dilettante or hopeless, having already given up on my tenure. I quickly understood that getting tenure was meant to be the primary or even sole goal of the first years of academic life: so many discussions and decisions were oriented toward this, as I learned at my first junior faculty consortium and consistently after that. So it felt unwise to risk my identity and reputation as an academic by letting people know I was spending weekends on gestalt therapy training, or subsequently taking counselling psychology evening classes on campus in the building next to the business school where I worked. This sense was amplified by experiences such as attending an Academy of Management panel where a prominent scholar explained that “everyone has to give something up to get tenure” and shared that *he* had given up his hobbies. I saw the logic of a singular commitment to a critical goal, but I did not feel it could work for me. Indeed, I had *begun* a new hobby—my psychotherapy training—in part to cope with the strain of trying to get tenure. But I wasn’t sure that others would understand or support this. Further, and while not fraught with the same reputational or career anxieties, I also felt cautious about talking too much about my academic life with my classmates in counselling psychology. I was at least 10 years older than most of them and felt I couldn’t really explain—to them or to myself—quite why I was doing these programs. I just really enjoyed it and found them enlivening.

I can now see that I was “splitting,” as it is known in the psychoanalytic literature (Fairbairn, 1952; Klein, 1946), keeping two parts of myself separate and unconsciously treating them as a simple dichotomy, rather than parts of a complex whole—which was me. I found this split both comfortable and uncomfortable: I felt acutely aware of the different logics of the two domains, with academia’s elevation of the intellect, incisive critique, clarity of argument, and well-crafted prose, and psychotherapy’s authorization of the heart, feelings, somatic experience, and implicit, dialogical communication. I saw the value of both and felt drawn to be in both worlds, but they did not feel reconcilable. At different times I considered leaving academia for a psychotherapeutic career, or, within academia, switching to a counselling psychology department. Another time, when I moved to academic institutions, I vowed to stop “all this nonsense with the psychotherapy hobby,” deciding I should fully recommit to academic life and putting my counselling psychology books out of reach, on the top shelf of my bookcase.

Segmentation and Unintended Integration

This splitting and segmentation of my two worlds was helpful in important ways. On dark days in my academic

life, for example, my other identity provided a refuge, somewhere I could explore different ways of being and thinking. In parallel, on days when the complexity and challenge of being a trainee and then a novice therapist felt diminishing, I shored myself up with my experienced researcher and teacher identities.

Yet, as the years passed, and I continued to live in both worlds while working to hold a thick boundary between them, I came to see that I was—largely unwittingly—also starting to integrate them. In my research, for example, I moved from studying core organizational processes that had traditionally focused on cognition and action, to seeking out the place of emotion in them, and from there to examining fundamentally emotional processes, like toxicity, care, and compassion at work, and then into deeper territories of people’s most challenging experiences, including trauma, loss, mental health issues, and more.

Methodologically, I went from gathering people’s accounts of their organizations to identify the shared and contested understandings of a collective, to looking deeply into individuals’ narratives over time and trying to understand what happens when they are disrupted, and how people work to build coherence in their lives despite the painful fractures they have experienced. Exploring the ways people story their lives and choices, I heard their tragedies and healing, and the role of their earliest relationships in these processes. I gathered the narratives through in-depth, intimate interviews, and engaged in detailed examination of individuals’ language, and the unconscious threads woven into their stories. I believe my learning as a therapist led me to ask better questions, allow more space for the answers, and connect more profoundly with my participants. And I found, along with the pain and distress they shared, immense hope, resourcefulness, and growth. This has also been my learning in my clinical work, with clients who have had unimaginably difficult experiences and yet are reaching towards the light, however hard it may at times be to see it.

So my story is one of splitting, segmenting, and often concealing each of two meaningful work identities, and yet inadvertently integrating them over time, almost in spite of myself. It has been a rich journey, and I have learned a lot. But what if I had made different choices? What if I had turned away from counselling psychology, singularly pursuing my career as an OB professor? Or if I had pursued counselling psychology more openly, and publicly integrated my worlds?

Turning Away From Counselling Psychology

Where would my research have gone had I never embarked on the study of counselling psychology, or had I followed the advice to give up my new hobby in order to get tenure? At the least, I expect I would have addressed different questions, possibly used different methodological approaches, and drawn on different literature in my theorizing.

My research on sensemaking and related processes, for example, has increasingly examined emotional and relational dynamics (Liu & Maitlis, 2014; Maitlis et al., 2013; Maitlis & Ozcelik, 2004; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Schabram & Maitlis, 2017; Vough et al., 2020), I might instead have stayed focused more on cognitive and discursive practices and continued with analyses at the organizational, rather than team or individual, level. Alternatively, or additionally, I might have become more interested in strategic conversations and change, got more involved in strategy-as-practice, or moved toward institutional theory to explore more macro-level processes in organizations and fields—perhaps in the arts sector, which has long been a passion.

Certainly, I do not think I would have been so drawn to study people's experiences of pain and suffering (Lawrence & Maitlis, 2012; Lilius et al., 2008, 2011; Maitlis & Petriglieri, 2019; Petriglieri & Maitlis, 2019; Seyb et al., 2022) and would not have encountered processes of posttraumatic growth, the transformational positive change that can come through people's struggle with very challenging situations (Maitlis, 2009, 2012, 2020). And I would likely not have considered exploring how unconscious processes shape working life or the influence of our earliest relationships on career decisions we make over our lives (Maitlis, 2022, 2023).

It is hard to imagine not being a qualitative researcher, but I might not have felt equipped, or been drawn, to do such intensive and personal interviews with participants, to probe their most disturbing experiences, and to develop relationships that have allowed me to continue to study their lives over many years (Maitlis, 2009, 2011, 2022, 2023). I might instead have done more ethnographic work, where I could embed myself in organizations and seek to understand workers' collective experiences. I would also likely have had different collaborations, which would have shaped the foci of study, the kind of data we gathered, and how we did so. Further, without the influence of clinical literature, the interpretations of my findings and theoretical contributions of much of my work would also doubtless have been different (Lawrence & Maitlis, 2012; Maitlis, 2020, 2022; Schabram & Maitlis, 2017; Seyb et al., 2022; Shepherd et al., 2022).

Integrating My Worlds More Openly and Explicitly

Alternatively, what if I had fully embraced my psychotherapeutic identity instead of secretly feeding her on the side? What would the consequences have been had I chosen to be more open about my other life and made more intentional efforts to integrate it into my career?

Looking back, I can see that trying to integrate my two worlds earlier, more deliberately, and more publicly could well have benefitted my research, both by loosening the way in which I held the two in my own mind and by broadening my professional networks. As it was, my instinct to

treat OB and counselling psychology as distinct and even at odds with each other meant that I did not actively consider how traditional OB questions might be examined from a more clinical perspective. Had I embraced my dual interests more explicitly, I might have seen more synergies between the two domains and brought such a lens to my work sooner, and perhaps more boldly.

This change might, for example, have affected my research on the emotional dynamics of top management teams which I studied through video ethnography. My then doctoral student, Feng Liu, and I carried out a painstaking analysis of how team members' emotions in a series of videoed meetings shaped their strategizing processes (Liu & Maitlis, 2014). This work was novel and made theoretical and methodological contributions to the literature, but our analysis was restricted to members' emotional displays captured in and coded from the videos. It did not attempt to uncover or theorize more implicit emotional dynamics and their possible impacts—even though, by this time, I had become very interested in unconscious processes. Incorporating such unconscious dynamics might have led to a deeper understanding of how emotions shape team processes.

In other research, my clinical experiences led me to focus more on pain, healing, and growth at work, but I increasingly studied these at the individual level, where I had been most exposed to them. Perhaps bringing a more integrative stance to my interests would have resulted in explorations of these and related processes at a more systemic level, in organizations, communities, or fields. Furthermore, had I been more explicit about my “side gig,” I would likely have connected sooner with others holding similar interests, enabling more generative conversations and collaborations at the intersection of OB and counselling psychology. I might also have built collaborations with scholars outside these fields to tackle quite different questions, perhaps using less conventional research methods, or conducting intervention studies or other kinds of action research.

If I Had a Second Chance

On the face of it, what I've just described sounds a better path than the one I trod, and it would be easy to regret my choices, or at least to feel that I would do things differently if I had my time over again. Yet I am not sure I would make very different decisions in a revised or relived life. Yes, it took a toll living in such a segmented way for so long and it may have constricted my scholarly work and limited the depth of some of my relationships; it may even have made it harder for me to feel fully connected to academic life—and to the work of psychotherapy. But I believe that integrating my worlds sooner and more explicitly and publicly might also have undone some of the rewards each brought.

I felt a great sense of freedom as I pursued my counselling psychology “hobby,” and I think that had I fully embraced,

owned, and spoken more openly about it—even once I had tenure—it might have become contaminated with the pressures and expectations of a career. Further, I believe that integrating my psychotherapeutic understandings more explicitly into my organizational research could have turned that rich learning into a purely intellectual pursuit—drawing me away from the clinical training and my work as a therapist, which is so much more than a way of thinking. Would explicit, public integration have undermined the process through which psychotherapy flourished as a passion and a major source of meaning for me in my life? I suspect it may have.

As for my academic career, I continued to feel that my sustained pursuit of my burgeoning hobby would be regarded as a conflict of commitment by others in the field. Was the backlash I anticipated more about me than some reality of the field? A reviewer raised this possibility, and I can see that, in part, I may have been hiding from my own projections. But not only. I had enough encounters and heard enough opinions about the single-minded focus required in our profession to suggest it was not all in my head.

Take-Homes From a Revisionist Reflection

I have shared how a decision taken early in my career and many times since then has shaped my scholarly work, and I have reflected on what might have been had I made other choices. This is an issue we all encounter since each of us has multiple identities that we choose to keep separate or to enact together. We do so through a continuous process that unfolds across our lives, oriented around different episodes that provide opportunities for segmentation or integration. These decisions are consequential for us and potentially also for others. As scholars of management and organizations we study people and social life, and so whether and how we integrate different parts of ourselves will shape our research in profound ways, in what we study, and how and with whom we study it.

I have no regrets about pursuing my counselling psychology “hobby” so intensely: while it took me away from a purist academic path, I think it gave richness to my work and, more importantly, to my life. Indeed, I suspect I might have left academia had I not found this way of feeding this other part of myself. However, the take-home from my story is not that we should all simply embrace and make public our alternative commitments and passions. Research has shown the benefits of disclosing a concealable identity at work, including increased well-being, job satisfaction, and social support—but also the costs of doing so, such as interpersonal mistreatment and discrimination (Clair et al., 2005; Follmer et al., 2020; Jones & King, 2014; Ragins, 2008). I have identified other potential costs here, including losing a private space in which to experiment, learn, and

grow another identity. Integrating publicly can be costly, certainly for a junior scholar, but also for more seasoned academics, who may find it hard to disrupt webs of work practices and valued relationships woven over many years.

What, then, does my story have to offer others in our profession, especially those at the beginning of their careers? I hate giving advice and believe it’s rarely helpful unless the giver really understands the position and context of the other. But perhaps there are themes in my story that might resonate with others and could be of value.

At the end of my talk in Boston (on which this essay draws), two very established academics came up and each separately whispered to me, “That was *my* story.” So, there are more of us out there than it may appear! Our academic community tends to elevate finely honed expertise and venerate complete commitment to scholarship, advise doctoral students that their dissertation topic will determine their first job and define the first part of their career, and encourage junior scholars to craft an optimally distinctive research identity. I have known this to be hard for individuals who felt the topics they cared about would not be seen as important or credible by the field, for people whose working lives were significantly shaped by intersectional identities that they believed could never be foregrounded in their research questions, and of course many others who concealed stigmatized, and—like me, not particularly stigmatized—parts of themselves for fear of what might happen if they shared them.

So, I hope my story highlights the potential value of allowing multiple parts of ourselves to be held and nurtured rather than amputated in the single-minded pursuit of academic success. In conversations with doctoral students, junior faculty, and others, I have often been struck by the guilty tone with which they speak about their interests, and their pleasure in them, and their wish to integrate them more into their work and lives. My experience suggests that these interests can have important benefits for a career, in my case both providing an alternative source of meaning when academic life was particularly dispiriting, and shaping my academic work in unexpected but positive ways. But I am not advocating pursuing another interest for the sake of one’s career! Quite the contrary: the fact that I studied counselling psychology despite, rather than in service of, my academic career was, I believe, key to the fulfilment it gave me.

I can’t advise on whether or when anyone should speak publicly about nonacademic commitments and passions they have; there are too many factors at play for any general recommendation to make sense. But I will share that, slowly and over time, as I spoke about my “other life” with certain friends and colleagues, I was invariably met with support and encouragement, and several times a comment like, “I’d love to do something like that” or even “I’ve been wondering about doing *this* thing.” So, for anyone who would like to feel a bit more integrated but

doesn't want or feel able to talk openly, consider sharing with one or two trusted people and see how it goes. The more we talk with others in the field about things that matter to us, within our work or beyond, the more our community becomes one in which it's okay to be the complex, multifaceted people that we all are. It is in this spirit that I have written this piece.

I would also encourage others to try a revisionist career reflection. I found both writing this essay and preparing my MOC talk immensely helpful in making sense of my career(s) and the decisions I have made over 25 years. Indeed, I feel they have been important parts of my integration, allowing me to explore the tensions and synergies of my different paths, reconcile choices I have made, and acknowledge more fully the person I have been becoming. If you have ever asked yourself questions such as, "why am I doing this work?," "what should I be spending my time on?," or "what have I done with my life?," consider bringing a revisionist lens to your career. And if you have never asked such questions, even better! You may find a revisionist reflection helps you understand your career differently and opens up new possibilities for the future.

In closing, I am heartened by the rise in our society, and in the organizational literature, of people owning multiple identities and even multiple careers (Bataille & Vough, 2022; Campion et al., 2020; Caza et al., 2018). I feel hopeful that our field may increasingly engage a broader conception of scholarship, one in which we link not only more to practice but also to conversations and activities on the borders of our field, and to those still further away. If we are to grow as academics, I believe these "outside" influences can shape us in valuable ways and help us connect to parts of ourselves that we have not fully explored. And I expect that this, in turn, will keep us feeling alive and enliven the work that we do.

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