The Study of Disciplinary Identity – Some Theoretical Underpinnings

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Abstract

In this paper I argue that Bakhtin’s dialogic theory of identity (Bakhtin, 1981, 1984, 1986), Barth’s anthropological theory of identity (Barth, 1969, 1981; Triandafyllidou, 2002) and Socio-constructionist theory of identity (Giddens, 1991; Burr, 1995; Shotter and Gergen’s edited series on text and identity) provide a remarkably coherent and complementary theoretical foundations for an exploratory study of disciplinary identity negotiation in academic texts. Bakhtin’s dialogic view of identity, in this paper, serves as an overarching theory while social-anthropological theory of identity and social-constructionist theory of identity contribute to the theory of identity within the dialogic framework. Barth’s dichotomous view of identity explicates the necessary consequence of Bakhtin’s infinite dialogues between Self and Others during the process of identity formation – i.e. to draw boundaries, to dichotomize insiders from outsiders, especially Significant Others who cause more impact, positively or negatively. Socio-constructionist theory provides further insights into identity formation by locating Self in a less privileged position, where Self is dialectically related to Others.

These three theories have contributed much to my understanding of discipline identity. In these theoretical lights, I understand identity as arising in simultaneous interactions with a multiplicity of others, especially Significant Others in different temporal and spatial contexts.
1. Introduction

The issue of the identity of an academic discipline has rarely caught the attention of analysts of academic texts. This certainly does not mean that academic disciplines are not concerned about the issue of identity in their academic discussions. The discipline of Chinese medicine, for example, often consciously compares itself with Western medicine in discussions of academic issues. This motivates me to explore the issue of disciplinary identity first from a theoretical point of view. In my discussion that follows, wherever necessary, I use the discipline of Chinese medicine as an illustration of my point. Exemplary extracts are taken from top journals of Chinese medicine in China if not otherwise indicated.

The second part of the paper outlines the theoretical inspirations that have illuminated my understanding of disciplinary identity. In particular, I shall give an overview of Bakhtin’s dialogic view of identity and then Barth’s anthropological view of identity. This is followed by a discussion on the issue of boundary in academic disciplines. I shall then move on to the socio-constructionist view of identity, with a focus on the social construction of knowledge and knowledge community. Guided by these theories, in the last part (Part III) of the paper, I shall attempt to discuss the conceptions of an academic discipline and describe the principles of disciplinary identity.

2. Theoretical Underpinnings

Though I discuss Bakhtin’s dialogic theory of identity, Barth’s anthropological theory of identity and social constructionist theory of identity one by one, I do not consider these three theories parallel; rather, I want to espouse Bakhtin’s dialogism as an all-embracing philosophy, and then propose that the
socio-anthropological theory and socio-constructionist theory make a contribution to the research of identity in this paradigm. I focus on the dichotomization between insider and outsider, especially Significant Others, in identity construction from socio-anthropological theory, and the view of multiplicity and simultaneity of identity construction from socio-constructionist theory in my study of disciplinary identity.

2.1 Bakhtin and Dialogism

The idea of dialogism is predominant throughout Bakhtin’s work, though Bakhtin himself never used the term ‘dialogism’, according to Holquist (2002, p.15). Bakhtin’s idea of *dialogism* “refers to particular instances of language, perceptible in novels and popular speech; and also to a defining quality of language itself, and its most fundamental sense-making capacities” (Vice, 1997, p. 45). To him, language is inherently dialogic so ‘dialogue’ is taken by him “to signify what was for him the paramount property of language – its inherent ability to effectuate that responsive exchange” (Danow, 1991, p. 126).

For Bakhtin (1986), the world is an event. “[T]he very capacity to have consciousness is based on *otherness*” (Holquist, 1990, p. 18). Life only lives in dialogue and meaning necessarily emerges only in dialogue.

The single adequate form for *verbally expressing* authentic human life is the *open-ended dialogue*. Life by its very nature is dialogic. To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth. In this dialogue a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life: with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds. He invests his entire self in discourse, and this discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life, into the
2.1.1 Dialogic View of Identity

Essentialists believe that external world is fixed. Bakhtin challenges this theory by proposing a dialogic view of reality. Bakhtin (1984) introduces the ideas of dialogicality and identity construction within dialogue where Other constitutes a crucial force. As Holquist (2002, p. 18) states, “it cannot be stressed enough that for him ‘self’ is dialogic, a relation” and “the very capacity to have consciousness is based on otherness” (original emphasis). Nealon (1997) further reiterates the interdependence of self and other: “In a dialogic system, neither self nor other can live independently; while the self may be privileged, it can never be complete” (p. 140).

I cannot manage without an other; I cannot become myself without another; I must find myself in another by finding another in myself (in mutual reflection and mutual acceptance). (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 287)

Every utterance, according to Bakhtin, immediately triggers two relations. One concerns the relation between the present message and the messages that the utterance carried in previous uses and the other concerns the addressivity of the message, i.e. whom the utterance is addressed to. The addressee (Other) can be either a concrete one or an abstract one.

This addressee can be an immediate participant-interlocutor in an everyday dialogue, a differentiated collective of specialists in some particular area of cultural communication, a more or less differentiated public, ethnic group, contemporaries, like-minded people,
opponents and enemies, a subordinate, a superior, someone who is lower, higher, familiar, foreign, and so forth. And it can also be an indefinite, unconcretised other [...]. All these varieties and conceptions of the addressee are determined by that area of human activity and everyday life to which the given utterance is related. (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 95, original emphasis)

Addressivity implies that meaning is negotiable because of the intervention of the addressee, Bakhtin conceptualises identity as being in a state of being addressed and in the process of answering.

Bakhtin uses the term heteroglossia to describe the inscription of multiple voices engaging in dialogues within the text. Holquist (2002) interprets heteroglossia as a situation where the subject is “surrounded by a myriad responses he or she might make at any particular point, but any one of which must be framed in a specific discourse selected from teeming thousands available” (p. 69). Heteroglossia therefore “permits a multiplicity of social voices and wide variety of their links and interrelationships (always more or less) dialogized” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 263). Heteroglot differences cover a wide range of social diversity in terms of time (present and past) and space (social and ideological); they represent

…the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles, and so forth, all given a bodily form. (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 291)

Contemporary theorists refer to this phenomenon of interwoven discourses as intertextuality (Kristeva, 1986;
Fairclough (1992), or interdiscursivity (Fairclough, 1999, 2003). Fairclough (2003) applies Bakhtin’s ideas in his work on discourse analysis. He focuses on how people intertextually construct an identity in a given discourse by positioning themselves in relation to others and in the way they relate their own contributions to previous contributions. Bostad et al. (2004) give a summary on how dialogism as a theory contributes to our understanding of the formation of Self:

A dialogic approach, we believe, can substantially contribute to our understanding of meaning. We admittedly do things according to our individual agendas and understandings, but these agendas and understandings have largely developed through our interactions with others, and with larger societal and material aspects of reality. In other words, inter-actions and inter-acts are more basic than actions and acts. (p. 8)

Dialogism hence offers great insights into my understanding of the identity of a discipline in its epistemological focus on intersubjectivity. It implies a radical critique of essentialist theories of identity. It reminds me that a socially-formed discipline, like any social beings, is always in dialogue with others. The environment the discipline is situated in is always in the process of becoming. Dialogism relates to disciplinary identity also in the way that it explains how a discipline sees itself in relation to others.

The dialogue of multiple voices has become a powerful metaphor for a social space wherein, as Michael Gariner puts it, “otherness is no longer considered foreign or threatening” (in Nealon, 1997, p. 131) but a necessary element in the formation of self.
2.1.2 Dialectic Nature of Identity

Szkudlarek (2002) has pointed out the relative significance of the issue of identity: “we need identity when we lack it” (p. 88). For example, a British person normally does not feel that identity is an issue at home, but when s/he emigrates to a foreign land, s/he is immediately more conscious of his/her own existence, i.e. being British. There is an immediate need for the person to identify herself or himself. Szkudlarek mentions that identity is to a large extent a linguistic phenomenon: “to identify ourselves, we need a particular narrative practice that provides for cohesion and coherence of our experience” (p. 88). Szkudlarek’s a dialectic view of Self and Other further illuminates my understanding of the psychological process of Bakhtin’s abstract dialogic construction of identity:

We need Others who provide for the sense of our uniqueness. [...] On the one hand, we need otherness to feel our distinctiveness; on the other, we fear it. Otherness is at once a condition of and a challenge to our identity. For the sake of identification, we look for difference. However, once we meet difference, we are tempted to incorporate it into the structure of “the same. (Szkudlarek, 2002, p. 89)

This dialectic view not only expounds the mechanism of identity construction but also shows the transformation of the reflexive Self as an inter-transformation of Self and Other. It views identity as emergent and dynamic, rather than as stable and given. It thus offers an open and flexible theory of identity. As Bakhtin (1986) states,

[T]here are no limits to the dialogic context (it extends into the boundless past and the boundless future). Even past meanings, that is those born in the dialogue of past centuries, can never be stable (finalized, ended once and
for all) – they will always change (be renewed) in the process of subsequent development of the dialogue. (p. 170)

So we can visualize Self in the complex network of the interactions with Others at a particular time in a particular situation (see Figure 1). There are perhaps countless less significant others (represented in empty bubbles) but they may become significant at other times in other situations. From the perspective of Chinese medicine, the identity of Self is constructed in its dialogic relationships with many others in its historical development.

Figure 1: An illustration of the dialogic system of Self and Other

![Diagram of the dialogic system of Self and Other](image)

However this inevitably poses challenges to discourse analysis as this complex network of dialogues, though ordered in its own way, may look hopelessly chaotic to discourse analysts, especially analysts of collective identity. As Russell (1997) comments,

dialogism focuses on the dialectical relation between the cognitive and the social, or between individuals engaged in reciprocal utterances (usually dyads). However, the dialectical relations between and among collectives are not ordinarily the focus of analysis, apart from the
reciprocal interpenetration of dialogic voices drawn from social languages. (p. 507)

2.2 Socio-anthropological Theory on Identity

In this paper, I propose an analogy between disciplines and ethnic communities – *disciplinary identity* (c.f. Becher and Trowler’s (2001) analogy between disciplines and tribes in their book *Academic Tribes and Territories*). One social anthropological view on ethnic identity (Barth, 1969) has proven to be extremely useful to my understanding of identity. It also shares a remarkable resemblance in its conception of identity to Bakhtin’s dialogism, yet complements it in an important way: it points to the possible identification of which Other that Self is ‘responsive’ to; to a discourse analyst, which Other(s) to look for in text.

2.2.1 Barth (1969) and Dichotomous View of Identity

The work of Fredrik Barth (1969, 1981), a Norwegian socio-anthropologist, has been predominantly concerned with ethnicity. He is perhaps most well-known for his anthology *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1969), in which he formulates a relational theory of ethnicity, which emphasizes the boundaries between ethnic groups, rather than the cultural contents which the boundaries enclose. He proposes to view ethnicity as an organisational form realized through the process of interaction between different groups rather than as a static cultural entity. Instead of defining ethnic identity as a set of features that the members of the ethnic group share, Barth looks at the dynamics of formation and maintenance of ethnicity. According to him, ethnic identity is not an intrinsic and independent property of a person or a group but is generated, confirmed or transformed in the course of interaction with others. This view of identity is greatly consistent with Bakhtin’s dialogic view of identity.
Interactions occur at the boundaries between ethnic communities, structuring the perceptions of the group. The continuity of ethnic groups, to Barth, relies crucially on the maintenance of boundary. Such maintenance is achieved through a continuing interaction, and more importantly, dichotomization between insiders and outsiders, which shapes and reshapes the form of identity.

The nature of continuity of ethnic units is clear: it depends on the maintenance of a boundary. The cultural features that signal the boundary may change, and the cultural characteristics of the members may likewise be transformed, indeed, even the organisational form of the group may change – yet the fact of continuing dichotomisation between members and outsiders allows us to specify the nature of continuity, and investigate the changing cultural form and content. (Barth, 1981, p. 203)

Instead of investigating the features, traditions, rituals or history that characterise an ethnic group and support its identity from within, Barth therefore suggests a focus on the interaction processes through which ethnic identity is maintained and re-confirmed (Barth, 1981).

I think Barth’s view on ethnicity can be applied to the study of identity of any form of human social organization, including disciplinary identity. Barth’s view on ethnic identity points to a dichotomous view of social reality, where individuals are distinguished into members of insiders and outsiders, especially significant outsiders (Significant Others) who have most impact on Self. Such a dichotomous view of identity construction explicates Others in terms of their degree of relevance and importance in identity formation at particular historical stage in a particular social-cultural context.
Triandafyllidou (who herself is much influenced by Barth) further sheds light on my understanding of identity. Triandafyllidou’s discussion on Significant Other (2002, pp. 32-42) explicates the dynamics and mechanism of identity formation and re-formation.

Triandafyllidou (2002), whose study is mainly on national identity, gives the following definition of Significant Other:

The notion of a Significant Other refers to another nation or ethnic group that is usually territorially close to, or indeed within, the national community. Significant Others are characterised by their peculiar relationship to the ingroup’s identity: they represent what the ingroup is not. (p. 33, original emphasis)

Triandafyllidou (2002) further attributes the shaping and reshaping of identity to Significant Others in the way that “they condition the ingroup”:

[Significant Others] condition the ingroup, either because they are a source of inspiration for it, an example to follow for achieving national grandeur, or because they threaten (or are perceived to threaten) its presumed ethnic or cultural purity and/or its independence. (p. 33)

There are two kinds of Significant Others, according Triandafyllidou (2002). One is an inspiring Significant Other and the other is a threatening Significant Other. When Significant Others are a source of inspiration, “an object of admiration and esteem, an exemplary case to be imitated”, the imposition “may be of a positive and peaceful character”. However, when Significant Others are (or perceived to be) a source of threat, the imposition may “take the character of a threat, it may be seen as a danger to be avoided, an enemy to
fight against, an outgroup to be destroyed, if necessary” (ibid, p. 34).

Barth (1969, 1981) mainly discusses External Other (outsiders) whereas Triandafyllidou (2002) in addition introduces the notion of an Internal Other (e.g. immigrants in relation to national identity) that could also condition the shaping and reshaping of a group identity. I believe both can be applied to my discussion of the issue of disciplinary identity of Chinese medicine. But I think there is one more Significant Other that they did not discuss (though they did mention broadly social factors) – the political other. One discipline may be brought into being or wiped out purely for political or financial reasons (here I am inclined to put the financial under the political largely because funding is often more a political decision). I shall call internal and external others Content Others while the political other Contextual Other. When this Contextual Other is seen as a threat to a discipline, differences that are usually considered boundary markers have lost their defining power. Instead of reiterating differences that define it, the discipline may therefore have to re-assert its social value and contribution to humanity. It is possible that an external other may be brought in and made relevant by the discipline to show that it has more social value to justify its existence. For example, in financial difficulties, one university department may have to argue that another department or research unit has more reasons (e.g. research less vigorous, courses offered unattractive to students) to be phased out.

2.2.2 A Diagrammatic Illustration

Duszak (2002) has pointed out that “The mental process of categorization foregrounds the difference because it is the comparison that provides the basis for making a distinction. This leads to the generation of otherness in the sense of being
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different” (p. 2). Hall (1996) confirms that “identities are constructed through, not outside, difference” (p. 4).

中醫重在辯証，西醫重在辯病
Chinese medicine emphasizes zheng [conformation] differentiation; Western medicine emphasizes disease differentiation


Social psychological research has also shown that a given group will engage in comparisons only with relevant outgroups. One can see from the above extract an explicit comparison and contrast between Chinese medicine and Western medicine made by the writer. One can also see one area of difference that Chinese medicine seeks to emphasize is its difference in diagnostics (from its counterpart). A less explicit contrast found from one of my interviews with a university professor in Chinese medicine would be. (Note: (.) below indicates a short pause).

中醫研究的對像是人($)中醫首先問人是甚麼
The object of study of Chinese Medicine is human beings (.) Chinese medicine first asks what a human being is.

Li Zhizhong, I1 (2002)

The re-articulation of what Chinese medicine studies presupposes that other medicines, especially Western medicine, do not do so. The Significant Other of Chinese medicine, at its present socio-historical stage of development, seems to be its competing discipline Western medicine (though political factors could be another potential Significant Other) (See 2.2 above).

I again attempt to visualize the formation of Self in relation to Other, and more importantly Significant Others in the following figure. The dotted line of the outer circle indicates the
dynamic nature of the social cultural historical context that Self and Others are situated in. The dotted circles/ovals of both Self and Others indicate the mutual permeability of their boundaries in the interaction with each set of others. Bigger circles obviously symbolize bigger impact, both positive and negative. The empty circles represent distant others that may not be actively interacting with Self but potentially will be at a different time, in a different social cultural and historical context.

**Figure 2:** An illustration of the dialogic relation between Self and Other from a socio-anthropological perspective

The difference between Figure 1 and Figure 2 is that Figure 2 has Significant Others that permeate into Self (see overlaps in the figure) as a result of interactions. That is to say, Significant Others, which are not fixed but changeable with different social historical contexts, make significant contributions to the (re)shaping of identity.
2.2.3 The Issue of Boundary in Academic Disciplines

From the above review and discussion, we can see one closely related issue to the construction of identity is the issue of boundary. Since my research interest is in an academic discipline and academic disciplines are social organizations, I think they should in theory draw boundaries too.

Identity is about boundaries, is about what makes Self different from Others, about what makes Self distinct. Academic disciplines, according to Gieryn (1983), do draw their disciplinary territories or boundaries in social-historical contexts to include and exclude in order to reinforce their social status. While discussing boundary-work in the attempts by scientists, Gieryn (1983) notes that “boundary-work describes an ideological style found in scientists’ attempts to create a public image for science by contrasting it favorably to non-scientific intellectual or technical activities” (p. 781). So identity is also about power. But identity is flexible and strategic. It also affiliates. It makes allies and engages in networks to make itself better grounded and more secure. By doing this it constantly redraws its boundaries too.

Boundary-work as intentional demarcation is analyzed by Turner (1978) as a ‘professional’ conflict, often for ‘authority and prestige’ rather than serious debate between two theories. Gieryn (1983) identifies three occasions where boundary-work is likely a stylistic resource for ideologists of a profession or occupation: expansion, monopolization and protection of autonomy, which to him are generic features of ‘professionalization’.

(a) when the goal is expansion of authority or expertise into domains claimed by other professions or occupations, boundary-work heightens the contrast
between rivals in ways flattering to the ideologists’ side;
(b) when the goal is monopolization of professional authority and resources, boundary-work excludes rivals from within by defining them as outsiders with labels such as “pseudo,” “deviant,” or “amateur”;
(c) when the goal is protection of autonomy over professional activities, boundary-work exempts members from responsibility for consequences of their work by putting blame on scapegoats from outside.

(pp. 791-792)

Gieryn uses the terms ‘ideologists’ and ‘profession or occupation’ to cover a wider range of boundary-workers in their respective social units or divisions of labour. His ‘ideologists’ certainly include thinkers and theorists in the academy and his ‘profession or occupation’ certainly includes academic disciplines, an area that my study takes an interest in.

To echo Bakhtin’s concept of dialogicality, again, we can understand such boundary-work as responses to, and interactions with, challenging Others. Such responses or interactions can be multi-layered and multi-faceted, but, as suggested by Gieryn in the above quote, they are more due to political reasons than due to academic reasons. That is why Robert E. Kohler (1982) in his study of biochemistry argues: “disciplines are political institutions that demarcate areas of academic territory, allocate the privileges and responsibilities of expertise, and structure claims on resources” (p. 1).

According to Gieryn (see Point b in above quote), challenges do not always come from outside. Boundaries can also be established (or contested) as responses to internal demands.
Disciplinary academics or professionals may have different academic or professional ambitions. They deviate from communal conventions or norms, no matter in their ontological positions, epistemological alignments or rhetorical strategies. Hence in some cases, Other may emerge from inside (Self) – an Internal Other (see discussion on *Significant Others* in 2.2 above). An Internal Other, in favourable social, political and economical conditions, may be able to successfully establish its own boundaries, hence its own identity, an identity differentiated and independent from the original Self. The force of 中西醫結合學 (integrated Chinese and Western medicine) in China that intends to establish itself as a medicine that combines Chinese and Western medicine yet differs from either is a good case in point.

Gieryn’s analysis is very enlightening. He has specified the motivations behind boundary work, which is very useful for my understanding of disciplinary identity, and the linguistic labels ‘pseudo’ ‘deviant’ ‘amateurs’ he exemplified provide very useful starting points for my linguistic analyses of disciplinary identity.

In social sciences, however, boundary-crossing seems very often practiced and even preferred (see for example Bhatia, 2002¹). Wax (1969) finds that “disciplinary boundaries among social sciences do not represent a systematic division of labour, nor methodological differences follow the disciplinary boundaries” (p. 97). But the active appropriation of theories and methodologies from a neighbouring discipline seems much less critical than necessary. Wax (1969) warns that

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¹ Bhatia (2002) uses notions such as genre mixing, genre embedding, and genre colonies to account for the ways in which writers of certain genres exploit or borrow discourse strategies originating from other genres.
Given a variety of disciplines in such rivalry with each other that they do not respect disciplinary boundaries, given also a variety of styles of research [...] the seeming accomplishments of one discipline can be embraced uncritically by a neighbor and then maintained with such vigor as to ignore the process of criticism which begins at home. [...] the dialogue among the disciplines is still deficient and inadequately critical. (p. 97)

No matter whether it is the politically-motivated boundary-building (as identified by Gieryn and Turner and Kohler), or it is the more free, even uncritical boundary crossing, (as identified by Bhatia and Wax), interactions between boundaries never cease for the dynamic development of the world. Morson and Emerson (1990) observe that “every cultural act lives essentially in the boundaries: in this is its seriousness and significance; abstracted from boundaries it loses its soil, it becomes empty, arrogant; it degenerates and dies” (p. 51). In other words, boundary work is crucial for identity. Boundary work is a driving force for the evolution of a discipline.

2.3 A Socio-constructionist View of Identity

Socio-constructionism, which also contributes to my understanding of disciplinary identity, bears traces of Bakhtin’s idea of dialogicality too. Socio-constructionism arises from and is influenced by a variety of disciplines and intellectual traditions. Its cultural backdrop is postmodernism (Burr, 1995). The post-modernist world view, according to Baxter (2003),

…does not accept that it is possible to know the world by dissecting it through apparently objective method of inquiry. Rather, it considers that knowledge is always constructed not discovered; contextual not foundational; singular, localized and perspectival
rather than totalizing or universal; and egalitarian rather than hierarchical. (p. 23)

A socio-constructionist view of identity sees identity as a product of social encounters and relationships, being shaped and reshaped from situation to situation, from encounter to encounter (Burr, 1995). Every situation of contact is a situation for identity work. In this sense, Self is remarkably reflexive; it continually constitutes itself as the Self that it wants to be (Freedman & Combs, 1996). This view agrees considerably with Bakhtin’s dialogic view of identity.

Giddens (1991) also points out reflexivity in the formation of identity:

In the post-traditional order of modernity, and against the backdrop of new forms of mediated experience, self-identity becomes a reflexively organized endeavour. The reflexive project of the self, which consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives, takes place in the context of multiple choices. (p. 5)

Giddens’s “the reflexive project of the self” not only locates identity in events and experience but also sees identity as a conscious, motivated and emergent entity, formed as a result of responding to multiple choices. This view is very useful for my understanding of the plurality of medical practice in China (see also Cai, 1998) and plurality of genre of research articles in Chinese medicine.

**Socio-construction of Knowledge and Knowledge Community**

Social constructionism presents an epistemological challenge to positivist theories of knowledge. It challenges the assumption
that there is a straightforward relationship between ‘knowledge’ and ‘reality’ and that objective, unbiased understanding is possible.

Socio-constructionism, according to Shotter and Gergen (1994), is concerned with “the processes by which human abilities, experiences, commonsense and scientific knowledge are both produced in, and reproduce, human communities” (p. i).

Latour and Woolgar’s (1979) seminal study of the ‘tribes of scientists’ points to social construction of scientific knowledge. Their study is concerned with “the process by which scientists make sense of their observation” (Latour & Woolgar, 1979, p. 32). While the scientists are trying to construct order (an ordered account) out of the disorder in their observations, data, and interpretations, Latour and Woolgar are trying to construct an ordered account out of scientists’ laboratory life. As Restivo and Croissant (2007) comment, Latour and Woolgar’s achievement contributes to our understanding that reality is an accomplishment. They have shown that the ‘out-there-ness’ of reality is a consequence of scientific work, both practical and rhetorical, not its cause. Similarly, Knorr-Cetina (1981), also takes up the challenge of reflexivity, explaining sociology of science in an ethnographic approach. What counts as a ‘fact’, to Knorr-Cetina, is the ‘manufactured’ result of a long social process of conflict and negotiation among a group of scientists, each motivated by self-advancement rather than the detached neutrality of the positivist myth. (See also Knorr-Cetina, 1983, 1999.)

Studies of scientific and technical rhetoric follow the discursive courses of facts and artifacts into the genre and styles of persuasion (Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984; Bazerman, 1988; Myers, 1990). In his book *The Rhetoric of Science* (2nd ed.), Gross (1990) maintains the view that “rhetoric has a crucial epistemic role in
science, that science is constituted through interactions that are essentially rhetorical” (p. x).

All these studies (and many others) using their own disciplinary tools of enquiry have proven with strong evidence that scientific knowledge is at least partly a product of socio-negotiation at different levels. To these scholars, scientific knowledge, like human experiences, is also produced in social interactions, and reciprocally reproduces the human community in which knowledge is produced. In other words, the identity of a knowledge-making academic community (such as a discipline) is shaped in its socio-interactions with others, which results in the rhetoric and narrative of the discipline. Such rhetoric and narrative of Self in turn constructs and defines the knowledge community. The socio-constructionist view of knowledge and knowledge community justifies my choice of research articles as an epistemological site to study the discursive construction of disciplinary identity.

3. Conceptions of a Discipline

In this section, I shall discuss why I need a new term disciplinary identity rather than just adopting some existing terms for an academic discipline. I shall start with different conceptions of a discipline. I shall then attempt to identify defining features of a discipline.

Becher and Trowler (2001) in their book Academic Tribes and Territories elaborate on the features and defining characteristics of academic communities. The metaphor ‘tribe’ underpins their conception of the academic community mediated through the schema of a social tribe where academics are ‘social animals’. They find that, despite temporal shifts of character and institutional or national diversity, each discipline has a recognizable identity and particular cultural attributes.
At a more superficial level, Becher and Trowler (2001) think that a discipline can be “in part identified by the existence of relevant departments” (p. 41), in physical form of buildings, with a group of personnel who share specialized disciplinary terminologies (in order to include and exclude membership) (pp. 46-47). In terms of cultural attributes, they state that a discipline usually also has its own disciplinary cultural elements such as shared traditions, customs and practices, values and beliefs, morals and rules (p. 47). It also has its cultural idols (important figures in the field) and cultural artefacts (pp. 45-46) to display on the desk (e.g. in Chinese medicine, a small cushion for pulse-taking and palpation or a statue of the human body, with all the Chinese medicine acupoints and meridians and channels inscribed), or to put on the walls (e.g. pictures of famous Chinese medicine physicians in history such as Li Shizhen (李時珍) or Zhang Zhong-jing (張仲景)).

In addition to these more tangible features, they discuss in detail academic aspects of a discipline such as academic exchange, gate-keeping practices, academic credibility, intellectual substance, and appropriateness of subject matter and international currency, individual quest for recognition and so on.

Their ethnographic study has no doubt shed much light on my understanding of what socially and epistemologically constitutes an academic discipline in a world that is increasingly diversified on the one hand, and increasingly convergent on the other. However, they have little discussion on how each discipline resists convergence and manages its boundaries (a notion which is very important to my discussion of identity) although there is a very small portion of discussion on “adjoining territories” (p. 58). Most obviously, a person who has an office in the building of an academic department, with
some typical disciplinary cultural artifacts on the desk or walls does not automatically qualify as an insider. The person has to share the values and goals of the community, follow its rules of conduct, engages in communal goal-oriented knowledge making activities mediated by a common language.

3.1 Different Names of a Discipline

As mentioned above, when referring to an academic discipline, Speech community, discourse community and community of practice are popular terms alternatively used in literature. Each seems to have a particular inclination. I shall discuss them one by one and then show how they illuminate my understanding of disciplinary identity and why it is necessary to introduce a new term Disciplinary Identity for my research interest.

3.1.1 Speech community

Speech community, a notion originated from Bloomfield (1926), has been an evolving concept in sociolinguistics. At the outset, a speech community was seen as being composed of those who share similar linguistic rules. Labov (1972) later emphasized ‘shared norms’ in the speech community by arguing that “The speech community is not defined by any marked agreement in the use of language elements, so much as by participation in a set of shared norms” (pp. 120-121). Hymes (1972) however proposed multiple criteria: shared knowledge of rules and conduct and interpretation of speech. I find a more recent definition (in which one can perhaps see the traces of insights from previous theorists) given by Romaine (1994) much more flexible as it does not take a rigid position in emphasizing the sharing of language in a speech community:

A speech community is a group of people who do not necessarily share the same language, but share a set of norms and rules for the use of language. The
boundaries between speech communities are essentially social rather than linguistic. (p. 22).

This definition stresses the shared (rules of) use rather than shared form of language. It also points out that boundaries between speech communities are essentially socially rather than linguistically defined, though it remains unclear to me what socially exactly involves.

However, this notion gets more sophisticated and extended when many linguistics appropriate the term speech community to mean discourse community. ‘Speech’ is taken to mean ‘language’ in an abstract sense, language that is used to achieve social goals (discourse in Foucault and Fairclough’s terms, among many others, see discussion on discourse community below). Though Bloomfield’s original concern in defining a speech community was purely linguistic, if ‘speech’ is interpreted in the sense of ‘discourse’, the insistence on ‘sharing of speech’ in a speech community is absolutely sensible because ‘language’ then becomes an important boundary marker.

Even if one can interpret ‘speech’ as ‘discourse’ and the social norms and rules rather than just language are defining features of a community, it is still a limited notion for my study of a discipline. As Holmes and Meyerhoff (1999) remark, “[The speech community concept has] nothing to say about maintenance or (de)construction of boundaries” (pp. 178-179).

3.1.2 Discourse Community

Another term that is very popular in discussion of academic disciplines is discourse community. Christopher Candlin in his preface to the book The Construction of Professional Discourse (1997) gives a detailed description:
‘Discourse’ is often used to refer to connected language in general, a generalization or an abstraction which is realized in specific pieces of connected and coherent language, or texts. Discourse in this sense is no more than stretches of connected spoken or written language, but since any interpretation of their meaning necessarily implies that such analysis depends on the context or social situation in which they occur and on which any interpretation of their meaning necessarily implies that such analysis depends on the context or social situation in which they occur and on which any interpretation of their meaning depends, then more commonly discourse refers to language in use, as a process which is socially situated. […] [We] may go on to stress the constructive and dynamic role of either spoken or written discourse in structuring ideas of knowledge and the social and institutional practices which are associated with them. In this sense, discourse is a means of talking and writing about and acting upon a set of social practices within these worlds, and in so doing both reproduces and constructs afresh particular social-discursive practices, constrained or encouraged by more macro movements in the overarching social formation.

Though theorists are respectively perspectival in their understanding of discourse (e.g. to Foucault, discourse is ideological whereas to Fairclough, discourse means power), there is one commonality: discourse goes beyond just stretches of spoken or written texts, it acts upon the world.

Discourse is socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned – it constitutes situations, objects of knowledge and the social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people.
Discourse is constitutive both in the sense that it helps to sustain and reproduce the social *status quo* and that it contributes to transforming it. (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 258)

There exists a dialectical relationship between discourse and social structure (or *community* in a narrower sense): they are mutually constructed. Discourse reflects, constructs and consolidates the social structure. Jonathan Potter’s concise definition (1996, p. 105) sums it all up: discourse is *talk or texts as parts of social practices* (original emphasis). More recently the notion of discourse has been extended to include objects and visuals (e.g. Scollon, 2001; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). Nevertheless the focus remains on the mediated social action and practice.

Discourse community can then be simply understood as a group of people who use shared mediations to achieve similar social goals. Compared with the notion of *speech community*, the notion of *discourse community* is more loosely defined. Porter identifies the problems around the concept of discourse community by asking “Should discourse communities be determined by shared objects of study, by common research methodology, by opportunity and frequency of communication, or by genre and stylistic conventions?” (Porter, 1988, in Swales, 1990, p. 22)

Swales (1990) makes an enlightening differentiation between the two concepts of speech community and discourse community by identifying the former as *a social-linguistic group* while the latter as *a sociorhetorical group*. He stresses that communicative needs of a speech community such as socialization or group solidarity tend to predominate in the development and maintenance of its discoursal characteristics. The linguistic behavior is mainly socially motivated. However
in sociorhetorical discourse community, linguistic behavior is functionally motivated, “since a discourse community consists of a group of people who link up in order to pursue objectives that are prior to those of socialization and solidarity, even if these latter should consequently occur”. “In a discourse community, the communicative needs of the goals tend to predominate in the development and maintenance of its discoursal characteristics”. “A discourse community recruits its members by persuasion, training or relevant qualification” (quotes from Swales, 1990, p. 24, original emphasis). To Swales, a speech community is naturally formulated whereas a discourse community is formed in social actors’ pursuit of common goals.

Swales (1990) proposes seven defining characteristics that he finds necessary and sufficient to identify a discourse community:

- A discourse community has a broadly agreed set of common public goals.
- A discourse community has mechanisms of intercommunication.
- A discourse community uses its participatory mechanisms primarily to provide information and feedback.
- A discourse community utilizes and hence possesses one or more genres in the communicative furtherance of its aims.
- In addition to owning genres, a discourse community has acquired some specific lexis.
- A discourse community has a threshold level of members with a suitable degree of relevant content and discoursal expertise.

Central to his analysis is the notion of genre, the organizational pattern of written communication (he later included ‘spoken communication’ in 1998), which he sees as belonging to the
community and at the same time helping to define the community. His view that patterns of communication are defining features of a discipline is absolutely illuminating. However most studies of academic discourse take disciplines for granted. They are not concerned about how defining features such as patterns of communication (genre sets) contribute to the boundary maintenance of a discipline. As Swales (1998) himself later admits:

Discourse community concept was thus more useful for validating the existence of groupings that already shared a complex of ideas and sentiments, and less useful for seeing how such groupings were initiated and nurtured, or for assessing the precise characteristics of any purported collectivity. (p. 21)

3.1.3 Community of Practice

The notion of discourse community has been questioned because it implies static, unchanging modes of discourse as dominant and uncontested; whereas, as with any active group one can assume competing discourses and interests as well as emerging genres (Dias et al., 1999) So instead, a new notion, communities of practice, comes to be used to refer to an academic community. Theorists of communities of practice represented by Lave (anthropologist) and Wenger (a computer scientist) hold that, in essence, communities of practice are groups of people who share similar goals and interests (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In pursuit of their shared goals and interests, they employ common practices, work with common tools and express themselves in a common language. Through such common activities, they come to hold common beliefs and value systems. Mainly concerned with situated learning, they emphasize learning through doing, through ‘legitimate
peripheral participation’, through learning with ‘expert’ participants.

The communities of practice may or may not have a name for themselves; they may be more or less formally organized. However, members are brought together by joining in common activities and by what they have learned through their mutual engagement in these activities (Wenger, 1998). In this respect, a community of practice is different from a naturally formed speech community (in sociolinguistic sense), which emphasizes shared norms of speech, and different from a discourse community (in Swales’ sense of genre), which emphasizes shared patterns of communication. Communities of practices are inter-related forms of participation. It centers on what people do. It emphasizes practice as boundary, practice as identity, practice as meaning (Wenger, 1998). A community of practice, according to Wenger (1998), can be defined from three dimensions: 1) a joint enterprise as understood and continually renegotiated by its members; 2) a mutual engagement that bind members together into a social entity; 3) a shared repertoire of communal resources (routines, sensibilities, artefacts, vocabulary, styles, etc.) that members have developed over time.

A community of practice involves not just the technical knowledge or skills associated with undertaking the tasks of common interest, but also a set of relationships developed over time (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The pursuit of shared goals and interest through shared activities gives members a sense of joint enterprise and identity.

Communities of practice is no doubt another powerful concept that underpins the social nature of learning and other academic activities because the term itself automatically evokes a sense of goal-oriented doing, which is exactly what academic disciplines
engage in. Patterns of communication are not as meaningful to communities of practice practitioners as to genre analysts (Dias et al., 1999). But again, the theorists of communities of practice are only interested in researching members enculturating into a community rather than the community collectively managing their boundaries. They are interested in negotiation of meaning and identity during the process of practices of individuals rather than that of the collective social organization that members practice in. They do not concern themselves with how each community constructs and maintains boundary work, an issue my study takes an interest in.

To sum up, all the popular terms – speech community, discourse community and communities of practice – that are often used alternatively to refer to academic disciplines are powerful notions in their own right for their particular research interests and perspectives. But none of them are concerned with how an academic discipline collectively negotiates its meanings and manages its identity in its academic discourse. Inevitably a new term or a new notion, *disciplinary identity*, is necessary for my particular research interest.

### 3.2 Understanding Disciplinary Identity

In the following, I shall try to analyze features of disciplinary identity in the light of dialogic theory of identity, dichotomous theory of identity (in particular, anthropological studies by Barth and Triandafyllidou) and socio-constructionist theory.

#### 3.2.1 Dualities of Disciplinary Identity

Drawing on Kempny (2002), identity is characterized by its sets of dualities- solidity/fluidity; fixity/changeability; uniformity/variability, which reflects the nature of any form of human social organization recognizable in the world. These sets of dualities boil down to one primary property in two
disguises that are dynamic dialectic opposites: being the same and being different.

3.2.1.1 Being the same

“The term ‘identity’ in one of its anthropological uses refers to the qualities of ‘sameness’ people may associate themselves with or be associated with by others” (Klekot, 2002, p. 51). The reason for a discipline to seem to be uniform, stable and fixed is because that identity is embedded in its coherent and integrative social practices within the social organization. The ethos and persona discursively constructed in its specialized lexis and terminologies (Swales, 1990) and under disciplinary norms and rules of participation, in its peculiar patterns of communication (genre set and systems), during the process of its institutionalizations and professionalization in the social-historical contexts reinforce the sameness of the discipline (see discussion on boundary markers in 4.2 below).

3.2.1.2 Being Different

Identity is also about being different, about setting boundaries and being recognized as unique. However differences do not automatically do boundary work. Differences may exist without playing the role of marking boundaries (Triandafyllidou, 2002). Some differences are emphasized (while others downplayed) at different times as a response to others (Barth, 1981), thus shaping and re-shaping the social group (such as a discipline). This view is important for textual analysis of inter-disciplinary identity strategies.

Only when a discipline is placed in contrast with others will the sameness and differences become meaningful. Identity is potentially an issue to all academic disciplines to varying degrees because they all have to demonstrate their evidence of
continuing “contribution to knowledge” and a related issue is that they often have to fight for funding to enable them to exist. The identity of a discipline is secure when there are no Significant Others (neither Content nor Contextual Others) that may jeopardize its social existence. However the significance of the issue of identity to a discipline may vary; it may be more significant to some and less so to others. I shall postulate that the significance of the issue of identity to a discipline is not categorical but rather a point on a continuum, from the least significant to the most significant. For disciplines with few threatening Others (disciplines with no threatening counterparts in another culture, full support from the government and sufficient research funding etc.) such as the discipline of Chinese history, with everything else being equal, the issue of identity is perhaps towards the left end of the line (the least significant). However, for disciplines like Chinese medicine, which faces constant challenges from Western medicine in China in many ways (among many other challenges over its long history), I would suggest that significance of the issue of identity is towards the right end of the cline (the most significant).

As Clunan (2000) maintains, “identity is both constitutive and prescriptive concept. Without the prescriptive element, identity is a static concept, as it does not motivate us to become anything. Without the constitutive element, identity is ideology that is easily manipulated by actors” (p. 104). The prescriptive element of identity can be understood from the reflexive behaviour of the society. “When a society answers questions of what it ought to be and do, it is comparing itself with what others are and do” (Clunan, 2000, p. 105). I hence take reflexivity as an identitary behaviour in academic discourse.
3.2.2 Disciplinary Boundary Markers

Disciplinary identity, therefore, just as the identities of ethnic groups or nations, typically involves the social psychological aspects of identity: self-awareness and awareness of others and expresses this awareness in its discourse.

Inspired by previous researchers’ insights in defining academic discourse communities (especially Swales, 1990, 2004), I put forward, five, I think, crucial boundary markers that make a discipline distinct. They are: Specialized lexis and terminology, Norms and rules of participation, Genre sets and systems, Disciplinary institutionalization, Disciplinary ethos and persona.

Among the boundary markers, I think the most important one is the “specialized lexis and terminologies” (in Swales’ term) (e.g. yin-yang and qi in Chinese medicine); these specialized words and terms explicate disciplinary ontological positions and epistemological thinking. They show how the discipline sees the world.

The second boundary marker is norms and rules of participation. A discipline usually has the norms and rules of participation that members have collectively and gradually established within the cultural historical context (e.g. academic writers have their conventional ways of reporting research and constructing new knowledge). Norms and rules of participation have ensured a particular social order that the discipline prefers. They also contribute to the coherence within the discipline by restraining its members’ social behaviour. This in turn contributes to the maintenance of the sameness of the discipline. They demonstrate how the discipline organizes the social world of the discipline.

The third disciplinary boundary marker is genre sets and systems. A set of genres interact with each other to form a powerful
system which reinforces the coherence and hence *sameness* of the discipline (e.g. the handwritten prescription of Chinese medicinal herbs or other medical material, with amount for each specified, during clinical consultations) These genre sets instantiate the cultural logic and value that the discipline holds, which again is often unique to the discipline. However, *patterns of communication* do not reflect the interactive nature of the genres sets that a discipline owns. The word ‘system’ is therefore necessary to show the goal-oriented inter-connection of the genres. Genre sets and systems show how the discipline *constructs* its academic world within the social world. Like *norms and rules of participation*, genre sets and systems also contribute to the maintenance of the uniqueness of the discipline.

The fourth boundary marker is *disciplinary institutionalization*. Institutions (university departments, degree granting systems, accreditation organizations, funding groups etc.) doubtlessly make crucial contribution to the formation of a discipline. Institutions themselves are not necessarily defining characteristics to make the discipline differ from others. In other words, what makes a discipline distinct is not what *others* all have and *share* but what they *do not have*. However disciplinary institutionalization (nominalization of the noun *institution* to me denotes a process) is a unique cultural process that systemizes the practices of inclusion and exclusion of membership; therefore it becomes an important defining characteristic. Institutionalization further fortifies the discipline by inclusion and exclusion practices. It shows how the discipline *relates* to the outside world.

One may see that all the four guards are in fact dynamic individual systems which further interact with each other to form a system network. The last boundary marker is disciplinary *ethos and persona*, resulting from and constructed in
all the social and academic activities carried out in and through the other four systems. In other words, it is the emerging *Self* that is created in and through the discursive activities that the systems collectively perform. It shows how the discipline *projects* itself to the world.

One should note that there are potential interactions with (including contestation against) *Others* in all these five boundary categories within a discipline. In this way, *Self* gets formed, adjusted, and transformed in its social historical context in relation to potentially *threatening* or *inspiring* others (see discussion on *Significant Others* in Sections 2.2 of this paper).

I believe that all the five boundary markers will inevitably manifest their presence to more or lesser degrees in academic discourse.

I would end the discussion on the complicated issue of what disciplinary identity is by giving a tentative description of the basic principles of disciplinary identity (with inspirations from Edley (2001), Swales (1990) and Barth (1969):

1) Disciplinary identity is a discursive accomplishment rather than a natural fact.
2) Disciplinary identity is collectively established.
3) Disciplinary identity is typically negotiated.
4) Disciplinary identity involves the operation of power.
5) Disciplinary identity is not free to construct itself as it wishes. To some extent, it is its social-historical context that determines the kinds of identity it can assume.
6) Disciplinary identity is constructed in and through a highly interactive set of intra-and inter-disciplinary genres and systems.
7) Disciplinary identity is also defined and re-defined in the interaction with other, especially its Significant Others, which is not fixed.
8) Disciplinary identity is rendered meaningful only in contrast to others.

The eight principles do not capture all there is to say about the social nature of disciplinary identity, nor will they all remain unaltered by other researchers and future studies. What they do attempt to capture is some of the complexity of society as it is reflected in the complexity of disciplinary identity.

References


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