Careers in Transition: Continuity, Complexity and Conflicting Desires in the Discursive Identity Construction of Ex-Consultants

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The President:

Prof. Dr. Thomas Bieger
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Abstract

This dissertation investigates notions of continuity, complexity and conflicting desires in the identity construction of ex-consultants, especially as they make sense of a past career transition: away from the strongly identity-shaping work environment of a management consultancy towards a different working context. For this purpose 30 life story interviews were conducted with former management consultants who now work in one of the following organizational contexts: academia, financial services, industry, NGO, inhouse-consulting or own start-ups. In order to explore how the identity construction of ex-consultants and their related self-image shifted (or not) in the course of a past career transition, three distinct discursive analyses were conducted, each focusing on a different aspect of the phenomenon.

The first analysis emphasizes the notion of continuity by critically exploring how discourses of elitism are carried from the consulting context into the new work environment. It highlights the context-spanning effects that these discourses may have on the professional identity construction of ex-consultants even in the post-exit arena. The second analysis complicates this narrative around continuity by highlighting aspects of complexity and multiplicity in the identity construction of ex-consultants. It emphasizes that in instances of career change, a range of different and potentially conflicting forms of identification may be invited, thereby offering different subject positions.

As if to reconcile these seemingly opposing findings of the first two analyses, the third analysis investigates the co-existence of conflicting desires for coherence (continuity) on the one hand and ambiguity (complexity) on the other. With an interest in why this is emotionally important, the analysis suggests that particularly in times of career change people may be motivated to consciously or unconsciously preserve both, coherence for a sense of self-continuity and ambiguity for a sense of openness.

Each of the three analyses is based on a different discursive understanding of identity, namely a Foucauldian-inspired understanding of identity, an understanding of identity through positioning theory, and thirdly, a narrative understanding of identity. By problematizing some underlying assumptions of these frameworks, the study develops and refines current conceptualizations of discursive identity construction.
Zusammenfassung


Um diese scheinbar widersprüchlichen Darstellungen der ersten beiden Analysen miteinander zu versöhnen, untersucht die dritte Analyse, wie Bedürfnisse nach Kohärenz (Kontinuität) und Ambiguität (Komplexität) miteinander vereinbart werden können. In Hinblick darauf, wieso diese Balance emotional wichtig ist, zeigt die Analyse auf, dass Personen vor allem in Zeiten des Karrierewechsels bewusst oder unbewusst dazu motiviert sind, sowohl Kohärenz für ein Gefühl der Selbstkontinuität als auch Ambiguität für ein Gefühl der Offenheit aufrechtzuerhalten.

Jede der drei Analysen greift auf ein anderes Verständnis diskursiver Identität zurück, nämlich ein Foucault-inspiriertes, ein durch Positioning Theory geprägtes und ein narratives Verständnis. Durch die Problematisierung dieser Rahmenwerke bzw. einiger ihrer zugrundeliegenden Annahmen entwickelt die Studie aktuelle Konzeptualisierungen diskursiver Identität weiter.
Acknowledgements

« Voici mon secret. Il est très simple: on ne voit bien qu'avec le cœur. L'essentiel est invisible pour les yeux. [...] Les hommes ont oublié cette vérité, dit le renard. Mais tu ne dois pas l'oublier. Tu deviens responsable pour toujours de ce que tu as apprivoisé. Tu es responsable de ta rose... Je suis responsable de ma rose... répéta le petit prince, afin de se souvenir. »

(de Saint-Exupéry, 1943, ch. xxi)

It is a habitual, almost expected custom I would say to start one’s dissertation by thanking those who have made a contribution towards completing the work that is yet to be presented. This includes the listing of supervisors, research participants, funding organizations, one’s colleagues, mentors, friends, family members and the like for the support provided during this lengthy path of pursuing a doctoral degree and the sometimes dreadful and scary task of writing up the research report. Even though, at this very stage in my life, I feel little else than pure gratefulness for the love, support and companionship which has carried me through the good days and the bad days of my doctoral studies, I don’t think that I can do justice to the many co-producers of this work by merely listing them in this acknowledgements section. I don’t think that a simple “thank you” will do to mirror what lives in my heart, what makes me feel so blessed and humbled at the same time. Time and again I have asked myself what else I could do to better express my gratitude. Throw a party – once this is completed – or even several ones? Write personalized thank you cards? Sure. And still – is there any other way, I wondered, anything more substantial, more lasting, more meaningful I could do for expressing my boundless appreciation? After some time of pondering I had to accept that there are occasions in life for which it is difficult to find the right words, where words cannot live up to that which is sincerely felt.

And yet, since I am bound in this research report to use words (and maybe some images) I decided to try my very best at least in terms of expressing my thankfulness in words – even despite an urge to remain silent instead and to put everything into a big personal hug. A silent and personal hug with all its warmth and tenderness – which for me stands in contrast to the formal listing of contributors – comes close to saying a quiet prayer. Most prayers, or at least most of my prayers, are
uttered in silence. And in the few occasions in which they become hearable, I say them very quietly. Because they are not public. They are private, they are personal, they are not meant for entertainment. Also, they are not open for discussion or ready for evaluation. They are not structured or rehearsed. Many times they are uttered in weakness and not in a position of strength, and in some occasions it is difficult to pray at all, because nothing seems to go according to plan. Under such conditions, taking the time to give thanks in prayer becomes a good exercise, especially when I cannot wait to actually present my long list of pleas (if not to say complaints) both for myself but also on behalf of others. For this acknowledgment section then I decided to formulate a little prayer which contains a good balance between giving thanks for and making a plea towards better honoring those who were and are still at my side, all this time and in various ways. This, for sure, is an unusual endeavor and never before – as far as I can remember – have I tried to write out a prayer. So if this format of acknowledgement makes you a little bit nervous too – especially if it jars with your atheist convictions – then we are all in the same boat of carefully daring a new step together. And so it goes:

Dear God of all denominations and non-denominations! With a good number of people in mind towards whom I would like to express my gratitude, and no real concept for how to structure this, whom to mention first and whom to mention last, how much detail to give, how much affection to reveal, or how much to keep to myself, let me start by thanking you for those people who taught me how to pray in the first place. Who taught me, when my hands were still tiny, the comfort and support that can be felt when putting together these little hands. Most of my friends will immediately recognize them as my German Oma and Opa. I say German, because – and this becomes more obvious when flipping through family albums – they are not my biological grandparents, and yet I don’t think they could have loved me an inch more even if they were. Besides teaching me how to pray I also owe to them that especially during my first years at school – the basis for one day pursuing a doctoral degree – they helped me to succeed. This was at a time when my parents, who had freshly arrived from the shores of Bangladesh, had to learn a new and difficult language themselves and could not have provided this kind of support that allowed me to stand out in class despite my immigrant background. Dear God, may my grandparents always feel – Oma, who is still with us and Opa, who lives on in our
hearts – that none of their sacrifices, their deeds of love, were ever in vain. Help me, dear heavenly Father, that one day I can give back to them and honor their example by showing the same amount of dedication, kindness and altruism towards others who are not born with certain privileges.

Thinking of my German Oma and Opa compels me to also pray for my biological grandparents, of whom I only knew two and then again very little. And yet I am most grateful for their inheritance. From my Dadi, who worked all her life as a high school teacher while at the same time raising her own six children, I certainly inherited a love for teaching as well as some ‘tough lady genes’. From my grandfather, her soft counterpart, I probably inherited my love for writing. I was told by my mother that Dada spend all his life “doing nothing” other than to sit on his bed, constantly reading or writing something. Isn’t it peculiar that even though I hardly got to meet my grandfather, I produced 95% of my thesis while sitting on the bed or a couch? Dear loving and kind Father, please help me to never forget my grandparents’ inheritance. Not only do I want to remember them when I engage with my passion for teaching and writing, but I also want to be mindful of my Bengali roots and the values which my grandparents have exemplified. Help me to be generous, regardless of wealth and possessions, and loving towards others without exclusions.

I thank you as well for my parents who had the courage of leaving their home country in search for a better future, not only for themselves, but also for their children and grandchildren. This being said I am also thankful that my parents – despite their obvious heartache – never tried to hold me back when curiosity compelled me time and again to move to a different country or even continent myself for exploring new grounds. In general I can say that my parents always enabled me to do whatever I wanted to do and thereby provided me with the necessary space for uncovering my passions. At the same time I have always seen my parents to work incredibly hard, and from my earliest days in life they have planted into my heart a deep appreciation for the value of education so that I would not take it for granted. Dear Lord, please help me that I carry this appreciation and the value of education (whatever form this may take) with me through all my life. Help me to one day carry it back into the world, that is, into remote areas where education is not so freely available, where it remains a privilege for only a few. Please, loving Father, show me
some ways in the future to make education more accessible to everyone who longs for it.

To round off my prayers for the family, I want to give particular thanks for having such a wonderful sister. At this point I could list many of her incredible achievements, including the personal (you just have to see her amazing two children), the academic (having received her doctoral degree with summa cum laude), the career (being the head of a chemical laboratory) and the social (her telephone never stops ringing), and yet these are not the first things that I associate with my sister. The one thing that characterizes my sister the most is that she thinks so highly of others while often failing to take credit for her own accomplishments. This has allowed her to stay down-to-earth, modest and amiable all her life. My sister has always believed in me, seen so much in me, and encouraged me to carry on even in my lowest moments. She is so wonderfully soft and she has cried many tears for me, tears that I could not shed myself. Please, almighty Father, help me to become a bit more like her. More benign towards others, more unassuming, more humble. Help me as well to find better ways to show her my appreciation, my deeply felt admiration and my gratitude for all that which she has done for me in the course of writing this doctoral thesis and way beyond. Help me to be the sister that she truly deserves to have.

Staying in the realm of close relationships, I would like to thank you dear Father, for those friends, both in Switzerland and in New York, who have provided a home for us, an extended family, a Bethany in a foreign country. I am speaking of people who have opened their doors for us, both into their homes as well as into their hearts. These are friends who laugh with us and cry with us, who seem to know everything about us and who never judge us, despite the many faults that we certainly have. Even though this is probably true for our entire church congregations in Zürich Affoltern and New York Chinatown, I would yet like to mention the following friends in particular: Marian and Röbi Brönniman, Andrea and Herby Carl (plus their parents and children), Victor Chan, Bex Ahuja and the lovely Hsun family. Dear Lord, please bless our friends abundantly for all that which they do for us in so many unique ways, for sensing each deadline pressure, for cheering us up and for distracting us when work starts to colonize our existence.

Other close friends, whom I would like to mention for their most loyal companionship over the last few years, are Jan Eckmann and Nika Fjody, Kai and
Carla Fleischhauer, Markus and Kathrin Hanke. Not only did these friends take a sincere interest in the progress of my dissertation, but they were also there when we needed them the most, in times of loss and illness, family concerns, self-doubt and so on. While sharing with us these moments of sorrow, the majority of shared experiences contain memories and fun times, joy and carefree indulgence. Thank you, God, for the gift of friendship and for giving us people who remind us, in all circumstances, that life can be good with the right kind of friends. On this note, I would like to move on to my friends in the semi-professional realm. I am particularly grateful that with Taylor Christl and Stefanie Neubrand, whom I met in the course of our systemic counseling training in Heidelberg, I have found true PhD buddies. Especially in the final year of my dissertation we have developed a fortnightly rhythm of conference calls to support one another in progressing with our doctoral projects. As two of the doctoral theses were slowly coming to a close, we have already promised one another that we want to continue our conference calls also in the future as we benefited so much from them, both personally as well as professionally. In fact, our aspiration would be to ‘grow old together’ and never lose sight of one another. Thank you, dear Father, for these lasting relationships. Please help me to always value them accordingly, to always find time for my friends, to be there for them when they need me, even though this may mean that a deadline is just a deadline that can also be postponed by a day.

And now that I am already in the professional realm, there are many colleague friends, for whom I would like to say a little prayer. I would like to start this prayer of thanks by mentioning some fantastic women who have not only been colleagues and friends, but also some wonderful mentors who have guided me along the journey of my PhD: Dörte Resch, Julia Nentwich and Kim Poldner. Please, dear Lord, help me to follow their example that from each of them I can carry something wonderful inside of me. I am particularly grateful as well for my doctoral ‘cohort’, colleagues and friends with whom I have walked the PhD path together and who have tirelessly provided input, feedback and support along all stages of the journey: Florian Schulz, Björn Müller, Michel Bachmann, Laurent Marti, Claudine Gaibrois and Bruno Deckert. I remember many fun occasions of sitting in doctoral courses together, of ‘grilling’ one another and chilling afterwards on the sofa, of laughing, teasing, and just being silly together.
And also those colleagues at the Institute of Organizational Psychology who have started their doctoral work before and after me (Christoph Michels, Tim Lehmann, Vera Hagemann, Sandrina Ritzmann, Wiebke Tennhoff, Anna Heydenreich, Katharina Molterer, Ursula Offenberger, Bernhard Resch, Mark Laukamm and Carolina Borra) have somehow left their mark in my doctoral work. Last but not least I am very thankful for the friendly, thoughtful and all-encompassing support that Christina Ihasz, the secretary at our institute, has provided in many unique ways. Dear heavenly Father, even though I know already how blessed I am with having such an amazing crowd of colleagues, who have taught me lessons of working together in a spirit of cooperation and support rather than in a mindset of competition and self-importance, please show me ways in which I can contribute more to this beautiful, caring and often cheerful atmosphere that we have at our institute. Help me to be a good colleague as well to others, to be mindful of other people’s concerns and their struggling and to offer a hand or a shoulder to lean on where this is needed.

Moving continents now I am thankful that there are institutions like the Swiss National Science Foundation, which has so generously provided me with a scholarship that allowed me to spend a year at Stern Business School in New York City. Not only did a little dream become true in this way, but I also learned so much from spending a year at a different institute, in a different work environment with different challenges and new inspirations. Thank you, dear Lord, that such institutions exist and may many applicants still benefit from such an exchange experience. Also provide comfort to those who may not be granted a scholarship despite some great efforts in the application process. May they not feel discouraged and find the strength to re-apply as it is certainly worth the effort. Thank you as well that beside the scholarship I always had some sort of employment (by the university/ canton of St. Gallen), so that I never had to worry about paying my bills and that I could fully concentrate on my PhD. I know that many doctoral students do not have an easy time to secure their funding for the entire time of their doctoral studies. Some might even refrain from pursuing a PhD altogether, exactly because of these funding concerns. Help me, God, to remain mindful of this issue and to raise my voice for this whenever possible.

Speaking of my scholarship, I am most indebted as well to Matt Statler, my supervisor at Stern Business School who has so kindly invited me to his department as
a visiting scholar. Matt has become a wonderful mentor, not only for progressing with my PhD, but also beyond. I particularly appreciate his holistic approach of never just inquiring about my current work situation, but taking into account the bigger picture of where I am coming from and where I am heading towards. That certainly helped me to see beyond the limited scope that I often had for myself. Thank you Lord, that I was so unexpectedly lucky with my Stern host and that the fruitful dialog is still continuing in the form of collaborations. With the mentioning of a mentor outside my own university, I am particularly appreciative as well that some senior scholars from different universities were so kind to engage with my doctoral work and to provide helpful feedback. At this stage I would particularly like to mention Mats Alvesson, who has provided valuable support and supervision at various stages of my doctoral project, and who kindly invited me to a most inspiring research visit at the University of Lund. Other supporters were Chris Land, Yiannis Gabriel, Sara Luise Muhr, Alison Pullen, Rafael Alcadipani and David Knights. Please help me, heavenly Father, to follow their example of generously providing feedback and support in a constructive way, even if there seem to be more pressing issues than to engage with the unfinished fragments of some youngster’s doctoral work.

Coming back to my year in New York, I was very pleased as well to re-unite and intensify bonds with PhD colleagues whom I had previously met during the visit in Lund. Sometimes the strength of a newly formed relationship can only be assessed in hindsight and especially some encounters ‘abroad’ can slowly fade away like a holiday romance. But the fact that I am working on a paper together with Markus Walz, and that Nathan Gerard was so generous to proofread my thesis gives me much hope, that these very special new bonds that I was able to form have ‘a future’. Thank you Lord, for leading me to new places every now and then and for increasing my circle of colleagues and friends in such an amazing way. Please help me to always stay open and receptive to new opportunities for making friends, even if I may feel that I have enough friends already. Markus and Nathan are the best examples for what I would be missing, if I were to close my heart and mind too hastily.

A key figure during the earlier phases of my PhD, and then again towards the end, has been my friend Peter Barta. When I felt so dreadful that my research report would become a dull and lifeless piece of work, a pure black-and-white, only-words-and-letters thesis, I took refuge to my friend Peter who has made himself a name for
his amazing photography skills. Approaching him with my concern has turned into a very exciting side-project to this thesis. Peter has engaged with my work very thoroughly, read several chapters and passages and very intelligently developed what he calls a “photo-essay” that would help the reader to open up to the various themes of my doctoral thesis in a more affective way. Most enjoyable in this little side-project were the various Skype calls in which we brought our ideas together and reflected upon the bigger message that my study tries to convey, and how this could be assisted with a series of photos in yet a more than representational way. Almighty Father, thank you for having such talented friends. Peter has reminded me of the amazing support system that I have, not only for completing my doctoral project, but also for other matters in life. Help me to always be appreciative of these valuable resources and please provide me with more instances of re-discovering friendships that already seemed lost over time and distances.

Coming closer and closer to the actual doctoral project, I also want to give thanks for finding such exceptional research participants. Even though much more space will be given to them in the actual research report, I already want to mention how lucky I was with my 30 interviewees who immediately agreed to participate in my study when I approached them, who made time for me straight away, who bestowed me with the wonderful gift of ‘telling their stories’ – and Lord, were they good storytellers! Thank you dear Father, that there are people in this world who despite busy schedules take the time to support a research project. And even more than that, thanks for the sincere interest that my research participants took in the theme of my study and for following up on the various steps in my research process. Field access is such a crucial issue when doing research and not everyone has an easy time to collect data. Often I get requests myself to fill in a questionnaire, to forward an email, to contribute to someone else’s study. Help me, Lord, to be more generous myself in sparing some time for such requests, so that more valuable research can be generated. Help me as well to always ‘handle’ my empirical material with the care, respect and integrity that it truly deserves.

And now to my supervisors: First I would like to mention Maddy Janssens. Thank you, dear heavenly Father, that she so readily agreed to co-supervise my thesis. When this was agreed upon some years ago, I didn’t think much about it. Now that my research report has been growing and growing, I finally understand the big
commitment that comes with co-supervising a thesis. Every page will be read, all my work of the last few years (except for the many, many pages which didn’t make it into this report) will be engaged with thoroughly. This is something I cannot expect from my family, my close friends or my dearest colleagues. Thus, even though I am most respectful towards the professional assessment and evaluation of my work, I am first of all thankfully humbled by the diligent engagement with my work. Already during the colloquium for my pre-study I learned to appreciate Maddy’s constructive feedback and I am grateful for any further suggestions of how I can develop my work and grow in my role as researcher. Thank you, dear Lord, that with my co-supervisor I found a person whom I can so easily look up to, not only for her remarkable academic achievements, but also for the atmosphere of friendship and friendliness that I can sense when being around her. Please help me to always return this warmth and friendliness in my encounters with others.

Coming to my supervisor Chris Steyaert I will try to keep it short because I could effortlessly fill several pages for expressing my gratitude towards him. But then again when I look through the various groups of people for whom I have formulated prayers of thanks so far, I could easily include him in many of them. Chris has been a wonderful mentor, employer, colleague, friend and also a parent. I can say wholeheartedly that I could not have wished for a better supervisor. Thank you, dear heavenly Father, that you have guided my path to his institute and that I could benefit so much from his expertise, his concise and always constructive feedback, his way of gently pushing me towards the next level of reflection, his never-ending remarks on better working out my theoretical contribution, his patience, his quick feedback reaction on my papers when I was waiting for it nervously, and also his understanding and loving care when things did not go so well in my life. The one thing I am most grateful about is the inspiration I get from spending some time with him or when reading one of his creative and unconventional papers. Then he suddenly transforms from being the assessor and evaluator of my work into being my muse.

Not once in all those years did I ever get the feeling that one day I could not learn from him anymore. Chris has a way to surprise, to re-invent himself, to never stand still. I admire his imagination and passion in teaching, his originality and eloquence in writing, his integrity as scholar, his modesty in the role of being a chair and his wisdom in the various matters of life. And yes, I could go on like this, but
also know that for Chris not everything has to be made explicit. Some things can simply be felt and that’s okay as well. Thank you, dear heavenly Father, that I had the pleasure and honor to be his PhD student and if I could make one simple wish, then please allow me to always stay close to him. Across time and distances I hope to never lose sight of him. Please bless him and his loved ones abundantly with health and happiness!

And last but not least I want to give thanks for the one person whom I feel most indebted to with regards to carrying me through this time of my doctoral studies: my husband Philipp. Only recently we have celebrated our 10 years anniversary of being together, which also means that for almost half of the time of being together, Philipp has most patiently tolerated this ‘marriage of three’. And in fact I do not remember a single occasion of Philipp complaining or pulling a face in all those years when in the evening, the weekend and – I have to guiltily admit – even during vacations I opened my laptop again. Quite on the contrary, Philipp has supported this project way before it had actually started. When I had to decide between doing a PhD or looking for a job in business, probably something along the lines of change and process consulting, Philipp encouraged me to do the PhD as this would be something “I’d really enjoy”. And he was absolutely right. It seemed to me that he was always right. I could approach him with just anything that bothered me – deadline pressures, writing blocks, feeling overworked, feeling isolated, being impatient and nervous about feedback, having future anxieties or even just something as banal (one would think) as formatting issues – Philipp always found the right words or some practical help to ease my trouble. When any extra costs occurred for trainings, workshops or conferences he totally insisted “Of course you are going!” and when I was very lucky, he even accompanied me. Also in the final phase of writing up the thesis he took some time off from work to spare me from household stuff, to make sure that I eat healthy food, and to create a good environment for me.

At this point I also want to mention that not only Philipp himself, but also his entire family, have been great promoters of my doctoral project. My parents-in-law, my sisters-in-law and their families, the uncles and aunts, and especially my grandmother-in-law – an amazing woman and wonderful role model for me personally – have followed each and every step of my progress with much enthusiasm. Thank you, dear gracious Father, that with Philipp, my partner, I also received a second
family, a family that finds so many ways for expressing their warmth, their love and appreciation. May they always feel how much we value these family ties and like to immerse ourselves in them, even though from time to time we have to fly out and explore new worlds and opportunities. Coming back to Philipp, the man at my side who just seems to be too good to be true, I urge you, dear Father, that I may never, not a single day, take for granted the million smalls things (beside the bigger ones) that he does in silence just for making me happy. Please help me to live up to this, to return his generosity, his gentleness, his patience, and help me to show him (despite my occasional obsessions with work) that he always comes first in my life. I am also most thankful that he shares with me my wonderful faith and that we can jointly agree: “As for me and my house we will serve the Lord” (Joshua 25: 14, King James Version). May this promise and desire always live in our hearts, carry us through times of trials and tribulations, give us the strength to gently reach out to others and allow us to distinguish between matters that are important, and those that are less important. For those things, dear heavenly Father, that were maybe not so good in the past few years, I ask you to please cover everything with your grace so that only that, which was done in love and kindness will be carried into the future where it can continue to grow. And now I close this prayer with Maranatha and Amen.

Zurich, July 2014

Patrizia Hoyer
1 An Assemblage of Introductions

Sometimes the most difficult hurdle of all is that of making an entry, of getting started – the challenge of writing an introduction. It’s like entering a new classroom: exciting but scary. What do others expect of such an entrance? What do I expect? These considerations can weigh rather heavily, particularly because each introduction bears the possibility of (re-)inventing the scene: setting the tone, engaging the audience (or not) and creating a certain atmosphere. The more varied the options for such an introduction, the more difficult the choices, as each choice comes with a series of consequences that determine how the story will continue, how people will relate to it, and thus, how the ‘whole story’ (which of course can never be told) will be read.

Do I aim for a smooth and lighthearted introduction that shows my enthusiasm for the topic and that will hopefully excite the reader too? Or do I immediately jump right into the middle of my study, show the theoretical debates that I want to enter, confidently flagging out my aspired contributions? Or do I take the more classical and didactic approach of introducing the general theme of my study, delineating the research context, announcing my research questions, findings and conclusions and thereby sketching out the entire structure of my thesis?

The more I thought about these options the more I realized that my introduction should ideally combine all the above mentioned elements, be light, go deep and at the same time give a step-by-step overview. What a task! In order to alleviate a bit of the burden of producing a single, all-encompassing introduction, I decided in the end to write three different introductions to the thesis, each with a slightly different aim, tone and theme for preparing the reader for that which is at the heart of my cumulative thesis, namely: three different working papers. And then, in order to stay with this emerging unit of triads, triplets or triptychs (you name it) I also decided to close this thesis along three conclusions: a thematic one, a theoretical one and a personal one.

Additionally, in-between the various introductions, papers and conclusions I decided to moreover insert some interview vignettes – again in groups of three – to share more of the rich interview material from my empirical work which will hopefully underline and open up the key themes that I try to address in the various papers. I know that by choosing this structure of triplets I bring in some multiplicity which complicates and decelerates the fashion in which my thesis unfolds – a dynamic which nicely reflects the overall spirit of my work.
1.1 Slow Yourself Down: A Personal Introduction

“For I do not want any one to read my book carelessly. I have suffered too much grief in setting down these memories. Six years have already passed since my friend went away from me, with his sheep. If I try to describe him here, it is to make sure that I shall not forget him. To forget a friend is sad. Not every one has had a friend. And if I forget him, I may become like the grown-ups who are no longer interested in anything but figures.”

(de Saint-Exupéry, 1988: 18)

This first introduction to my PhD thesis is nothing but an invitation to the reader to accompany me as I try to make retrospective sense of my research project and its evolution over the past few years. It is a rather nonacademic piece of writing and yet it is probably the most challenging piece to read in this overall composition of introductions. It starts very slow, gets very long and it becomes increasingly more personal as the story unfolds, hence a not-so-easy genre for some academics. At the same time, this is probably the most sincere version of how I could possibly introduce my thesis and so I ask for your understanding, ideally some curiosity, and if possible, I’d like you to even enjoy.

1.1.1 Re-walking the PhD Path

I have lost count over how many times in the past few years people have asked me the daunting question: “So, what is your PhD about?” Did I hear that a hundred times? Or was it rather a thousand? I honestly couldn’t say, but the answer probably lies somewhere in-between. And surprisingly, over the years, I never got tired of ‘telling my story’. After all – how nice of people, both close and distant, to take an interest in my work, be it at a conference, in a doctoral course or colloquium, on a transatlantic flight, at the lake, a family gathering or simply at a bar over a glass of wine. Just as varied as the locations and situations of being asked this question was the length of my accounts, which ranged from the “well, in a nutshell...” to the in-depth, two-hour engagement with just one sliver of my study. And of course there has never been that one story I have been telling about my PhD. It can better be thought of as a changing and evolving story where different and sometimes new aspects are being tested and
experimented with, while other ideas or findings are pushed into the background or silenced altogether. Each incidence of telling the story may therefore be considered as a little enactment of my research where I made an effort to articulate what I had not spelled out before, or at least not in that very same way.

And then these articulations also took on several different forms and genres. I recount that once, in a doctoral course at the University of St. Gallen I gave a performance on my PhD project which was as bizarre as the location of its presentation. The performance itself consisted of a bricolage of 19th century love poetry, recruitment talk, provocative images of suffering and abuse and a 15 minutes video of a person vomiting. The carefully chosen location: a public ladies’ toilet at the university, which for the time of the presentation – and probably for the better – was in fact closed to the public. In sheer contrast to that I remember my attempt to appear nothing but serious and professional when presenting part of my PhD at the 73rd Annual Meeting of the Academy of Management in Orlando, Florida, where the only dubiousness of my presentation could possibly have come from the conference venue at the heart of Disney World. Also in the written versions of my PhD story I have experimented with different genres and writing styles. This ranged from what has been referred to as “playful fairy-tale writing” to the aspiration of producing publishable work for well ranked and peer reviewed journals. In my fairy-tale writing I attempted, among other things, to describe my own PhD journey along metaphors of arranged marriage, love affairs, promiscuity and long-lasting romance; a narrative which did not spare its readers from the kinky details of my PhD fantasies. Quite differently, when writing for journals, I tried to be rather dry and detached in my narrative to better match the overall tone of these outlets.

And now this: the ‘formal’ introduction to my dissertation. Even though this will probably not be the last time that I am asked to perform once more the story of my PhD, it is yet an important version, as this – if all things go well – will sooner or later go into print, which makes it an awfully durable version of my story. It seems to me that there is somehow an implication that when writing the introduction to one’s dissertation, one should not just type down the first things that come to mind. Instead, the introduction needs to be carefully planned, skillfully crafted and concisely articulated. Also, to establish legitimacy and to earn the respect of the readership from the very first paragraph, it is probably wise to draw on an overwhelming, if not to say,
indigestible density of other people’s work. In this way readers will immediately sense that they are dealing with a thoroughly composed, topnotch academic masterpiece. I guess this is bad news for me. I’m already on paragraph number three and I have still not said anything clever or complicated that would convince the readers of my credentials. Instead I have chosen a narrative genre which gives a more personal, yes almost conversational version of my PhD story. Hopefully, towards the end of this (first) introduction you will understand why this chosen form appeared most adequate to me for telling, once more, the story of my thesis. But now, let me finally say a few things on what my PhD project is actually about.

As the title of my thesis already suggests, in my study I set out to explore the discursive identity construction of former management consultants. So for introducing or framing the overall project, I should say at least a few words on a) why I have chosen a discursive framework, b) what I find interesting in the study of identity and c) why, of all possible groups, I have chosen to investigate the identity construction of former (!) management consultants. I would argue that each of these three components could fill their own chapters, if not books. And in fact, if you turn to the reference list at the end of my thesis, you will find that such books as well as countless articles have already been written, especially on the topic of identity. Thus, to cite a fellow PhD student whom I met during a doctoral course at the University of Lund, we could ask ourselves: “Do we really need another f***ing study on identity?” My answer would be “yes, we do”, as the puzzle of identity seems to be an ongoing one. It is a theme that has occupied people for centuries if not to say millennia and still there seems to be no rest in finding answers to the question of who we are.

At the same time I am not claiming that the study which you are about to read can provide exhaustive answers to this question. Quite the contrary I would argue that, just as much as identity can be constructed – both discursively as well as non-discursively – in countless ways, so varied and fractional can be our answers for better explaining identity. So my study can at best be understood as a small piece in the huge puzzle of identity, a puzzle that can possibly never be completed as it is culturally, historically and contextually situated and therefore evolving and never finite. If this metaphor of infinite puzzle appears too dubious or even unnerving, putting in question (once again) the relevance and legitimacy of my study, then I have nothing much to counter other than to plea the reader for some more patience. I have good reasons to
believe that my study is meaningful after all. “And why is that?” – you may ask. Is it because established researchers have applauded my work during conferences? Is it because anonymous reviewers have indicated that my work bears potential for publication? If you want to take that as proof for the “worthiness” of my work, you may certainly do so. If you tick differently though, and if you understand that several years of unassuming, zealous, and sometimes heart-breaking work will sooner or later bear some fruits to the dedicated researcher, then please dwell with me for another while. In fact, I invite you to be my companion and to re-walk with me, for a bit, the path of my PhD story.

This common walk could look something like this: When I tell people that my PhD project is about the discursive identity construction of ex-consultants, I often get interrupted there and then. “Did you just say ex-consultants?” “Yes, I did!” At this point, if I’m lucky, I have already won the attention of my counterpart. So I continue the story. “Many large global consultancies like McKinsey, BCG or Bain & Company are rather successful in shaping the identities of their employees, especially by portraying themselves as an elite working context.” People usually nod at this, signaling that they have heard about these firms before and silently agree with the image I just depicted. “At the same time, most consultants don’t stay in this environment for too long. They consider the consultancy an ideal springboard for a future career and leave after two, three years to take up a position elsewhere. And yet, even years after leaving the consultancy, many former consultants are still associated with their past employers. New colleagues may whisper: ‘Meyer? He is a tough guy! But at least he knows what he’s doing. He’s an Ex-McKinsey.’ In line with this observation, when management consultants change careers, they themselves often continue to identify with their elite consulting past which may have various consequences for their identity construction in the new working context. Some of them may in fact struggle to identify with their new employer as they cannot let go of their past consultant self-image. Others however, especially those who start their own businesses, have an easier time to develop a new professional identity that is no longer tied to their consulting past.” “Hmmm, interesting!” is the reaction which I often get at this point. In the way that people utter these words I can tell that their interest is sincere and I can already observe how their own thinking process is starting off.
Sometimes, in the very short versions of my PhD story I leave it there and let people chew on this teaser on their own. If however, I get a curious or unsatisfied look on people’s faces, I know they want more. So again, I continue the story, but this time there are various directions that the story can take. While I have no intentions to reproduce the wealth of a hundred, maybe a thousand slightly different storylines that I have developed over the past few years, there are yet three particular versions of my story which have more or less stabilized at this point. And these three versions have also become the defining structure of how I am organizing the written composition of my thesis – along three different working papers. All three papers aspire to be standalone pieces so that they may (hopefully) get published independently of one another. At the same time, they all provide a particular version of my PhD story and are therefore related, complementary, and in some parts unavoidably overlapping. For most parts, however, the papers are really distinct from one another as for each one I tried to formulate a different problem and research question which prompted me to a different literature for situating the problem, a different conceptual framework for analyzing the problem and different results, as I had started off with different research questions in the first place.

With the mentioning of these three research papers you may already sense how my descriptions are becoming slightly more technical, more academic if you will and it may not be too long before I have to switch my narrative genre to a more scholarly one. But now, just to postpone for another while a more academic tone (which will then predominate the remainder of this thesis), I will once more make a little excursion and retell my PhD story along the metaphor of a party. It is a story that I rarely get to tell in a formal context, and yet one, which is probably most revealing about my choice of study, my role as researcher, and my various sense-making attempts as both a subject and object of my own study.

1.1.2 Betraying a Secret: How it All Began

Despite a recent hype for auto-ethnographic research endeavors in the field of organization studies, I often fear that giving away my own entanglement with my chosen research topic and area of investigation could possibly diminish how people, especially academics, esteem the credibility of my work. People who conduct research in a field that is potentially ‘too close to home’ are easily perceived as engaging in
some kind of navel-gazing that is far afield from sober management science. Narcissism, egocentricity and therapeutic soul-searching are just some examples of the possible criticisms faced by studies that investigate a researcher’s own life world, not to mention notions of emotional bias and subjective distortion. And while an increasing number of researchers is bravely ‘coming out’, claiming their hybrid status of both the subject and an object of their own study, I have so far, at least in my working papers, successfully concealed my personal stake in studying the discursive identity construction of ex-consultants. Even though, as I would claim, I do not really have a hidden agenda in all this, the choice of my research topic is yet not innocent. Therefore, and despite a similar controversy revolving around confessional tales in academic outlets, at least I want to lay open – in a spirit of transparency – how I personally relate to the theme of my study (thereby taking the risk of being equally accused of the above mentioned points).

The easiest way to justify my chosen research theme is probably to blame it all on my supervisor and to claim that it was his idea in the first place (while in other versions of my story I like to highlight how autonomously I have developed my research interest which slightly diverges from other research themes at our institute). But this is what actually happened: When joining the Research Institute of Organizational Psychology at the University of St. Gallen in 2009, I had nothing but a vague idea of wanting to address the theme of organizational and social change. A first ‘under the shower’ idea was to investigate very broadly the value changes that come along with large economic crises and which affect society on a wide scale. Upon presenting these rudimentary ideas to my supervisor, he initially liked them (or at least that’s what he politely pretended) yet in the very next moment he discouraged me from pursuing them any further. Instead he suggested that I should probably just, as a Swedish proverb says – “gräv där du står” – that is, to “dig where you stand”. So where was I standing at that time, other than at the beginning of a new adventurous journey? You may already guess the answer. My choice to enter academia likewise represented my decision to leave a management consultancy in Zurich which thereby rendered me to become an ex-consultant.

While I personally saw nothing interesting in this biographical detail of mine, my supervisor yet observed an interesting paradox that surrounded my newly evolving professional identity as researcher. And this observation was primarily grounded in
the contradictory and sometimes conflicting stories I was telling about my consulting past and my decision to exit the consultancy. The first thing my new colleagues had to confront was the fact that I would talk about the consultancy a lot. When I think of it in hindsight, it must have been coming out of their ears. Consulting this, consulting that: “This is how we do the electronic data filing in consulting”, “this is how we make PowerPoint slides in consulting”, “this is how you set up a proper excel spreadsheet”, “this is how you formulate concise emails”, “this is how you double-check for typos or hiccups”, “this is how you prepare and structure a meeting”, “this is how you pro-actively wrap-up a meeting and formulate action points”, “this is how you react to your supervisor’s requests most promptly and without delay”. And even if I was not saying these things out loud, at least I would try to do them consistently and thereby show others ‘a good way’ of working. And for better or worse my new environment was reacting to my style of working rather positively. I took this as affirmation that my consulting lessons were of value even to my new employer and happily continued in my modus operandi. But this was only the start.

A different, yes almost conflicting evaluation of my consulting past was reflected in the countless stories I would tell over lunch breaks or any social encounters, where I reproduced the ‘suffering’ and ‘pain’ I endured in consulting: Ridiculously long working hours, being made to believe that I was pretty useless, HR talks to resign from consulting after just 5 weeks into the job, having no time for lunch (not even a desk sandwich), finding no time to call my mother on her birthday, crying from exhaustion in the office restrooms every evening around 10pm just to clear my system for the last 2-3 working hours of the day. When painting this horrible image of my consulting past, I assured my new colleagues that now everything was better, that working at the university was a bliss, that work packages even at peak times felt light, that no matter what happened at our institute – I had seen worse before. It was a mix of gratitude, relief and appreciation of how I was treated in this new environment. It was also a reassurance to myself that I had made the right move, that this was a place where I belonged, where I enjoyed the work and where people were perceived to be more than just (human) resources.

This being said, there was a third kind of stories in which I openly bemoaned the good money I had earned in consulting which from one day to the other was cut in half. Also the car was gone, the mobile phone plus contract, and all travel and
entertainment expenses which before I could charge to the company were now deducted from my private bank account. These stories of loss revealed how strongly I was still affiliated with the consulting past, especially around the notion of lifestyle. I had a hard time to understand for example why my new colleagues in their early or mid-thirties would deliberately choose youth hostels, outdoor camping or couch hopping when going on a holiday. I had gotten used to comfortable hotel beds and was not ready to compromise that. Also, long discussions over sharing dinner courses (instead of ordering your own) and then going carefully Dutch for the bill was something which made me uneasy. And since there was nothing much I could do about it, especially as I had no plans to convert my new colleagues (except for some random office receptions featuring music and champagne) or to adapt my own lifestyle, I took refuge in past relationships and spent most of my free time with former consulting colleagues. I particularly remember how I would rush out of the office every Friday evening to join my friends on their weekly Happy Hour which often then turned into a late night.

This is where finally the theme of the party comes in, because I have to admit that I was never much of a party person before I joined the consultancy. I still remember how after six months into the consulting job – and two official attempts by then to resign from the company – the Zurich office head (leading partner) himself approached me several times as I had not signed up to join the company’s annual ski-weekend. He would not accept my excuse that I could not ski and that I would rather spend time with my husband instead when already I saw so little of him during the week. He insisted that my attendance was important for the firm culture, for being integrated, and if my husband was so important to me, he could join on the second day, the Saturday. So this was the plan. I joined the ski-weekend, but rather reluctantly, thinking that this would become another firm event that I simply had to live through. And then the unexpected happened: the turning-point, a life-changing event! Even though my husband came to join me on the second day, he was already too late. On this first night of the ski-weekend my last frontier of resistance, as identity scholars like to call it, was forever crushed.

In consultancies you often find strong cliques among peer groups, that is, people who join the consultancy around the same time and who develop strong bonds during the initial weeks of the so-called “boot camp trainings”. I had successfully
refrained from this as I did not really enjoy those forced socialization attempts and had not found people I really clicked with. When making this last minute decision to join the ski-weekend I then had to ask my immediate supervisor to give me a ride to the venue. I knew this was an uncool thing to do, especially since he belonged to the coolest clique of senior consultants in the office and certainly did not want to babysit an uptight youngster like myself. But he was sympathetic and even invited me to join their table where only a highly selective group of buddies was admitted. What followed then was a party I shall never forget. It was dirty, it was flirty, it was highly ecstatic. But I was told to relax and enjoy and to not take everything too serious, because whatever happened during such an offsite would stay at the offsite. This was the (probably not so honorable) code of honor. And while I had performed somewhat poorly in my first few months on the various consulting assignments, thereby receiving little to no attention from my peers, the ski-weekend was much about ‘performing’ après-ski songs, a genre which I was highly proficient in. So within one evening I basically stepped up from being a boring outsider and career struggler to becoming the queen of party, something which counts a lot in consulting as I would learn. In fact, thanks to my outstanding ‘party performance’ I became the youngest honorary member of the most highly esteemed circle of friends in the entire office.

From then onwards I understood all this talk about strong culture, the work hard – play hard myth, the bold claim that “a consultant never lets another consultant fail”. Suddenly I had friends, confidants, advocates, protectors, people with whom I could share and exchange my frustrations, anxieties and war stories. I realized that I had not been the only one struggling, that it was a shared suffering, that others were as critical of the management practices as I was. So rather than competing against one another the strategy was to stick together, to strengthen one another, and to laugh things off when there was no other way out. Likewise I tried to pass on the support I had received from senior consultants to other newcomers by speaking to them openly and by encouraging them to hang in there, to not give up, or to leave the consultancy if they had an alternative job offering. The party, which from then on took place more regularly for me, was considered a territory of freedom, revolt and resistance, even if ironically it was organized and paid for by the company. The relationships I developed during that time (and we are only speaking of another twelve months) felt more intense than what I had experienced in other, let’s say, less hostile and threatening
environments. And now that I was working in this more friendly environment of the university where people at the same time were more protective of their personal boundaries, it may come as no surprise that I returned to my consulting friends for fun, stimulation or just for some personal exchange. Even though I was happy with and never regretted –for a minute – my decision to leave the consultancy and to join the research institute, it seemed like I could still not let go of the past altogether and so the party continued…

Just from those few versions on my consulting experience it can be read that my affiliation with the consultancy was highly complex and ambiguous, and certainly had an effect on how I was conducting myself in the new work environment. This complexity, ambiguity and ongoing identification with the consulting past then became the place for me to ‘start digging’ for my own research project. Not so much in terms of a self-study, but more through engaging with the existing literature around themes of power, resistance and identity construction in management consultancies, which would ideally help me as well to gain some distance towards my own experience and to possibly see the consulting apparatus through a number of different lenses. And after some engagement with this literature I started approaching (other) former management consultants for interviews. Through these interviews I wanted to learn more about how other people experienced their consulting past, their career move and their sense-making attempts in their new work environments. For the sake of having some kind of research design, I targeted people in 6 different working contexts including academia, NGOs, own business start-ups, industry, financial services and in-house consulting within a large Swiss bank. I tried to interview 5 people from each context, resulting in a total of 30 interviews. I started off with a number of people I knew personally through my social network and then expanded this group of interviewees through referrals.

The interviewing process itself was very pleasant and I perceived my interviewees as cooperative, pro-active, sharp and professional. As a result I could complete all interviews within a time span of less than four months. Upon my request for an interview, my interviewees themselves arranged the interview location, scheduled interviews for me with other ex-consultants and –without my request – provided me with additional material such as company documents or (popular) literature on ex-consultants. Moreover, interviewees sent me follow up emails to
inquire how my study was developing and never got tired, on any future encounters, to discuss and think with me through the density of observations I had been making. As a little downside to this, my interviewees made it very difficult for me to gain the distance that I had hoped to develop towards my own experience. I very much enjoyed these interview exchanges and even when transcribing all thirty audio-recordings I felt that there was a lot of substance in them, prompting me to reflect upon my own life and about the kind of person I wanted to be. In general I would claim that (ex-)consultants are particularly good narrators who know how to establish rapport, how to engage an audience, and how to reflect about themselves in a sometimes brutally honest and critical way. There it was again: The party continued and had taken on a new form for me.

When starting to analyze my interview data in relation to the literature, it soon became clear that this study – as much as it was an identity project for myself – allowed my interviewees to perform their own version of identity (or several versions) as they started to unfold their life stories from the day they entered university to the current day of the interview. In fact, my study had forced them to reflect upon, partly relive, or actively invent a professional self-image that would position themselves towards their past and their present working reality. This being said, I am most aware that the results which I will present in this study about the discursive identity construction of ex-consultants have been co-produced between myself and my interviewees. As with any study (on identity), I have chosen theoretical and methodological frames that very much shaped the observations I was able to make and the way that I later interpreted these observations. This makes it ever more crucial, as promoters of a reflexive research approach would argue, to problematize my own role as the researcher by incorporating me as a critical variable in the research process. Reflexivity in organizational research signifies sensibility and suspicion towards the relationship between a researcher and the ‘objects’ that are being researched. It is a call for transparency which helps to scrutinize the researcher’s taken-for-granted pre-understandings which influence choices in the research process. It also helps to make more transparent the researcher’s own entanglement with the topic, her potential bias, as well as her relationship to interviewees, which in my case certainly had an impact as well on the kind of information that was shared or silenced in this study.
Thus, with a concern for reflexivity, there is also an imperative for at least addressing the potential imbalance between the researcher and the people ‘being researched’. In my particular case, that is, when partly interviewing people who entrusted me with their stories both as a person (researcher) of integrity but also as a friend, I was confronted with some unusual openness in the research process where stories were kept highly personal. These stories included accounts of being humiliated, bullied or sexually harassed. Interviewees spoke of suffering from depression, insomnia, substance abuse, of having lost confidence and self-respect. Naturally, I tried to anonymize (and partly disguise) all interview material in order to not expose any of my interviewees, especially when including some longer interview vignettes to reflect these stories. At the same time, when sharing here some of my own experience as former management consultant, it is not simply to self-indulge, but to pay tribute and respect to my comrades who, for the advancement of this study, have opened up their hearts and depicted the intricacy of their experiences.

It is for the sake of establishing some more balance between those interviewees and friends of mine, as well as myself in the role of researcher, that in this first part of my introduction I have tried to avoid an overly distant and highly self-protective third person account of what my PhD project is about. Following this personal introduction, I will also insert a first set of interview vignettes – a little appetizer so to say– that illustrates a bit this partly sensitive nature of my empirical material which calls indeed for a reflexive positioning of the researcher. This being said, most scholars will agree that a more distant approach and tone can at other times be very helpful. It can help for example in the process of turning empirical observations, grounded within a certain scholarly debate and conceptual framing, into findings that may inform our theoretical understanding of a particular organizational phenomenon. In the next introduction I will thus switch my narrative style to a more scholarly one as I delineate the outline of my PhD project in a more theoretical manner.
Interview Vignettes I: Memories of a Grueling Consulting Past
Jens (Interview 6): “That’s unbelievable really!”

P: Jens - why did you go into consulting? What did you know about it and from where?

J: I didn’t really have any first-hand reports. Else I would probably not have done this [laughing]. I don’t know; it was just the usual cliché that you hear about consulting. I had visited career fairs at the university and a few recruiting events, but I didn’t do this extensively.

P: Okay, so why don’t you say something about your time in consulting. I know quite a bit about it already [laughing] but imagine that I didn’t know. Imagine you had to tell someone who’s got no clue about what’s going on in consulting.

J: Well, the first week was already super tough where I started to work with this manager called Schmidt. The actual project started in my second week and that’s when it already started to really suck. We worked super long hours and in hindsight I don’t really understand why. I don’t think this Schmidt guy was managing it well, but anyways, we were really under time pressure.... And nobody ever said thank you for anything.

P: [laughing] Yeah, I remember that.

J: Really. Never. And that’s my classic. It was my first week. [imitating his previous manager] “Send me that stuff”. Everyone got two slides. ”Send me the slides by 6 pm“. And at that time I didn’t know yet that a deadline was a deadline. So I thought, okay, let me send these slides two minutes past six as I was just finishing a last sentence. And then Schmidt looks at me: [again imitating the angry manager] “Shall I do it myself? Shall I do it myself? Shall I do it myself?” We were sitting face to face. [imitating, getting faster and louder] “Shall I do it myself or are you still sending something? Are you sending something? Are you sending it now”? And I got totally nervous in that moment. And of course my email didn’t work anymore, just in that moment. So I put it on a memory stick. And I was shaking. Well, I don’t remember that really, but I could imagine that it was like that. So I put it on a stick and he saw that and he didn’t say, no problem, send it to me in 5 minutes. Then I gave it to him on the stick, he opened the file and burst out [exaggerated scream]: “WHAT IS THIS”?

P: [laughing]. In hindsight, sorry that I’m laughing...

J: No, no, no. I find that a funny story myself and I enjoy telling that story. This is actually, I actually find that unbelievable for someone who’s doing slides for the first time. That’s unbelievable really. What an asshole! [...] So psychologically I became totally drained. The nights from Sunday to Monday I could hardly sleep, I took sleeping pills. And on Monday mornings I felt totally exhausted because I still hadn’t.... I fell asleep, woke up again, fell asleep, woke up again, fell asleep. On
Monday mornings I had stomach cramps, I felt completely nauseous and still had to pretend that everything was in order. I was totally scared to do anything. Because then I thought I’ll be bullied again.

**Steffi (Interview 11): “There was no backup anymore”**

**P:** Steffi, why did you choose to pursue a consulting career?

**S:** For me it was the variety and wanting to enter at a high level. Taking the difficult route - purposely! I didn’t have a bad feeling. I knew it would be really tough, but I knew it would be a clean thing. I was convinced that the way they presented themselves during the recruiting process, that’s what they would be like afterwards. So I decided for the consultancy.

After a few weeks on the job I was staffed on a project where I was reporting to a senior consultant. If I would meet this guy on the street I would immediately turn around. Macho. Complete macho. [imitating him] ”Here, write these meeting minutes, pimp up that slide”. It was never, I never got to see the big picture, couldn’t push my own topic.

At the same time he was making comments like: “Oh cool, you got a new car? I’m sure you’d look good on that car wearing a tiger bikini.” HELLO? EXCUSE ME? But in that moment you’re just a career starter in a really prestigious consultancy and you are on your first project. What do you say to someone who makes such a comment when you’re even a bit scared of him? I didn’t say anything. Just got on with things.

And the project went all wrong. That was three months. There I already realized that I was losing it. Just my self-esteem and my way of problem solving. I was so intimidated that I lost all my self-confidence. And after this there was this monster project, six months restructuring project. That gave me the rest.

**P:** In how far?

**S:** Level of stress. In-between I didn’t regain any self-esteem. I will never forget, in this restructuring phase we worked 85 hours from Monday to Friday. Only till Friday. It was unbelievable. Working all week and on weekends I was just dosing and sleeping, very close to getting depressed. For a couple of months.

At some point my mother said: “This is not my daughter, I don’t recognize you anymore. Where is the girl with the high ambitions, with the energy, who has no problems to speak up?” That was gone and in this moment I realized, you realize that subtly, that I did not even have the energy anymore to read a novel. I couldn’t. Maybe I could watch some romantic movie on the TV still, but even then I started crying. I was emotionally exhausted. That was really, well, bad. There was no backup anymore.
And I thought: What’s next? Where am I going? At that moment I was just..., nothing. Kindergarten nurse. I wanted to be a kindergarten nurse, have 30 kids yell at me for 8 hours, I didn’t care. I just wanted to work with people. That is, with people who have feelings.

Amelie (Interview 9): “It was horrible”

P: Amelie, what made you go into consulting?

A: Actually that’s funny. In hindsight you would say you have to follow your intuition. You have to follow your gut feelings. I did exactly the opposite. I felt it was wrong and did it anyways. The first few days I was asking myself: What am I doing here? What is this? And I was under a lot of pressure. Maybe that is normal when you start something new, but that was really extreme.

Very soon I had long working hours. You go to the client the first time. I was totally nervous. I have to say the first three months were horrible. Really horrible. Even if I had had more work experience then, I think it would still have been horrible. Super long working hours, that is, till 1 or 2am EVERY day. And when I said around midnight that I couldn’t do it anymore, that I had to sleep, the others would say, “well, we also have to sleep, but we’re staying”.

And they really put a lot of pressure on us. Plus the manager was not constructive at all. He always came into our team room and said: “Shit! Shit! Shit how this is going!” But he didn’t really communicate what the problem was, he was just swearing. “That’s crap! Shit, that doesn’t work”! Nothing more specific.

Also, when I started to work for the consultancy I learned that my grandfather had cancer in the final stadium and it was clear that he was gonna die soon. And you think, oh, you wanna see your grandfather, but on the other side you’re totally overwhelmed with your work. And on weekends I was so tired, I simply wanted to sleep and not drive all the way home. I went every now and then but I really missed spending more time with him. You cannot change anything of course, but just for myself to know that I was there. And it was exactly this time when I was working so much that he died. And I was already happy to get two days off. Or actually JUST ONE.

I told my team that there was a funeral. [imitating the colleagues] “Well, go if you have to”.

[laughing] So I almost felt bad about going.

I think they hire the kind of people who are ready to play that game, to work 150%. I don’t know how they do this. Sure, during these trainings they convey this team
culture, I also hated that. The first ski-weekend, that was like one-and-a-half months after I had started. They were all drunk. That was horrible. It was extreme. And I didn’t know these people.
1.2 Complicate Yourself: A Theoretical Introduction

“As researchers, we all want to produce interesting and influential theories. The dominant view is that a theory becomes influential if it is regarded as true. However, in his seminal study Davis (1971) showed that what makes a theory notable, and sometimes even famous (Davis, 1986), is not only that it is seen as true but also, and more important, that it is seen as challenging the assumptions underlying existing theories in some significant way.”

(Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011: 247)

In this second introduction to my PhD thesis I present a theoretical framework around the concept of identity that has substantially guided my overall research project. While other theoretical constructs such as discourse, control, resistance and agency, sense making, (career) change, ambiguity and coherence, psychoanalysis and positioning have also become important concepts in my analyses of interview data, the following introduction will show how these other concepts can be organized around, and thus help to inform the theme of identity. By clearly setting the focus on the field of identity studies – and a discursive understanding of identity in particular – I try to commit myself to one particular research area (as vast as it may be) in which to contribute some novel insights that challenge existing theoretical assumptions. In doing so, I try to expand current understandings around identity construction to enlighten practitioners, but above all I try to pave the way for more nuanced investigations and conceptualizations of identity dynamics in the context of organizations.

1.2.1 The Concept of Identity

Ever since the concept of ‘identity’ entered the social sciences and humanities in the 1950s, it has become one of the fastest-growing areas of social inquiry across a number of different disciplines (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Côté, 2009). Still today, the study of identity continues to prosper and few other concepts have been as generative. In fact, over the past 60 years the term identity has appeared in the titles of hundreds of thousands of books and articles (Wetherell, 2010), and the number of publications using it as a keyword is now in the tens of thousands per decade (Côté, 2009). This being said, the theoretical conceptualizations of identity could not be more
varied as identity scholars come from a wide spectrum of disciplines including Clinical, Social, Organizational, Developmental and Cultural Psychology, Anthropology, Sociology, Biology, Media Studies, Gender Studies, Religious Studies and many more. Each discipline and sub-discipline uses the term in a slightly different way (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Côté, 2009) which may explain why identity continues to be a slippery, confusing and notoriously elusive concept that is difficult to define (Wetherell, 2010).

Despite this already existing diversity of identity approaches which – at worst – may lead to another “Tower of Babel” in the social sciences (Côté, 2009: 6), I would claim that the evolution of the identity concept has not yet come to a standstill. Quite the contrary, the waves of new publications indicate that even today understandings around identity are constantly being developed and refined across disciplines. Such an advancement and increasing sophistication of the identity concept can also be traced within the area of Organization Studies, a field wide and diverse enough for me to comfortably position my PhD project within its ‘boundaries’. In the following I will specify what concepts of identity I apply in my own study which sets out to explore the identity construction of former management consultants as they move from a strongly identity shaping context to a new work environment.

Very broadly, I draw upon a social constructionist understanding in which identity is viewed as an outcome of relational processes where people – in this case former management consultants – discursively and in constant interaction with others construct a sense of ‘who they are’ (Kenny et al., 2011). To further complicate the matter I actually apply a series of slightly different discursive approaches for investigating the identity constructions of ex-consultants, with each approach taking a different stance on how best to conceptualize and empirically investigate the phenomenon.

These approaches include 1) a Foucauldian-inspired understanding of identity, assuming that the identity constructions of (former) management consultants are shaped through normalizing discourses, 2) an understanding of identity through discursive positioning practices which allow previous consultants to position themselves in different ways towards their past and present working context and to thereby assume particular subject positions, and 3) a narrative understanding of identity which is grounded in the belief that ex-consultants develop a sense of who
they are through narrating their life stories. And as if this was not complex enough, in each of the three papers I take a different focus as well regarding the organizational level at which identity can be investigated. This includes the examination of professional identity constructions, processes of organizational identification as well as identity transitions in times of career change.

After providing an overview of how the concept of identity has evolved in the social sciences more generally, how discursive approaches vary in their understanding of identity, and how the identity concept has been approached in the field of organization studies, I will position my three working papers within the outlined discursive frameworks, research orientations and levels of organizational analysis. Moreover, I will indicate how with each paper I aspire to make a contribution to the discursive understanding of identity in organizations. This is a crucial component of my study, as providing an overview and simply applying existing models to an interesting organizational phenomenon would not be enough to satisfy my own aspirations as researcher, nor would this meet the expectations from my wider community of scholars with regards to the theoretical contributions that my study accomplishes.

Therefore, the various analyses that I have conducted in the pursuit of my research interests have always been driven as well by a quest for advancing current discursive understandings of identity in the area of organization studies. That means that each of the three working papers of my thesis, which addresses a different aspect concerning the identity construction of ex-consultants, also problematizes an existing understanding of identity and tries to offer a way forward for (hopefully better) conceptualizing the discursive dynamics involved in constructing a sense of ‘who we are’, particularly by focusing on the continuous, complex and conflicting desires in the identity construction of ex-consultants.

1.2.2 Evolution of the Identity Concept in the Social Sciences and Humanities

Before going into the details of the three individual papers, in this section I will give a general overview of how the concept of identity has evolved within the context of social sciences and humanities. Given the vast literature on identity there could be countless ways for structuring such an overview and endless possibilities for what to mention and include. To keep this overview most relevant however, for situating my
own project within the field of identity studies, I have decided to particularly focus on how the concept of identity has evolved from being considered as a static and enduring characteristic of individuals (an understanding which is still prevalent in some disciplines) to being theorized as a more dynamic construct that is inherently social, constantly emerging and contingent upon cultural, historical and contextual variables. In that way, this overview will allow me to lead up to and elaborate upon a discursive understanding of identity by taking note of some of its historical as well as philosophical antecedents.

According to Peter Gleason (1983), an American historian, the word identity derives from the Latin expression ‘idem et idem’ which means ‘the same and the same’, thereby highlighting the distinct and enduring characteristics of a person. In line with this conception, identity – in the 1950s – was commonly depicted as an ‘essence’ of self where rigid and unchanging cognitive structures made up ‘the inner world’ of a person (Benwell & Stokoe, 2010; Kenny et al., 2011). From this positivist stance it was moreover assumed that identity could be scientifically measured through experiments, questionnaires, and specialized tests. Philosophically, this notion of identity had been shaped by discourses of modernity including the Cartesian understanding of self as ‘thinking substance’, the Enlightenment’s celebration of autonomous and rational man who throws off the chains of tradition as well as the Romantic belief that some mysterious depth can be found in people’s creative psychological interior (Wetherell, 2010).

Interestingly, this conceptualization of identity as the unchanging characteristic of an individual has had its critics from the very beginning. In fact, as soon as the identity concept entered the academic sphere, it was theorized in two distinct and somewhat competing ways, either recognized as an individual project of self or as a social phenomenon (Wetherell, 2010). This splitting into individual and social identity created the most central and enduring puzzle in identity studies from the 1960s onwards. It was grounded in a deep-seated epistemological division between those scholars (mostly psychologists) who supported an individual focus on mental traits and dispositions for the prediction of behavior, and those (mostly sociologists) who were more concerned with a social focus on interaction. Even today a number of disagreements around ontology and methodology in the field of identity studies still stem from this divide in focus and emphasis (Côté, 2009; Wetherell, 2010).
In some research areas, however, attempts have been made to find common ground in terms of combining both understandings – a consideration that I find relevant for my own study. Since I investigate the identity construction of former management consultants, I take a focus on individual as opposed to collective or organizational identities. At the same time, the framework I have chosen for examining these identities is intrinsically social and relational. Hence I will take a closer look at those studies that have tried to integrate both views. The first attempts to combine relational aspects with a notion of self-identity date back to the 1930s, that is, to early symbolic interactionist and pragmatic approaches in sociology (Côté, 2009). Even though scholars in those fields did not themselves use the term identity, their thinking has since become central to later studies of the concept. Symbolic interactionists understood the self (or identity) as a never-ending synthesis between processes of internal self-definition and external definitions of oneself offered by others (Wetherell, 2010).

According to George Herbert Mead (1863-1931), children acquire a sense of self through processes of socialization whereby they internalize the expectations from significant others such as parents that then develop into a sense of ‘the generalized other’, referring to expectations from the wider community. Mead distinguished between the ‘I’, that is the active part of an individual in interaction with others, and the ‘me’, which marks the sense we develop of how others perceive us. Hence, through some kind of looking glass or mirror, we are able to view ourselves through the eyes of the other. Taken together, the ‘me’ and the ‘I’ form a person’s sense of self in this theory. While Mead offered an important first step towards combining individual and social aspects of identity, his work was later criticized for making speculative assumptions about the human mind and for presuming distinct cognitive processes (Kenny et al., 2011).

Another key figure for combining individual and social dimensions of identity was Erik Erikson (1950, 1956, 1968). In fact, many identity scholars today consider Erikson to be the most prominent and groundbreaking theorist for popularizing the concept of identity in the Western World. Erikson’s work was primarily concerned with the functioning of the ego and can therefore be considered a psychoanalytic approach. At the same time, Erikson combined psychoanalysis with both a cultural and social awareness that would bring the individual into a constructive relationship...
with society. More concretely, Erikson’s use of the term ‘identity’ suggested a social functioning of the ego, resulting in a psychosocial equilibrium between a long-lasting sense of self and the feeling of belonging to a community, that is, between personal ideals and other people’s views and expectations (see also Frosh, 2010).

Apart from linking the individual with the social, Erikson’s work may also be considered interesting for highlighting the processual and changing rather than static and durable nature of the identity project. Strictly speaking, Erikson understood identity as a developmental achievement which unfolded across different life stages. He claimed that in each different stage of childhood, adolescence and adulthood, people had to deal with and resolve tasks, problems and various dilemmas. Rather than considering this development along life stages as an automatic progression, Erikson framed identity as an active search or quest, an ongoing struggle and work in progress that may never come to a full completion. This reading marked a clear departure from earlier conceptions of identity as being a pre-defined and stable essence. Despite some well-praised merits of Erikson’s work it still has its critics, particularly for being highly normative and almost utopian with regards to what Erikson considered ‘good identity’ (Côté, 2009; Wetherell, 2010).

A further and perhaps most developed attempt at integrating the notion of individual and social identity can be found in Social Identity Theory (SIT). Developed in the European field of social psychology from the 1970s onwards, first by Henri Tajfel (1982), and later more extensively by John Turner and colleagues (Turner et al., 1987), SIT started off with the key insight that the psychology of an individual might change substantially through his or her identification with a social group (see also Wetherell, 2010). In fact it was even proposed that people have a natural tendency to identify and form strong psychological and emotional bonds with people and groups whom they considered similar to themselves and who hence became viewed as members of an ‘in-group’. Likewise, this bonding with an ‘in-group’ may strengthen processes of dis-identification with an ‘out-group’ where members of this group are considered to be different and inferior.

In this way, SIT illuminates how people can become so (over-)identified with a particular group that the out-group is rendered as evil and as deserving exclusion, punishment or even death such as in cases of ‘ethnic cleansing’. Despite its attempts of looking at both individual as well as social aspects of identity, SIT has been
accused by critics of reducing identity to a cognitive phenomenon which is part of human nature rather than viewing it as a social process in which identities and decisions of whom to identify with are influenced through prevalent discourses. Moreover, critics argue that SIT falls short of acknowledging and accounting for the multiple, complex and sometimes shifting identifications that people form (Elsbach, 1999; Kenny et al., 2011). Starting in the late 20th century and led by scholars such as John Shotter and Kenneth Gergen (Gergen, 2001; Shotter & Gergen, 1989), identity research took note of this complexity and shifted towards an understanding of identity as fragmented, multiple and transitory, as well as relational, critical and context-dependent (Côté, 2009; Wetherell, 2010). The focus of analysis shifted away from both single individuals and social groups, and instead took note of the multiplicity of possible identities across different situations and contexts. It was assumed that people can have a number of different identities that are inconsistent or potentially even contradictory, thereby creating a number of irresolvable dilemmas (Billig et al., 1988; Kenny et al., 2011; Wetherell, 2010).

These ideas around multiplicity, from the 1990s onwards, marked a new philosophical order for the analysis of identity which emerged in the guise of postmodernism more broadly, and post-structuralism in particular (Hassard & Cox, 2013). This being said, various post-structuralist scholars insist that post-structuralism does not fall under the broader umbrella of postmodernism and therefore I will delineate both orientations independently of one another. Postmodernist thinking, which is reflected for example in the work of Lyotard, Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, departed from the modernist belief that humanity has the essential capacity of perfecting itself through the power of rational thought (Cooper & Burrell, 1988: 92). Postmodern scholars rejected the idea that human agents act as the center of rational control and understanding, and that human interpretations of the world have an absolute or universal status. Instead, they focused on aspects of indeterminacy and paradox in their analysis of social life, thereby positioning the individual within an observer-community that constructs interpretations of the world which are open to deconstruction (as suggested by Derrida) and re-interpretation (Cooper & Burrell, 1988).

Post-structuralism – as the name suggests – departed from structuralism, which during the 1960s was a fashionable doctrine in the human sciences in France.
Structuralism has been associated with the work of the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, the Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and the literary theorist Roland Barthes, while some of them later on incorporated more post-structuralist ideas in their writings (this has also been said, for example, for Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard and Gilles Deleuze). Structuralist scholars, very broadly, emphasized the structure of systems in which different parts are dependent upon the whole and can only be understood in relation to the structure. Moreover, they postulated that categories and value systems do not gain their meaning by objects of the material world but through differentiation in language. On these premises, structuralists refuted the Cartesian conception of the subject as an intrinsically rational being and emphasized a philosophy of the subject as being immersed in cultural meanings (Olssen, 2003).

Poststructuralist scholars have rejected some of the strict interpretations and applications of structuralist notions. More concretely, they have moved away from the idea of there being a universal system of rules or elementary structures that underpinned history. In particular, they do not agree with the prioritization of an assumed pre-existing structure over the parts and instead they emphasize notions of pluralism and difference (Olssen, 2003). Moreover they maintain that certain identified patterns are not the same across different cultures and historical periods, but instead they consider them to be specific to a particular time and place. Most notably, poststructuralist thought is based on the insight that language is constitutive of social reality (Broadfoot, Deetz and Anderson, 2004). Thereby it privileges the social over the individual in the sense that individual experience is considered as socially generated, and it embraces a dynamic and relational view of identity as constantly evolving (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Bardon et al., 2012). It has been argued that the post-structuralist conception of identity offers a very useful perspective for exploring the complexity of identity construction in a ‘liquid’ society where individuals are constantly confronted with multiple and fast-changing sources of identification (Bardon et al., 2012).

Within the poststructuralist framework the study of identity shifted towards a discursive understanding which many identity scholars today consider the most important complication in the evolution of identity studies (Benwell & Stokoe, 2010; Wetherell, 2010). Rather than being located in the ‘private’ realm of cognition,
identity became regarded as a social phenomenon, dynamically constructed in the public spheres of discourse, interaction and meaning-making (Benwell & Stokoe, 2010). In the following section I will elaborate upon the discursive approach to identity and provide an overview of the three discursive perspectives that have influenced my own conceptual and methodological choices for investigating the identity construction of former management consultants.

1.2.3 Discursive Understanding of Identity

With the ‘linguistic turn’ in the 1980s, a new perspective on the relationship between language and reality was introduced to the social sciences (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). The epistemological postulation of the discourse project signified much more, however, than simply a shift in attention to matters of language. It became a shorthand for an entire philosophical tradition influenced by scholars such as Wittgenstein, Foucault and Derrida (Mumby, 2011). While language was traditionally considered a passive descriptor of pre-existing objects – being ‘true’ when it correctly reflected reality and ‘false’ when it did not – the ‘linguistic turn’ marked a radical departure from the view that language simply mirrored or revealed a pre-existing social reality (Phillips & Oswick, 2012). Instead, it suggested that through the production and dissemination of text and talk (Berger & Luckmann, 1967), or more concretely, in the process of “differentiating, fixing, naming, labeling, classifying and relating” (Chia, 2000: 513), discourse may construct whatever phenomena we are interested in subsuming within the broader phenomenon of identity. In the past two decades then, discursive studies have expanded into a well-established theoretical as well as methodological framework, inspiring a variety of interpretive as well as analytical moves for studying identity through discourse (Phillips & di Domenico, 2009; Phillips & Oswick, 2012).

This being said, even within the discursive framework there is not just one single way for understanding and investigating identity. Instead there is a plethora of different discursive approaches that take a slightly different angle on how to conceptualize identity through discourse. These approaches include macro and micro understandings of discourse, narrative understandings, conversational understandings, rhetorical understandings, discursive psychological understandings, and many more. In the following I will provide an overview on the three discursive approaches I have
chosen for investigating the identity construction of former management consultants, namely a Foucauldian-inspired understanding of discourse, an understanding of discourse through positioning theory and a narrative understanding. For each of these approaches I will briefly delineate their historical as well as philosophical roots to make more transparent the particular theoretical focus that each approach brings to the discursive analysis of identity. Moreover it could be argued that each approach (potentially) comes with what Habermas (1972) referred to as a different ‘knowledge-constitutive interest’ – technical, practical-hermeneutic or emancipatory – thereby resulting in a functional, interpretivist or critical research orientation (Alvesson et al., 2008; Heracleous, 2006).

Given these differences in theoretical focus, knowledge-constitutive interest and research orientation, it could be argued that each approach also has a different take on what aspect of identity would be interesting to study in the context of organizations. As a result there is a great diversity in the field of organization studies concerning the identity themes that are being investigated at different organizational levels including the individual, the group and the organizational level (Alvesson et al., 2008; Kenny et al., 2011). While there are no particular ‘rules’ to state which discursive approach would be most apt for a particular identity theme in organization studies, by plotting some recent identity studies along the dimensions of discursive approaches and organizational levels of analysis I hope to illustrate certain trends of how discursive approaches have been paired with particular organizational themes of identity.

As a next step I will point out how my study tries to problematize the (non-)application of these three discursive theorizations of identity to particular organizational themes, thereby indicating the contributions that my study tries to make to the existing literature on processes of discursive identity construction. After providing an overview of the three different discursive approaches, I will insert a summarizing scheme that makes explicit once more how all the above mentioned dimensions hang together in my three research papers. This first overview of the three papers will then be deepened out in the next and empirically informed introduction to my research project where I try to further ‘multiply’ myself.
1.2.4 Foucauldian-inspired Understanding of Discourse

I am starting my overview with a Foucauldian-inspired understanding of discourse which emphasizes that the social construction of reality through discourse is not unbiased or neutral (Heracleous, 2006). Following Habermas’ (1972) framework of knowledge-constitutive interests, the Foucauldian-inspired approach to discourse is driven by an emancipatory interest for uncovering repressive power relations, constrains of agency and potential ways of liberation, thereby marking a critical research orientation. In this approach close attention is given to the intrinsically political nature of discourses as defining what is to be considered as normal, acceptable and standard behavior, thereby bringing issues of knowledge, power and resistance to the core of the analysis (Hardy & Maguire, 2010; Phillips & Oswick, 2012). The motivation of this approach is to expose, demystify and challenge the status quo of that which is discursively constructed as natural or taken for granted, and to ideally weaken the grip of dominating organizational or societal structures which constitute identities. Therefore, much research taking a critical discursive approach focuses on pressing social problems including marginalization, oppression or exploitation, not only in terms of a scholarly investigation, but also as a form of social intervention (Heracleous, 2006) which looks into different ways of how to discursively resist normalizing dynamics (e.g. Burr, 2003; Fleming & Spicer, 2003; Kärreman & Alvesson, 2009; Kärreman & Spicer, 2009).

As the term already suggests, this critical approach to discourse can be related back to and situated within the writings of Michel Foucault (1926-1984) who has inspired different concepts and analytical frameworks for understanding discourse in a particular way. Foucault’s notion of discourse encompasses much more than the common understanding of discourse as ‘language’ or ‘some connected passages of speech or writing’. Instead, he was concerned with discourse as a way to produce knowledge and meaning around a particular topic at a certain historical moment (Hall, 1992; Hall, 2001). Therefore, in The Archaeology of Knowledge (1972) he developed a first conceptualization of discourse and proposed an initial methodological system for how to analyze discourse. This work was based on the idea that discourse is a means for producing the subject rather than the subject producing discourse, meaning that subjects are mainly defined by anterior discourses. In his genealogical writings, Foucault markedly amended this understanding of discourse and its related analytical...
methods by opening up new avenues of inquiry investigating the link between discourse, knowledge and power, assuming that knowledge and power are always inextricably enmeshed:

“We should admit rather that power produces knowledge…that power and knowledge directly imply one another, that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations” (Foucault, 1977: 27).

By providing a view of knowledge as interest-laden, Foucault also claimed that there could be no ‘absolute truth’ outside the play of discourse; there could only be ‘regimes of truth’ (Foucault, 1980: 131), that is, a type of discourse that a particular society accepts and enacts as being true. Related to this, Foucault suggested a new understanding of power as a productive property of social relations. In fact, in his work *Discipline and Punish* (1977) Foucault introduced an altogether novel conception of power as functioning in a disciplinary way. Prior to this work, he argues, there was the perception that power originated from a single God-given source. The sovereign king or head of state was believed to ‘possess’ power which he could mobilize at any given time to impose his will on his subjects (see also Munro, 2000). This entititative image of power was not only repressive but also negative in the sense that it imposed proscriptions, prohibitions and limits on activities for people of lower orders who did ‘not have’ power but were subject to it (see also Burrell, 1988).

Foucault however rejected the view that power is an essentially repressive force. He proposed instead the concept that behavior of individuals is effectively controlled through mechanisms of permanent surveillance and disciplines including the control of time, space and bodies, which eventually become self-imposed. Being interested in the practice rather than the essence of power, he examined how it is circulated and how it functions in a positive way. He particularly emphasized how subjects are produced through disciplinary processes of ‘normalizing’ that measure and if necessary correct the behavior, appearance and beliefs of individuals by means of differentiating, comparing, homogenizing, hierarchizing and excluding (Collinson, 2003), thereby creating the ‘appropriate individual’ (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002).

Treating the mind as a surface of power inscription and semiology as its tool, Foucault considered the submission of bodies to be achieved through the control of
ideas. He argued that once this power starts to work internally by disciplining the mind, people become subjected to particular discourses that produce ‘truths’ about the ‘self’. Through these ‘techniques of the self’ (Foucault, 1988) people come to understand ‘who they are’, often in a punishing and (self-) disciplining way (see also Kenny et al., 2011). With his new conceptualization of discourse in relation to power and knowledge, Foucault first of all shifted attention away from grand strategies of power towards more localized tactics and mechanisms through which power circulates – something he referred to as the “micro-physics” of power (Foucault, 1977: 26). Moreover, this new conceptualization provided fruitful insights for how to critically analyze discourse in a holistic and context sensitive way (Heracleous, 2006).

This being said, Foucault’s work has also been criticized on various fronts, starting with the critique that his writings are hard to understand, partly obscure, and difficult to operationalize in concrete analysis. In addition, it has been argued that Foucault’s work overemphasizes the vulnerability of the self to powerful discourses while not paying enough attention to the possibilities of resistance that lie in the variability and flexibility within, around and between discourses (Kenny et al., 2011). Especially in his earlier work Foucault framed resistance as a tactical reversal, stating that even though power always triggers resistance, the latter cannot succeed as it “is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (Foucault, 1978: 95). From this viewpoint, resistance – rather than being a disruptive force – strengthens or reproduces the power regime that it actually tries to confront. This framing was later on criticized (by Foucault himself and others) for being overly deterministic, thereby compromising the critical potential that lies in the capacity of human agents to delegitimize and demystify dominant discourses (Heracleous, 2006).

Even though it has been commented that also Foucault’s later writings still lack an adequate conception of agency, I would argue that in his essay ‘The Subject and Power’ (1982) as well as in his writings on governmentality (e.g. Foucault, 1991a), he already takes a more optimistic view on resistance, arguing that power necessarily entails the capacity for ‘positive’ and ‘productive’ resistance, as “power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free” (Foucault, 1982: 221). This framing offers people more choice for behaving in several ways (Bevir, 1999) where agency can be detected in the “new position and role occupied by the speaking subject in discourse” (Foucault, 1991b: 56).
Another issue with Foucault’s work has been his “refusal to retain one position for longer than the period between his last book and the next” (Burrell, 1988: 222). As Foucault himself admitted, his concept of discourse has overall remained rather blurred:

“instead of gradually reducing the rather fluctuating meanings of the word “discourse”, I believe that I have in fact added to its meanings: treating it sometimes as the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a certain number of statements; and have I not allowed this same word “discourse,” which should have served as a boundary around the term statement, to vary as I shifted my analysis or its point of application, as the statement itself faded from view?” (Foucault, 1972: 80)

Even in light of these (self-)criticisms, Foucault’s understanding of discourse has nonetheless endured as an insightful resource in the critical approach to discourse (e.g. Knights and Willmott, 1989; McKinlay and Starkey, 1998). It contributed substantially to the understanding of discourse as producing regimes of truth that can be studied through textual analysis which goes beyond the raw material of the text, and which provides insights on the social meanings of a discourse as well as its possible effects in terms of constituting identities (Heracleous, 2006). In the following I will provide a short overview and some concrete examples of how the Foucauldian-inspired understanding of discourse has been applied in the field of organization studies for investigating issues of identity, particularly at the level of professional workplace identities.

1.2.4.1 Applications of the Foucauldian-inspired Understanding of Discourse

When applying a Foucauldian-inspired discourse approach to the study of identity, organizational scholars have often highlighted the relevance of the identity concept for better understanding contemporary relations of control and resistance in organizational settings. This has resulted in a particular interest in the concept of ‘identity regulation’ which according to Alvesson and Willmott (2002) helps to explain “how organizational control is accomplished through the self-positioning of employees within managerially inspired discourses about work and organization with which they may become more or less identified and committed” (p. 620). Studies that
take note of such discursive processes of identity regulation assume that employees work most efficiently and productively when their identities are tied to their daily activities and thus to the goals of the organization (Whittle, 2005). In that way an employee is persuaded to want “on his or her own what the corporation wants” (Deetz, 1992: 42), which forms the kind of employee desired by the company – less recalcitrant and more productive. From a managerial point of view, such power mechanisms that provide a script or cultural template for organizational action are highly appreciated as they create the ‘ideal worker’ (Tienari, Quack, & Theobald, 2002), that is, the dream of the employer with regards to compliance and work motivation (Alvesson, 2000). Without any forms of coercion, threat or reward, and without being supervised, employees act in the best interest of the company (Whittle, 2005).

While most research on organizational control has focused on how employee identities are shaped through dominant discourses that have normalizing effects, there has also been some attention, however, on how this normalization can be discursively resisted, for example through tactics of dis-identification that attempt to block the colonization of a pre-given self and that allow individuals to disassociate themselves from an existing organizational image or culture that is experienced as ‘cheesy’, ‘phony’ or ‘evil’ (Kärreman & Spicer, 2009). So besides systems of identification, there are also practices of distancing in which individuals can construct an alternative, different sense of self than that prescribed by the organization (Collinson, 2003).

When employees resist dominant and identity shaping discourses, they can make use of multiple oppositional practices including humor (Collinson, 2002), irony (Trethewey, 1999), cynicism (Fleming & Spicer, 2003) and parody (Graham, 1993). Within a discursive understanding, the major site for challenging and changing identities is that of language again (Collinson, 1994). Based on the idea that identities are not fixed, experience may be understood as being open to an infinite number of possible meanings, negotiations and re-inventions. In the Foucauldian-inspired framework, change of identity becomes possible through the opening of marginalized and repressed discourses, making them available as a source from which to fashion alternative identities. Foucault did not imply though, that change is a matter of easily talking oneself out of oppressive social relations or damaging identities. A first step would be to recognize the discourses that are currently shaping the prevalent identities.
in order to work towards identity positions in discourse that appear more appropriate and less personally damaging (Burr, 2003).

In the following I will provide some examples of identity studies that have applied a critical, Foucauldian-inspired discourse approach, particularly for investigating or theorizing how professional workplace identities are shaped within the context of organizations. Collinson (2003) for instance argues that the contemporary Western workplace is characterized by an ideology of achievement and meritocracy where conventional notions of valued identity based on dignity by birthright, family status, religion, etc. have been replaced by a validation of self through career success. While this may provide more openness for individuals to exercise discretion over ‘who they want to be’, it may also increase levels of insecurity and vulnerability and potentially lead to competition in all aspects of life. Especially the fear of losing one’s job and thereby one’s economic independence, bears serious threats to one’s sense of autonomy and self-respect in the ‘post-bureaucratic’ organization, where work is often organized along flexible, contract-based and ‘nomadic’ work assignments.

Collinson argues that in this context identities are not only shaped through organizationally prescribed discourses, but also through the identity-seeking preoccupations of individuals who become obsessed with an (illusory) search for a stable sense of identity, which may in fact turn into a ‘psychic prison’ (Morgan, 1997). More concretely he claims that any attempt to discursively construct and sustain a particular identity which tries to overcome power asymmetry, ambiguity and multiplicity may actually reinforce and intensify the insecurity that people aspired to overcome in the first place. By delineating ‘survival practices’ that individuals adopt in light of these insecurities, Collinson tries to enhance our understanding of how power relations are rationalized, reproduced, resisted or potentially even transformed in surveillance-based organizations.

In another study, Meriläinen, Thomas and Davies (2004) analyze management consultant talk through a cross-cultural comparison of normalizing discourses and resistance among British and Finnish management consultants. In this study, the authors explore the various discursive possibilities available to both male and female consultants as they construct their professional self as ‘knowledge worker’. They argue that professional identity construction is embedded in a gendered and
normalizing discourse of what it means to be an ‘ideal’ consultant. This being said, the authors also take note of alternative discourses around ‘work/life balance’ and ‘the balanced individual’ through which consultants construct different spheres of their life, thereby displaying resistance at the level of subjectivity. By comparing different cultural contexts in terms of British and Finnish consultancies, the authors moreover observe that these contexts have an influence as well on what forms of resistance are made possible within a given setting.

And thirdly, Kosmala and Herrbach (2006) explore the self-management of identity in four different audit firms by taking particular note of how identification and distancing processes may be viewed as the outcomes of technologies of the self. The authors argue that the ambivalence inherent in different identity attributes enables auditors to cynically distance themselves (more or less effectively) from the regulatory structures of their environment. This, they argue, contributes to a better understanding of how power and identity are mutually constituted when employees resist the dynamics of organizational control. Since they observe a distancing from professional ideology and organizational culture to be more symbolic of individual agency rather than to be truly emancipatory, the authors conclude that jouissance (Žizĕk, 1989), which marks the paradoxical enjoyment of the post-modern condition, may enhance a firm’s performance in the short term, while in the long term, prolonged cynical attitudes can transform employees into ‘compliant’ professionals who do not challenge organizational issues, even if it would be beneficial to the organization if they did.

While all three studies provide an interesting insight into how – in the contemporary workplace – identities are shaped through insecure conditions and normalizing discourses with different perspectives on how the resulting subjectivities can be resisted or not, I claim that all three studies, in line with most other identity studies that adopt a critical understanding of discourse (e.g. Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; Alvesson & Robertson, 2006; Fleming & Spicer, 2003; Laine & Vaara, 2007; Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004, 2009;), theorize identity construction or identity regulation as a context-limited phenomenon. In the following section I will delineate how my study on the identity construction of ex-consultants tries to problematize this context-limited focus, thereby aspiring to theoretically develop the current
conceptualization of identity and processes of discursive identity construction/ regulation as being context-spanning phenomena.

1.2.4.2 Problematization and Aspired Theoretical Contribution

When critically exploring the identity construction ex-consultants, I take a particular interest in how identity shaping discourses of one particular working context, namely the context of management consultancies, may continue to have an effect on the identity construction of people even beyond the boundaries of this work environment. By doing so, I aspire to problematize the underlying assumptions of most critical identity studies which exclusively focus on how people’s identities are successfully shaped within the boundaries of present employment relationships, thereby supposing that the effects of identity shaping discourses lose their grip as people exit a firm. To challenge this inherent assumption, my study puts forward the argument that strongly identity shaping discourses are more powerful and far-reaching than currently acknowledged as they may continue to affect the professional identity construction of former management consultants even in the post-exit arena. In this framing, the effects of identity regulation are not terminated contractually, but instead they may continue well beyond the employment relationship.

Even though there is an understanding among identity scholars that during times of career change, people experiment with and alter their previous professional self-image by revising and replacing identity shaping discourses of the past, it is yet assumed that after a certain period of transition from one organizational context to another, a new professional identity will stabilize as a result of some enduring and profound identity changes (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). By putting in question that identity shaping discourses can easily be revised or replaced when moving to a new working context, in this study I propose that identity constructions in the post-exit arena are embedded in a complex and possibly ongoing process where career related identity transitions may never come to a full completion. With this proposition, I aspire to theoretically refine the current understanding of professional identity as being a context-limited construct, and instead I propose a conceptualization of identity that takes into consideration the temporal (Brown & Humphreys, 2002) and context-spanning dimensions of discursive identity construction.
This may be considered a first step towards empirically and conceptually developing the notion of ‘post-exit identity construction’, a concept which bears the potential of providing a context-bridging understanding of identity and therefore calls for further research, especially with a focus on identity dynamics in relation to career change. A first concept for developing this notion of post-exit identification could be that of ‘nostalgia’, which to date has hardly been drawn upon in the field of organization studies (for an exception see Brown & Humphreys, 2002). Nostalgia addresses a past-oriented and therefore context-spanning construction of identity. The term nostalgia was coined in the 17th century by the Swiss physician Johannes Hofer, who considered nostalgia a psychological disorder. Stemming from the Greek words ‘nóstos’ (return) and ‘álgos’ (pain), nostalgia was initially equated with homesickness, that is a painful yearning to return home (Holak & Haylena, 1998), associated with symptoms such as depression, sadness, anxiety and insomnia (Wildshut et al., 2011).

Only by the late 20th century, being nostalgic was perceived as something different from being homesick. More concretely, it was considered as a distinct consciousness and sentimental longing for people, events and places of one’s childhood or past, which – despite some musing and possible detachment from everyday life (Brown & Humphreys, 2002) – was viewed as a normal human reaction rather than a pathological disorder (Sedikides et al., 2008). According to Holak and Haylena (1998), nostalgia is a ‘bittersweet’ emotion that can be observed when a pleasant memory of the past comes along with a sense of loss and unattainable desire for wanting to return to the past. Brown and Humphreys (2002) consider this romanticized view of the past as potentially being a product of simplification and idealization.

While it is regarded unwise in the Western culture to ‘live in the past’ or to be past-oriented, some research indicates that the past can feature as a vital psychological resource for enhancing a sense of meaning in life (Routledge et al., 2011), as well as for counteracting distress and for increasing the accessibility of positive self-attributes and positive self-regard (Sedikides et al., 2008). Especially during times of transition, nostalgia for the past can increase people’s psychological well-being and their emotional capacity to cope with challenges in the present. According to Iyer and Jetten (2011) this is only possible however, as long as an individual in a sense of discursive continuity is able to draw easily on experiences and accomplishments of the
past which at the same time appear relevant for constructing uniqueness and pride in the presence.

By taking a more critical perspective on the notion of nostalgia and the ongoing identification with a past working context, in this study I try to draw attention above all to the potential difficulties that may arise when people’s identity constructions continue to be shaped by a past working context. When grounding their sense of self primarily in discourses of the past, people may feel discouraged to explore and embrace new opportunities for identification, in that way constraining processes of re-orientation (Brown & Humphreys, 2002). More specifically, the preservation of consulting discourses in the new work environment may perpetually confront ex-consultants with an interface between an ideal self-image grounded in the consulting past and the social reality of their new working context that can be at odds with the ideal of the past. As a consequence, people may continue to draw on the consulting past as an ongoing source for identification while the new working context may become a source of discontent or even frustration. In such a set-up a strong affiliation with a past self-image can alienate people from their present working context and prevent them from adopting a new identity.

1.2.5 Understanding of Discourse Through Positioning Theory

A second and related understanding of identity can be found in positioning theory which also assumes that social phenomena are mostly produced discursively in the context of situated language use. It is a social constructionist perspective which theorizes identity based on the dynamic analysis of discourses, assuming that “selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced storylines” (Davies & Harré, 1990: 48). The concept of ‘positioning’ was coined by Hollway (1984) who spoke of ‘positioning oneself’ and of ‘taking up positions’ in the sense that “discourses make available positions for subjects” (Hollway, 1984: 236). This suggests that people “have specific locations” (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999: 16) within a conversation which makes their actions intelligible. Along Habermas’ (1972) framework of knowledge-constitutive interests, an understanding of identity through positioning can either be driven by a practical-hermeneutic interest (interpretive approach), or else, by an emancipatory interest (critical approach).
When applying positioning theory in an interpretive way, scholars particularly explore different positionings in the analysis of narratives and highlight the multiplicity of social identities that are expressed through a variety of discursive positioning practices. These practices may render identity as always being mutable since people – in contradictory forms of biographical talk – ‘can sometimes be this and sometimes that’. Continuity in identity positions may stem from a history of being continuously positioned in a certain way, where individuals over time become emotionally attached to a particular position. And yet, while some occupied identity positions may become more habitually adopted in a particular interactional context, and thereby more permanent, other identity positions remain more temporary and ephemeral (Hollway, 1984).

In my own study, I apply positioning theory (once more) for taking a critical perspective on identity. Positioning, even though it is neither intentional nor unintentional per se (Davies and Harré 1990), often occurs within certain “moral landscapes” (Harré et al., 2009: 9) where available positions in discourse are endowed with rights and duties that people draw upon in support of their positioning claims. Discourses within these moral landscapes may emphasize, proscribe or in fact marginalize certain positions (Coupland & Brown, 2012; Davies & Harré, 1990). Within an organizational setting for instance, institutional positioning may occur when dominant discourses prescribe how individuals are expected to function and perform within that organization (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). Once people take up a specific position in discourse, they start to interpret the world from a certain perspective and vantage point which momentarily calls them into a given subject-position (Davies & Harré, 1990; Smith, 1988). The more an individual’s intentions are structured by that subject position, the more he or she may become bound by it (Harré & Gillet, 1994). In this way, identities get caught in webs of power and political interest where choices of positioning are constrained.

This being said, people may differ in their capacity and willingness to position themselves in one way or the other, as well as they may differ in their power to achieve certain positioning acts based on their specific location in social orders and networks (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). And yet, by going back to the idea which is highlighted as well in interpretive studies, namely that people may stand in multiple, and potentially contradictory positions, it may be argued that they have room
for negotiating or even refusing certain discourses and the positionings which they make available. Choice and individual agency can thus be expressed by changing one’s positioning in the form of challenging and modifying, sometimes drastically, an organizationally imposed discourse and to locate oneself in another (Harré et al., 2009). Especially situations that call for a choice between contradictory positionings may provide an opportunity for people to act as agentic and reflexive subjects who adopt and mediate between alternative positions (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré & Gillet, 1994).

This may be considered the strength of positioning theory that it recognizes both, the constitutive (and potentially limiting) force of discourse, as well as people’s capacity of exercising choice through different positioning practices. Rather than providing a definite answer to the question of identity, the framework of positioning offers a ‘shifting answer’ that depends on the multiplicity of positions made available within one’s own and within the discursive practices of others. In order to resist certain imperatives for positioning, alternative positions and hidden possibilities have to be brought to the surface. According to Kuhn (2009), ignoring the multiplicity of discourses and discursive positionings would mean to ignore the discursive ‘realities’ in which identities are developed (Kuhn, 2009). In the following I will provide some examples again of how positioning theory has been applied for studying identity in organizational settings.

1.2.5.1 (Lack of) Applications of Positioning Theory

While the number of studies applying an understanding of discourse through positioning theory is less extensive than the amount of studies drawing on a Foucauldian-inspired understanding of discourse, in the following I will provide some examples again of how positioning theory has been used in organization studies for the analysis of identity, especially in relation to processes of organizational identification. A first study by Garcia and Hardy (2007) is situated at a large Australian university which at the time of the study was particularly affected by a reform in the higher education sector. Rather than only investigating the identity constructions of organizational members, this study also investigated the university’s organizational identity itself. By applying positioning theory to emphasize how individuals related themselves to the university in multiple, ambivalent and potentially
conflicted ways (Maguire & Hardy, 2005), the study reveals how senior executives, general staff members and academics constructed identities both for themselves and the university through different positioning practices that resulted in a variety of individual and collective positions.

This is important to note as it depicts individuals as being active in the process of identity construction, even in light of reforms which are influenced by broader and sometimes constraining discourses that may require organizational and individual identities to change in order to accommodate calls for being more commercial and strategic in their outset. While such reforms may place additional and often competing demands on individuals, leading to increased administration, work intensification and loss of autonomy, the study indicates that through different positioning practices, individuals may attempt to cope with and possibly evade such identification pressures.

In another study, LaPointe (2010) explored the concept of career identity as narrative practice, that means, as a practice of “articulating, performing and negotiating identity positions” (p. 1). She argues that especially in times of career transitions, people start to negotiate between opposing and sometimes even incompatible positions. The resulting identity conflict, LaPointe claims, may become a crucial element for influencing how the career transition evolves. By applying the concept of positioning the author purposely situates identities within a particular cultural, historical and interactional context, namely within the discourses that position identity in times of career change. By taking note as well of people’s reflexive capacity to negotiate and modify available positions and to reflect upon their career from various angles, LaPointe offers a contextualized understanding of identity construction which reveals the emancipatory potential that is inherent in the interwoven meanings and contradictions within individual accounts.

In a third study, which investigates the available subject positions of corporate lawyers who are often presupposed to hold the position of ‘corporate lackey’, Kuhn (2009) highlights that the identification with a particular organization and the resulting formation of subject positions may be as manifold as the discourses circulating around these organizations. By directly confronting corporate attorneys at large US law firms with the accusation of being a ‘corporate lackey’, Kuhn invited his respondents to reflect upon processes of identification that were conditioned by discourses of managerialism and legal professionalism in support of particular subject positions. At
the same time, Kuhn invited reactions of reflection and resistance, thereby creating a more nuanced picture of the diverse discourses along – and against – which actors may identify.

Based on the idea that identification with an organization requires (self-)positioning, organizational members must be seen as being more than just the effects of discursive powers. Instead, as people exert a measure of control over their identifications, they can be regarded as “(co-)authors of their subjectivities” (p. 684). In this framing the individual becomes a site of confluence, that is, a “self-reflexive node at which a variety of cultural, institutional and organizational discourses meet” (p. 682). As Kuhn argues, few studies examine the multiplicity and heterogeneity of discourses across a particular work setting when investigating subject positions of organizational members. By drawing on positioning theory however, Kuhn aspires to provide a richer and more contextualized conception of subject positions which highlights that these subject positions are often influenced by an array of different discourses.

Instead of critiquing the study of identity through positioning theory per se, in my study I actually set out to problematize a lack of applying positioning theory in the field of organization studies. More concretely, I criticize that there is a great potential in organization studies to explore the variety and complexity of organizational identifications through positioning theory, which to date however, has not been realized (for an exception see Garcia & Hardy, 2007; Kuhn, 2009). In the following then I will delineate how my study tries to problematize the predominant conceptualization of organizational identification through social identity theory, which is based on a cognitive model for explaining behavior and which is often motivated by a technical interest for improving organizational effectiveness. By suggesting positioning theory as an alternative route for conceptualizing the complex dynamics of organizational identification, especially in light of career changes, I moreover delineate the second theoretical contribution that my study aspires to make.

1.2.5.2 Problematization and Aspired Theoretical Contribution
Organizational identification is often referred to as the psychological attachment to a specific organization, assuming that “[m]embers become attached to their organizations when they incorporate the characteristics they attribute to their
organization into their self-concepts” (Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, 1994: 241-2). As the perceived attractiveness, reputation and prestige of an organization increases, members move from the periphery of the organization to the center, thereby increasing their own level of inclusion and organizational participation (Bhattacharya & Elsbach, 2002; Dutton et al., 1994). Ashforth and Mael (1989) were the first to introduce the concept of organizational identification to the field of organization and management studies. Their conceptualization was grounded within Tajfel and Turner’s social identity theory (SIT), and ever since, SIT has remained most prominent in the theorization of organizational identification (see also Alvesson et al., 2008).

Tajfel and Turner (1985) described identification along processes of self-categorization and social comparison, where processes of self-categorization accentuate similarities between oneself and members of an in-group (as well as dissimilarities between oneself and members of an out-group), while processes of social comparison help to maximize in-group distinctiveness which allows people to reflect positively upon their own in-group. The resulting social identification with the group enables individuals to meet a variety of needs including the need for safety, the need for affiliation and the need for self-enhancement (see also Pratt, 1998). While Tajfel (1982) originally proposed that social identities (also) derive from the emotional attachments which individuals develop towards social groups, meaning that a person’s social identity is grounded in the “knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel, 1978: 63), most social identity scholars to date have treated social identities and identifications as purely cognitive (rather than emotional) constructs (Elsbach, 1999).

Organizational identification, respectively, has also been framed above all as the cognitive link between the definition of an organization and the self-definition of a person in relation to that organization (Dutton et al., 1994). In terms of social categorization and social comparison dynamics this would mean that organizational identification is a matter of considering an organization as positively distinct from other organizations and of highlighting the homogeneity of affiliation among organizational members (Pratt, 1998). While there is great consensus in the literature on the conceptualization of organizational identification from a social identity
standpoint, I agree with discursive psychologists (e.g. Billig, 1997; Edwards, 1997; Wetherell & Potter, 1992) who find the predominantly cognitive depiction of identification problematic. More generally it has been argued that the domination of one particular perspective or school of thought can stifle the theoretical understanding and development of a particular social phenomenon. Especially, when there is a lack of critical debate, deviant voices and counter-ideas, there is little room for alternative views (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011).

Alvesson and Sandberg (2011) problematize such a colonization of particular research areas and encourage scholars to actively question and critically scrutinize established knowledge constructions in academia, especially for developing a broader understanding of metatheoretical standpoints. More innovative theorizing may require scholars to reconsider the antecedents of a theory and to challenge its underlying assumptions (see also Brown & Lunt, 2002). Coming back to the predominant cognitive framing of organizational identification based on SIT it may be problematized how this theory artificially separates the individual as rational agent from society (Brown & Lunt, 2002). Moreover, by remaining insensitive to discourse and thus the notion of political domination, SIT ignores wider processes and relations of power in which statements on identity are formed (He & Brown, 2013).

It has therefore been argued that for understanding organizational identification as a genuinely social rather than cognitive process, the mainstream tradition would greatly benefit from alternative explorations and theorizations of the concept (Brown & Lunt, 2002). Accordingly, in my own study, in which I explore the identity construction of ex-consultants through their various organizational attachments towards their past and present employers, I aspire to shift focus away from the cognitive assumptions underlying SIT by suggesting positioning theory as an alternative route for conceptualizing organizational identification. More concretely, by examining organizational identification through a variety of different discursive positioning practices that people engage in for expressing their multiple and sometimes conflicting organizational attachments as they move from the ambiguity intensive working context of a management consultancy towards a new work environment, I hope to provide a more complex reading of organizational identification, especially in the context of career changes.
Another point of critique which my study tries to address is that practitioners and researchers have typically framed organizational attachment as something which is desirable to strive for as it is associated with positive outcomes for both the individual as well as the organization. Strong ties between an organization and its members are assumed to foster a sense of meaning and belonging which is positively associated again with high performance and employee retention (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004; Pratt 2000). Therefore, most studies on organizational identification can be situated within a functionalist research orientation which is mostly driven by a technical interest (Habermas, 1972) towards improving organizational effectiveness. Most of these studies set out to investigate parameters of organizational identification including levels of commitment, loyalty and motivation among organizational members. And yet, despite this call for strong cultures and ideologies that lead to close organizational attachments, organizations which are very successful in promoting strong ties – such as management consultancies – are often viewed with both fascination and fear, especially for their ability of winning over the hearts and minds of their employees (Hochschild, 1983; Pratt, 2000).

A few scholars have therefore started to explore the ‘dark side’, that is, the potentially negative effects of organizational (over-)identification on both individuals and organizations (e.g. Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004; Pratt 2000). Critical scholars have particularly voiced their concern that individuals who over-identify with an organization may lose their sense of individual identity, while at the same time becoming less able or willing to see the faults of the organization and to point them out (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004). For individuals a prime concern would be that organizations take an advantage by bending the wills of their employees to match that of the organization. As Pratt (2000) put it:

“Although attaining strong, positive identifications may facilitate organizational functioning, one must be cautious about the dark side of such identification, such as a lack of organizational flexibility, individual vulnerability (especially if the organization’s reputation fails), distrust and paranoia, overdependence on and overconformity to organizational dictates, antisocial, unethical, immoral, and even tyrannical behaviors on behalf of both leaders and followers, decreased creativity and risk taking, burnout, and the loss of an independent sense of self” (p. 487).
In my study I therefore set out to challenge the mostly positive conceptualization of organizational identification within a functionalist research endeavor. Instead, by offering a more nuanced reading of the imperatives for organizational identification, which may affect the identity construction of organizational members even beyond the employment contract, I hope to provide a framework which bears the potential for further developing our current view on organizational identifications in a critical way.

While studies that look at the ‘dark side’ of organizational identification have noted that imperatives for identification also invite various forms of resistance such as ‘dis-identification’ through which employees may attempt to block or escape these imperatives (Kärreman & Spicer, 2009), in my study I moreover argue, that rather than always creating a distance towards a particular working context, dis-identification in co-existence with positive identification may actually lead to schizoid-identification (Elsbach, 1999) which can potentially ‘lock people in’ to an ongoing state of ambiguity, thereby creating the subject position of ‘ongoing career juggler’ who is neither fully subjected to nor effectively liberated from imperatives for identification.

While it can certainly have benefits if working contexts provide meaning to their employees, a healthy form of organizational identification is possibly one that also leaves space for alternative sources and areas of identification that are not only associated with one’s working life (Kuhn, 2009). For that, people might have to resist subject positions made available in larger organizational discourses and instead be active in the construction of alternative discourses. By arguing that ‘neutral identification’ (Elsbach, 1999) is not necessarily just a lack of organizational identification and commitment, but potentially a way to achieve a healthy balance between the work and private sphere of life, this study depicts positioning practices that achieve such a more neutral identification as potentially being a promising emancipatory step to counter positive, negative or ambiguous forms of over-identification, thereby challenging the mostly functionalist framings of organizational identification.

Thus, by introducing positioning theory to the analysis of organizational identification, I clearly attempt to move the conceptualization of organizational identification out of a domain that is problematically associated with cognitive and functionalist framings towards a more critical-discursive understanding of
identification which takes note of the emancipatory potential that lies within the various positioning practices that people can engage in for expressing different forms of identification that result in different subject positions, which then again allow people to either reinforce or escape imperatives for organizational identification.

### 1.2.6 Narrative Understanding of Discourse

Most narrative work in organization studies is also grounded in the social constructionist understanding that narratives are not simply a way of describing reality, but instead, a way of constituting it (Maitlis, 2012). Assuming that we live in a ‘storytelling society’ (Benwell & Stokoe, 2010) where people make sense of their lives through processes of arranging characters and events in meaningful ways (Czarniawska, 1998; Kenny et al., 2011) narrative scholars maintain that “it is through storytelling that people’s lives are experienced and made meaningful, and their identities constructed” (Stockoe & Edwards, 2006: 56). From a narrative understanding, identities are molded and fashioned through local narratives which people tell about themselves, as well as through broader cultural narratives referred to as ‘master narratives’ (Somers, 1994). To take this point one step further, some theorists even suggest that narratives are in fact identities as “we become who we are through telling stories about our lives and living the stories we tell” (Bruner, 1994: 53).

Particularly the philosophical work of Paul Ricoeur (1984, 1985, 1988, 1992) has been influential in narrative research on identity. In his theory of narrative identity, Ricoeur (1988) suggests that through narratives people develop a conception of self-identity where, in a reflective process, the self is discovered in its own narrational acts. Ricoeur thereby emphasized the “temporal dimension of human existence” (Ricoeur, 1992: 114) as he made a distinction between how we conceive of time as being a linear experience that moves forward in hours, days and years, or as a practical or phenomenological experience, that means in weaving together past present and future and in rendering the past and the present meaningful through immersion in the present (see also Kenny et al., 2011). Related to this, he particularly highlighted the importance of ‘emplotment’ which is “the process that synthesizes experience in a narrative” (Ricoeur 1991: 21), and which integrates a complex set of episodes into a single story.
In line with the idea of emplotment and the notion of a consistent plot, researchers – less common in organizational research, but more dominant in personality and developmental psychology (Maitlis, 2012) – have tended to locate and analyze identity constructs in the context of biographical self-narratives (Humphreys and Brown, 2002). Many narrative identity scholars have in fact followed the influential work of McAdams (1987, 1988, 2001) who proposed that identity itself takes the form of a unified and meaningful life story, where open-ended, confused and ambiguous stories become ‘readable’ by creating an internalized sense of coherence and self-continuity.

In the field of organization studies, most narrative identity scholars assume however that individuals – rather than producing a singular overall life story, hold the capacity to create several more or less contradictory fragments of identity stories at different times and in different contexts (Clarke et al., 2009). They do not consider narratives as being static, but instead, they view narratives in a process of being constantly assembled, refined and embellished which reconceptualizes identity as a potentially chaotic, precarious and mutable construct that is repeatedly up for redefinition and revision (Gioia et al., 2000). Recent studies have even emphasized that stories can be distributed and told by many different people in fragments rather than from beginning to an end. In that way, stories can be altered and refined in-the-making. As a consequence, identities which are constituted through narratives may become multiple, contested and even ‘recast’ in the process (Kenny et al., 2011; Whittle et al., 2009).

Within Habermas’ (1972) framework of knowledge constitutive interests, it could be argued that the narrative understanding of identity is driven by a practical-hermeneutic interest in human cultural experiences. Narrative inquiry thus falls into an interpretivist research orientation, where studies investigate how people craft and make sense of their identities (Weick, 1995) by weaving ‘narratives of self’ in concert and interaction with others. Influenced by poststructuralist thinking, the interpretivist approach tries to overcome static notions of identity as a particular way of being, and instead embraces the idea of identity as a process of becoming. Scholars adopting a narrative approach to identity assume that there is not one single image of self but a mélange of multiple, shifting and competing identity projects created and co-created in dialogue with others. In the following I will delineate how a narrative
understanding of identity has been applied in the context of organization studies, especially with a focus on instances of organizational or career change, followed by some examples of narrative identity studies.

1.2.6.1 Applications of a Narrative Understanding of Identity

Based on the idea that organizational life is often marked by instances of fragmentation and instability, the narrative approach focuses particularly on processes of identity construction in light of ambiguous, complex and sometimes contradictory experiences, in that way unfolding dynamic relationships between self, work and the organization. The narrative approach assumes that particularly in times of uncertainty, stories, just as rituals and myths become important building blocks in the identity construction of organizational members (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). One often used concept for investigating narrative identity constructions in the context of unstable organizational settings is that of ‘identity work’. According to Svenningson and Alvesson (2003), identity work refers to “[…] people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness. Identity work may either, in complex and fragmented contexts, be more or less continuously on-going or, in contexts high on stability, be a theme of engagement during crises or transitions” (p. 1165).

In the following I will provide some examples of how a narrative approach has been applied to the study of identity, especially with an emphasis on identity transitions in relation to the experience of change. Clarke et al. (2012) have for instance conducted a study on the narrative identity construction of academics working in UK business schools. Similar to the earlier mentioned study by Garcia and Hardy (2007) which investigated identity positionings at an Australian university, also in this research setting, identities of employees were affected by the increasing pressures of new public management practices including league tables, research assessments, managerialist practices of audit and other performance measures. It almost comes as a surprise then that the focus of the study is on various ‘narratives of love’ – including romantic, unconditional and pragmatic love – which respondents drew upon in order to account for and to make sense of how they experienced these new forms of public management. In the analysis of love narratives, Clarke and her colleagues found the responses of their interviewees to be mostly complicit with the
new demands for accountability as they integrated them into their sense of academic identities, thereby generously overlooking the sometimes loveless and instrumental demands that were progressively being imposed on them.

In another study, Chreim (2005) investigated how continuity and change were managed discursively in a Canadian bank through narrative texts of organizational identity. By analyzing the evolving narratives composed by senior managers, the author found that the selective reporting of elements from past, present and future, among other things, led to a sense of confluence, that is, the simultaneous existence of continuity and change. Moreover, in support of the view that organizations are plurivocal, Chreim also analyzed evolving narratives of the organization as they were presented in the business press. By doing so, she found that these narratives were at times concordant and at other times discordant with accounts of senior managers, thereby providing alternative evaluations of organizational changes and developments. Chreim concludes from this that organizational identity remains an indeterminate phenomenon, as those voices and texts which constitute it remain open to multiple readings, subsequent re-writings and continuous destabilizations.

And lastly, in an attempt to better understand people’s organizational involvement in the context of their whole working lives, Watson (2009) conducted a study which paid particular attention to the concepts of narrative, identity work and the social construction of reality. With an interest in the context and societal culture of everyday working lives, Watson analyzed a large private autobiography of a former manager. The analysis revealed that identity work consists of simultaneously using discursively available narratives, but also of creating many small new narratives that become embedded into one large life story within a framework of culture, social structure and history. At the same time, Watson calls for the abandonment of widely used but limiting concepts such as that of ‘managerial identity’, and he also makes a warning about an equally limiting tendency towards ‘narrative imperialism’ and the associated idea of ‘narrative self’, which marks the attempt of explaining multifaceted phenomena such as identity within a restrictive set of concepts that simplify complex processes.

When turning to the general critique of narrative approaches, it may be noted that at least in organization theory, narrative approaches have faced little critique to date. Some critics have argued that narrative studies place too much emphasis on the
individual as storyteller, thereby sometimes ignoring the wider social context and structure. Moreover it has been argued that narrative approaches overemphasize meaning-making at the expense of material constraints (such as wealth/property) which may affect or constrain people regardless of how they ‘narrate’ themselves (Kenny et al., 2011). Together with other discursive approaches, a narrative understanding of identity has also been criticized for ignoring or not ‘accessing’ people’s experience, subjectivity and their unconscious. As a consequence, in a new psychosocial tradition, scholars are trying to look at the interior unconscious mind through language, assuming that subjects located in social realities are not only mediated by social discourses, but also by psychic defenses (Hollway and Jefferson, 2005; Benwell & Stokoe, 2010) which brings us to a psychoanalytic understanding of identity.

In the following I will delineate how my own study also attempts to problematize the narrative understanding of identity along those lines, namely by drawing attention to some of the unconscious and emotional dynamics which are not captured in most narrative analyses.

1.2.6.2 Problematization and Aspired Contribution

In organization studies, narrative analysis has particularly been applied for studying organizational life in instances of fragmentation and instability (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). Likewise, in my own study I investigate self-narratives of former management consultants who report upon their experience of past career transitions. While most narrative studies on identity fall within two camps, either highlighting notions of ‘coherence’ and ‘continuity’ (e.g. Pals, 2006; Singer, 2004), or else, notions of ‘ambiguity’ and ‘complexity’ (e.g. Brown et al., 2005; Humphreys & Brown, 2002; Somers, 1994), in my study I do not take sides with either of these (extreme) positions, and instead I argue that markers of ambiguity (contradictions, frictions and competing interpretations) and coherence (claiming continuity, drawing causal links, mitigating disparate accounts) may co-exist in the narrative construction of identity, especially in times of career change.

For investigating and better understanding this co-existence, I draw on a psychoanalytical framework which helps to explain why it might be emotionally worthwhile to preserve both, coherence as well as ambiguity. By choosing this
framework I aspire to challenge the assumption of narrative approaches that a person has easy access to his or her operating identity story through phenomenological reflection (Polkinghorne, 1996). Psychoanalysis, which is typically associated with the work of Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), assumes that as individuals identify and get emotionally attached to other people or things, they unconsciously try to preserve their strongest identifications and feel threatened when these associations are jeopardized. Exactly this lack of conscious understanding of what triggers positive or negative reactions is relevant for a psychoanalytic understanding of identity as it particularly attends these unconscious forces including fantasies, desires and feelings which are not adequately attended in narrative approaches to identity (Kenny et al., 2011).

In my own study then, I draw particular attention to the underlying desires that drive people – through the workings of ego-defenses – to emotionally balance between coherence and ambiguity when narratively constructing a sense of self. From a psychoanalytic perspective, ego-defenses in times of career transitions are motivated by an unconscious desire of achieving a balance between a sense of self-continuity and the feeling of openness. And indeed, as Brown and Starkey (2000) note: “Where there is too much discontinuity, there is a dread of fragmentation, splitting, dislocation, or dissolution – dread of the ‘not-me’ – and where there is too much continuity, there is dread of paralysis and stagnation” (p. 111). While critics may consider a psychoanalytic perspective on narrative identity construction as partial, eclectic and merely one of many possible approaches for investigating identity narratives, I try to illustrate how a psychoanalytic approach – rather than claiming a regime of truth – may in fact offer different possible readings.

I also try to counter the widely held view that the study of emotions in organizations goes beyond the reach of textual analysis, which is said to be inadequate for attending the affective qualities of organizational life (Chia, 2000). While I acknowledge that the textual analysis of interview material may have its limits for making analytical claims regarding underlying emotions and unconscious desires, according to Hoedemakers (2010) it is through contradictions in the interview material – as exemplified in my analysis – that the emotional subtext is brought to the surface, thereby allowing for a reading of the unconscious in otherwise conscious interview material (see also Muhr & Kirkegaard, 2013). In that way a psychoanalytic interpretation may help to develop and substantialize our understanding of narrative
identity construction as not being a consciously controlled endeavor, but instead, an emotionally mediated balancing act between coherence and ambiguity.

My proposition that narrative identity construction is constantly being balanced stands in support of Steyaert’s (2007) claim that no matter how much coherence one can bring to a story, the story – unless it is history – will continue to resemble “a ball full of strings and knots” (p. 734). With this statement Steyaert promotes the idea that openness and playfulness are important elements in the embodied performance of storytelling where people stretch and play with available strings, and where contradiction and incoherence imply that “no story is ever the whole story” (p. 733). It is the telling and retelling of stories, it could be argued, which creates coherence but also keeps the story open. According to Clarke et al. (2009) this dynamic provides a ‘wiggle room’ for authoring different, antagonistic, but at the same compatible self-images.

In choosing this theoretical framing I aim to conceptualize narrative identity as both a coherent and at the same time ambiguous construct. Secondly, by combining a narrative understanding of identity with a psychoanalytic framework, I aspire to touch upon an ongoing discussion that puts into question whether textual analysis bears the potential – or actually falls short – of capturing emotional aspects of organizational life. Given that psychoanalytical theory provides both a language and concepts for analyzing underlying emotional desires in the unfolding of life stories, I argue that this combination of narrative analysis and psychoanalytical reading bears some great potential for (future) studies on narrative identity construction.

1.2.7 Outlook to Overall Contributions

While this second and theoretical introduction to the thesis has delineated the three different discursive perspectives that I apply in my study for investigating the identity construction of ex-consultants, also pointing out the various problematizations and theoretical contributions that I aspire to make in the three different working papers (an overview is presented in Table 1), in the theoretical conclusion of the thesis I will try to depict the overall contribution that my study – in the combination of all three papers – aims for. By doing so, I will try to break out of this structure around three papers and look at some of the meta-assumptions and propositions that my study brings forward. This will hopefully allow me to formulate a theoretical contribution.
that goes beyond the sum of that which each paper tries to achieve individually. And
now, in the following section, I will give more flesh to each paper by shedding more
light on the organizational setting, the research questions as well as the empirical and
methodological choices.

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*Table 1 Conceptual Overview of the Three Working Papers*
1.3 Multiply Yourself: A Thematic/ Empirical Introduction

“Method? What we’re dealing with here is not, of course, just method. It is not just a set of techniques. It is not a philosophy of method, a methodology. It is not even simply about the kinds of realities that we want to recognize or the kinds of worlds we might hope to make. It is also, and most fundamentally, about a way of being. And then, and as a part of this, it is about the kinds of people we want to be, and about how we should live.”

(John Law, 2004: 10)

After having provided a personal introduction that retells my PhD project in an informal manner and a more theoretical introduction around the concept of identity, I feel ready now to provide the kind of introduction that people might have expected in the very first place: depicting the organizational theme and ongoing debate within which to situate my own research project, formulating the overall problem that my study tries to address, listing the research questions that have guided my various research papers and analyses, describing in detail the chosen methodology and empirical setting, describing the data analyses, announcing results and providing a snapshot of how my study is going to discuss these results, while at the same time trying to avoid too much overlap with what has been said before and what will follow in the papers.

More concretely this means that in the following introduction I will briefly delineate the organizational context of management consultancies and depict the general state of identity research within this context. I will problematize the context-limited focus of these studies and their assumption that upon leaving a firm, management consultants can free themselves from strongly identity shaping discourses and their discursive interpellation. This critical focus will then lead up to the first paper in which I explore the potentially long-lasting effects of such identity shaping discourses. In the second paper I will take particular note of the complexity of shifting organizational identifications that I observed when ex-consultants described their career moves from the consultancy to a new working context and finally, in the third paper I will argue that, based on an unconscious and emotional desire to maintain both self-continuity and openness in response to career change, people discursively balance
between notions of ambiguity and coherence. Moreover, I will share some methodological details about my study, pointing out that all three papers were based on the same interview data, while each paper contains a distinct analysis that is based on a different unit of analysis and thus a different analytical focus.

1.3.1 The Context of Management Consultancies and Beyond

There has been an expanding academic interest within the field of organization studies in the work of management consultants (e.g. Berglund & Werr, 2000; Deissler, 2006; Fincham, 1999; Kitay & Wright, 2007; Kykyri, 2008; Meriläinen et al., 2004), one of the fastest growing groups of professionals since the mid-1960s (Sturdy, Clark, Fincham, & Handley, 2008). The work of management consultants has been characterized by the International Labor Organization as “an advisory service contracted for and provided to organizations by specially trained and qualified persons” (Furusten, 2009: 266). While this appears to be a rather neutral description, there is currently some considerable debate revolving around the consultancy assignment with opinions ranging from admiration to hostility. The only thing that is agreed upon is the fact that the contemporary image of management consultants and their activities trigger strong reactions in both directions – positive as well as negative (Alvesson & Johanson, 2002).

Some large consultancies for example, mostly of American origin, are highly esteemed among corporate managers as well as university graduates for having gained normative power through their global activities and dominant market positions, thereby setting professional standards in the world of business (Furusten, 2009). The capacity of consultancies not only to respond to external market changes but also to generate these has become a defining and highly esteemed characteristic (Ford & Ford, 1994). Skeptics on the contrary argue that given the “disastrous failures” (Fincham, 1999: 336) that go onto the account of management consultants, the level of power and influence gained by this group of professionals is irresponsible. They claim that management consultant services are above all quick fixes, based on abstract, populist models and coined in clever phrases that help to justify excessive fees and likewise conceal consultants’ lack of industry knowledge (Sturdy et al., 2008).
While the above mentioned debate primarily highlights issues in the consultant-client relationship, demonstrated also in the paradox of clients loving consultants as their comfort blanket and scapegoats while at the same time hating them for their insensitive and arrogant manner (Alvesson & Johanson, 2002), there is a second major debate, namely around the image of management consultants as ‘working machines’, often carrying the stigma of ‘modern slaves’ (Kuhn, 2009). This image derives from the long working hours that management consultants are confronted with, as well as the meticulous monitoring of their work through frequent performance reviews and tight deadlines which consultancies justify with reference to external performance pressures (Mühlhaus & Bouwmeester, 2012).

And yet, despite these tayloristic means of control which remind us of the controversial image of a modern machine bureaucracy (Kärreman, Svenningson & Alvesson, 2002), talented university and business school graduates, who could rather be assumed to aim for more creative and entrepreneurial firms, fiercely compete to get into management consultancies (Armbrüster, 2004). One possible explanation for this could be that the pressure to work hard in management consultancies is portrayed as being intrinsically motivated rather than exercised from the outside. Through discourses around the ‘enterprising self’ (du Gay, 1996), young consultants come to believe that they invest above all into their own career development and future employability instead of rendering a service to an employer.

Research moreover indicates that identification with a highly prestigious company allows employees to take pride in their organizational membership and to construct a positive self-image which mobilizes enthusiasm. Being aware of this decisive factor, management consultancies invest heavily into their external brand image, engaging in marketing activities that ensure the longevity of their brand and associated prestige (Kärreman & Rylander, 2008). This certainly helps to explain why it seems so compelling for young graduates to work for prestige-carrying companies such as management consultancies. Alvesson and Kärreman (2004) refer to this as a socio-ideological form of control which may create a ‘mental cage’ for supposedly autonomous individuals who accept an entire belief system and uncritically tie their identities to it.

This being said, most identity studies in the wider context of management consultancies have exclusively focused on how identities are shaped within the
boundaries of present employment relationships (Alvesson & Empson, 2007; Alvesson & Kärreman, 2004, 2007; Alvesson & Robertson, 2006; Armbrüster, 2004), thereby paying little attention to the identity construction of individuals who after several years in the firm exit the consultancy and start working in a different context. Even though in critical management studies ‘exit’ might be considered the ultimate emancipation success in the form of discursively and practically distancing oneself from socio-ideological techniques of control (Mullaney, 2001), leaving behind a company may yet be accompanied by strong and so far neglected signs of ‘post-exit loyalty’ (Alvesson, 2000), that means of having positive feelings towards the company and wishing to maintain personal contacts. Such post-exit loyalty, it could be argued, is reflected as well in the strong alumni-networks of management consultancies which by far exceed the size of their current global workforce. Sturdy and Wright (2008) in fact claim that even upon leaving the consultancy the identities of ex-consultants within their new work environments remain closely linked to the prestige and status of their former employers.

In my study, now, I will particularly investigate this puzzle of how former management consultants discursively construct an image of self as they make sense of their career move from an elite management consultancy towards a different work environment. In the following I will delineate the research questions that have guided the various analyses for better understanding the identity construction of ex-consultants.

1.3.2 Questions to be Answered

If I was to formulate one broad research question that could be applied to my overall study beyond the details of each working paper, it would be something like the following:

“How does the discursive identity construction of people change (or not) as they go through career transitions and move from one working context to another?”

To limit the scope of this very open question, in my study I focus on people who leave the working context of a management consultancy to pursue a career in a different work environment. Having provided a short overview on the peculiarities of the consulting context, it can be expected that exploring the identity construction of ex-
consultants will be particularly insightful for better understanding identity transitions from an elite and strongly identity-shaping, yet ambiguous working context, to a new work environment (similar transitions could possibly be observed for (ex-) investment bankers, corporate lawyers, or people leaving the military). Also, by taking into consideration that the new working context could have an impact as well on processes of identity construction in times of transition, I am moreover interested in the variations that can possibly be observed when interviewing ex-consultants from different new contexts (more details on that will be provided in the methodological section).

In the theoretical introduction I have already indicated how in each of my working papers I take a different theoretical perspective on processes of identity construction, thereby focusing on aspects of professional identity, organizational identification and identity transitions in times of career change. In this empirical introduction now, I will become more specific concerning the problem and question that each individual paper sets out to address, namely the potentially long-lasting effects of discourses of elitism on the professional identity construction of ex-consultants, the complexity of different organizational identifications towards the consulting past that may or may not shift in the course of a career change, and finally, the emotional aspects of identity transitions that become explicit in the narrative balancing between coherence and ambiguity. So for the first paper with the title ‘Preserving Discourses of Elitism: The Identity Construction of Former Management Consultants’ I have formulated the following research question:

1) In how far do discourses of elitism grounded in the consulting past continue to affect the identity construction of former management consultants even in the post-exit arena?

In the second paper, with the title ‘A Critical Matter: Exploring (Shifting) Organizational Identifications through Discursive Positioning Practices’ I ask:

2) What forms of (shifting) organizational identifications do former management consultants display as they move from the ambiguity intensive consulting context into a new work environment?
And thirdly, in paper number three ‘Striking a Balance: Ambiguity and Coherence in the Narrative Construction of Identity’ I investigate:

3) How do people balance coherence and ambiguity in their self-narratives of transition and with what underlying emotional desires?

In the following I will give a little snapshot of how these above mentioned research questions will be engaged with in the three working papers and with what results.

1.3.3 Overview of the Three Working Papers

In this section I will provide a short overview of the three different paper-based analyses which are the pillars in the cumulative composition of my PhD project. Even though there will be some (unavoidable) overlap with what has been said before in the theoretical introduction, I hope that this overview is still helpful for the reader to better situate the three papers in the overall study.

Paper I:

*Preserving Discourses of Elitism: The Identity Construction of Former Management Consultants*

In this first paper, which has been co-authored by my PhD supervisor Chris Steyaert, we assume a critical perspective for investigating how discourses of elitism continue (or not) to shape the identity construction of former management consultants even in the post-exit arena. This is based on the idea that even if consultants at some point drop out of the consultancy they may still feel inclined to preserve an elite consultant self-image by perpetuating discourses of elitism into their new work environment.

By examining the variations of discourse translations – from the consulting past into a new working context – and their effects on the identity construction of ex-consultants, in the analysis we found that when continuing to draw on previous discourses of elitism, interviewees reproduced the consultant self-image even in the new work setting. When revising discourses of elitism, interviewees tweaked the consultant self-image and slowly re-oriented their identity construction towards the new working context. And when replacing discourses of elitism altogether, former management consultants invented a new self-image that – despite making comparative
references – was no longer grounded in the past working context. Interestingly, interviewees were not just observed to engage in the one or the other; on the contrary we often found that within one single life story, interviewees equally continued, revised and replaced discourses of elitism, thereby constructing a range of different and competing self-images that co-existed in the new working context.

By following closely, in this first paper, how discourses of elitism were perpetuated from the consulting context to a different work environment, we try to shed more light on processes of identity construction in the post-exit arena. In this way – as mentioned before – we try to emphasize the temporal (Brown & Humphreys, 2002) and context-spanning dimensions of discursive identity construction, which to date remain poorly theorized. Moreover, by making explicit the commonalities and variations in the post-exit identity construction of former management consultants, the first paper also depicts possibilities and limits of making emancipatory post-exit moves in terms of continuing, revising or replacing discourses of elitism. This is to counter that the widely dispersed group of ex-consultants, which goes basically unnoticed both in organizational research and practice, has to negotiate between competing identity constructions in a seemingly individual rather than collective way.

And finally we argue that identity construction in the post-exit arena continues to be complex, multiple and continuously up for negotiation. This ongoing process of identity negotiation, we say, deserves full attention as it may conflict with people’s desire of achieving and maintaining an integrated sense of self during and after a change in career.

Paper II:

A Critical Matter: Exploring (Shifting) Organizational Identifications through Discursive Positioning Practices

This second paper highlights the complexity of (shifting) organizational identifications that can be observed when people change careers. Following studies that have highlighted the controversial nature of management consultancies (e.g. Kumra & Valsecchi, 2012, O’Mahoney, 2007), in this paper I argue that organizational identification in the context of management consultancies is more complex and ambiguous than currently depicted. Elsbach’s (1999) model of expanded
identification nicely addresses this complexity by noting how people, rather than always displaying positive identification with a given organizational context, may also express different forms of identification such as dis-identification, schizo-identification and neutral identification. To further increase the complexity of this model I argue that in response to career change, people’s sense of organizational attachment may shift or become even more complicated as they start juggling between competing attachments towards their past and their present work environments.

For analyzing the possible range and actual processes of how different organizational identifications may shift in response to career change, I examine the discursive positioning practices (Davies & Harré, 1990) that former management consultants engage in for either expressing their close attachment, their (simultaneous) distancing attempts, and/or their neutral stance in relation to a given work context. Moreover, based on the assumption that different working contexts provide different discursive resources (Kuhn, 2009; Taylor, 2007) that can be drawn upon in one’s positioning practices, I pay close attention to the discursive resources available in the various working contexts that either enable or limit certain forms of organizational identification.

The analysis indicates that former management consultants engaged in six different positioning practices that enabled them to a) (continuously) identify with the consulting context by ‘reviving the past’, b) to dis-identify with their previous consulting context by ‘closing the past’, c) to identify with the new working context by ‘embracing the present’, d) to distance themselves from the new context by ‘degrading the present’, e) to position themselves as overtly ambivalent (schizo-identification) in light of their career change by ‘remaining ambiguous’, and finally f) to show more neutral identification with the new working context by ‘shifting the focus’ to some non-work related aspects of their identity. These positioning practices respectively invited subject positions of ‘nostalgic ex-consultant’, ‘legitimate career changer’, ‘contented career changer’, ‘frustrated ex-consultant’, ‘undecided career juggler’ and ‘well rounded individual’.

In this second paper then I try to expand upon Elsbach’s (1999) idea that organizational identification is more complex and multifaceted than often assumed in the organizational literature. To further develop this understanding I illustrate how positioning theory (as a critical-discursive rather than cognitive or functionalist
(approach) can be particularly useful for shedding more light on the actual processes of identification in its various forms. Moreover, I argue that neutral identification, rather than just being a lack of organizational identification and commitment, may potentially be an effective way forward for achieving a healthy balance between one’s work and one’s private sphere of life. Therefore, I frame positioning practices that achieve such a more neutral identification as being a promising emancipatory step to counter positive, negative or ambiguous forms of over-identification.

**Paper III:**

*Striking a Balance – Ambiguity and Coherence in the Narrative Construction of Identity*

In the third paper I enter into a theoretical discussion on how identities are narratively constructed during times of career transitions, especially taking note of arguments concerning coherence or ambiguity. While many narrative scholars highlight notions of ‘coherence’ and ‘continuity’ in their study of identity (e.g. McAdams, 1987; Pals, 2006; Singer, 2004), an increasing number of organizational scholars is turning towards concepts of ‘ambiguity’ and ‘complexity’ in their narrative investigation of identity (e.g. Brown et al., 2005; Humphreys & Brown, 2002). In this paper I set out to reconcile these seemingly one-sided and incompatible framings by conceptualizing identity as both a coherent as well as ambiguous construct.

For this I particularly draw on the idea that storytelling is an enacted performance where the narrative construction of identity is affected by a continuous yet subtle ‘balancing act’ between complexity and coherence which is emerging and thus never really completed (Ezzy, 1998; Steyaert, 2007). By assuming a psychoanalytic perspective, I combine the narrative investigation of ‘how’ this co-existence of ambiguity and coherence is achieved linguistically with a framework for interpreting ‘why’ it might be emotionally worthwhile to do so.

The empirical analysis illustrates three narrative strategies through which interviewees manage to maintain a sense of coherence without mitigating the ambiguity and multiplicity produced in their narrative accounts, namely through ignoring the ambiguity (but not entirely), making the ambiguity explicit (to make it bearable) or escaping the ambiguity (by taking refuge into a wishful future). By linking these narrative strategies to the ego-defenses of *denial, rationalization* and
fantasy, I draw attention to some of the underlying emotional desires for balancing both coherence and ambiguity.

So in this third paper I aim to bridge the current divide between studies that either frame identity as constructed through a coherent and integrated life story and studies that frame identity as completely decentered and fluid. By providing a less simplistic and more nuanced view of identity as both a coherent and yet ambiguous construct I hope to enrich the narrative approach for studying identity. Secondly, in combining a narrative understanding of identity with a psychoanalytic framework I try to illustrate how even through textual analysis, emotional aspects of organizational life can be captured. Thus I suggest that by adopting a psychoanalytical perspective, narrative scholars may be able to better attend the emotional and more than conscious dynamics in the construction of identity.

Table 2 provides a thematic overview of the three working papers. Once more, while this thematic introduction provides an outline for each of the three papers in isolation, in the thematic conclusion of this paper I will try to work out the synthesis again, that is, the broader message/contribution that can be derived by looking at the overall study. In the following section now, I will go into the details of my PhD project along the empirical aspects of the sample, the data collection and the various data analyses.
Table 2 Thematic Overview of the Three Working Papers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unit of analysis</th>
<th>Discourses of elitism and their translation into a new working context</th>
<th>Positioning practices, (discursive practices, subject positions</th>
<th>Narrative strategies/ ego defenses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Results</td>
<td>3 kinds of discourse translations and their effects on identity constructions: a) continuing discourses of elitism → reproduce the consultant self-image; b) revising discourses of elitism → tweak the consultant self-image; c) replacing discourses of elitism → invent a new self-image; all discourse translations were observed to co-exist in single interviews</td>
<td>Six positioning practices and resulting subject positions: a) reviving the past → nostalgic ex-consultant; b) closing the past → legitimate career changer; c) embracing the present → contented career changer; d) degrading the present → frustrated ex-consultant; e) remaining ambiguous → undecided career juggler; and f) shifting the focus → well rounded individual</td>
<td>3 narrative strategies and associated ego defenses: a) ignoring the ambiguity (but not entirely) → denial; b) making the ambiguity explicit (to make it bearable) → rationalization; and c) escaping the ambiguity (by taking refuge into a wishful future) → fantasy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspired contribusions</td>
<td>a) emphasize context-spanning dimension of identity construction; b) depict possibilities/limits of emancipatory post-exit moves; c) highlight identity construction as continuously complex, multiple and negotiable</td>
<td>a) introduce positioning theory to better illuminate complex processes of organizational identification; b) frame neutral identification as a promising emancipatory step to counter identification imperatives</td>
<td>a) bridge divide between studies that either frame identity as coherent or ambiguous; b) combine narrative and psychoanalytic understandings to capture emotional aspects of narrative identity construction</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1.3.4 Methodology

1.3.4.1 Sample and Data Collection

All three papers are more or less based on the same empirical material, namely on 30 auto-biographical (Helfferich, 2005) or life story interviews (Atkinson, 1998; McAdams, 2001) conducted with ex-consultants who now work in new organizational contexts. As a result, the description of the sample and data collection probably marks the most repetitive element of the entire thesis, as each individual paper naturally
includes a short section on these methodological aspects. This being said, the externally imposed word limit in each working paper (ranging from 8000 to 10000 words) has always forced me to keep these descriptions rather short. Therefore I would like to take the opportunity here to go into some further depth when describing my research participants and the specifics of conducting the interviews. While I have already shared some information – in the personal introduction to the thesis – on how I selected my interviewees and how I experienced them in the interview situation, in this section then I want to provide some more demographic and work related details about my interviewees, as well as some more particularities about how and where the interviews were conducted. This more comprehensive documentation could also become an important starting point for possible follow-up interviews if this study was to be expanded into a longitudinal study.

A very first pilot interview, which was later on integrated into the overall sample, was conducted in February 2010. At this point I have to mention that I owe the ‘most winning idea’ in the entire interviewing process to my colleague Florian Schulz who suggested that, based on McAdams’ (2001) and Atkinsons’ (1998) method of conducting life story interviews, I should simply ask people to freely narrate their life stories by inviting them to imagine that in a couple of years they would have the idea to write up their life stories in a book. This, he promised, would ‘get them to speak’ with little intervention needed from my side. While this became my rough plan for the interviewing process, I had non-the-less developed an interview guide with initially 31 questions (see Appendix I) that would allow me to ask follow-up questions if needed. After the first interview I then refined the interview schedule to only include 11 questions (see Appendix II), and while this short interview guide was probably helpful for the first couple of interviews still, it did not take long until I went into the interviews with just one starting question and no further script (even though some of the questions delineated in the refined interview guide were often still drawn upon naturally in the flow of the interview).

At the beginning of the interviews, I gave participants some brief information on my current research interests, namely the construction of identity across changing organizational contexts, especially when coming from the working context of management consultancies. I quickly introduced myself to all interviewees as well, even when I was interviewing people I had known before. I wanted to (re-)introduce
myself in the role of researcher, and also make explicit my specific insider view on the theme given my own background as former management consultant. This latter detail, I hoped, would allow interviewees to speak more openly about their consulting past. When asking people to freely narrate their life stories from the time they entered university to the current day of the interview, I encouraged them to delineate the important chapters in this period and to think of interesting and remarkable aspects or episodes that they would feel worth sharing when writing such a book. For most parts, indeed, I did not interrupt my interviewees as they were unfolding their life stories. In some instances, however, when certain decisions were not explained or elaborated upon, follow-up questions such as “Why did you choose to go into/ exit consulting?” were asked. Or if too many aspects within the story were implied as known by me as the researcher, I suggested “Now imagine someone does not know what the consulting business is like at all. How would you describe it in the book so that everybody could get a good idea of what was going on?” To explore interviewees’ new image of self, the circular question was asked: “If I now spoke to your new colleagues, superiors or subordinates in your current job, what would they tell me about you?” and in the end, interviewees were given the chance to ask questions or to raise any other issue they considered relevant to discuss.

By signing a written consent form prior to the interview all participants agreed that the interview would be audio-taped, transcribed and exclusively used for research purposes in an anonymous manner. While all of the interviewed ex-consultants came from a similar previous work environment, the majority (N=26) from one of the 5 big global strategy consultancies all founded or headquartered in the US, or else from large accountancy or IT consultancies, there was yet a good amount of diversity among the interviewees, especially with regard to their new working contexts. Interviewees were chosen from the following six different organizational contexts (each time 5 people from that specific context): 1) academia/ research, 2) NGO, 3) own start-ups 4) industry (including food/beverage, health care and the metal industry), 5) financial services and 6) in-house consulting, that is, a group of people all working in the same department of a large Swiss bank. In paper II, where I take note of the shifting organizational identifications that interviewees exhibited towards their past and present working contexts, I summarized all business contexts (industry, financial services and in-house consulting) into one category as similar observations.
were made along those contexts. In this second paper I therefore speak of 4 instead of 6 different working contexts.

Besides the different new working contexts, other relevant parameters of variation were the time that interviewees had spent in a consultancy, which ranged from less than 1 year to 10 years with an average of 3 years, and the time that people had been out of that consultancy at the time of the interview, which ranged from less than 1 year to 9 years, with an average of 2 years. Since all 30 interviewees had pursued a university degree, spent several years in a management consultancy, and then at least entered one new organizational context, each interviewee reported upon a minimum of two major (career) changes in his or her life; first the transition from university to a working context and then from the consultancy to a new working environment. Prior to joining the consultancy, 8 of the 30 interviewees had acquired a doctoral degree and had thus worked in an academic environment before, while 6 more interviewees had jobs in industry or financial services before entering the consultancy. At the time of the interview, most interviewees were still in their first job after leaving the consultancy, while 3 people had changed jobs a second time after their consultancy exits, but mainly within a similar work environment.

Concerning the demographics, 8 of the interviewees were female (27%), which somewhat reflected the current ratio of men and women in most German or Swiss based management consultancies at the time of the interviews. The age of interviewees ranged from 26 to 44, with an average age of 32. Interviewees held 7 different nationalities including Swiss, German, British, Italian, Finnish, Russian, and Austrian, and even more diverse ethnic backgrounds which will not be listed here. Most interviews were conducted in German, while 3 were also conducted in English and 3 in Swiss German, depending on the interviewees’ preferences. 27 interviews were conducted face-to-face, while 3 interviews were conducted via Skype with ex-consultants who were not living and working in Switzerland at the time of the interview, 2 of them even living outside of Europe. The face-to-face interviews were conducted either in people’s offices, at my university office, or in more informal settings such as cafés, restaurants and bars, or else, when I was befriended with the interviewee, also in my or the interviewee’s home. A full overview of the interviews is provided in Table 3.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Pseudo Name</th>
<th>Interview date</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Yrs in cons.</th>
<th>Yrs out of cons.</th>
<th>New working context</th>
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</tr>
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<tr>
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</tr>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 3* Overview of Interviews and Interview Partners

Often I was asked how the differences along demographic variables or duration of affiliation played out in my observations on how ex-consultants constructed their self-image in the post-exit arena. Even though these variations have not become an integral part of my analyses – as I wanted to refrain from making any generalizing claims – at
least I want to mention some of them in this context. I observed for example that interviewees who had entered consultancies at an early age and as their first full-time job after university often showed a stronger and more long-lasting identification with the past than interviewees who entered the consultancy at a later stage with more previous work experience. At the same time, and against my expectations, I observed surprisingly few differences along the parameters of duration; interviewees who had worked in a consultancy for several years as well as those who only stayed in the consultancy for less than 2 years showed an equal amount of doubt regarding whether or not they had left the consultancy too early (or too late). Likewise, comparable signs of continued identification could be found among ex-consultants who had left the company some 9 years or less than 1 year ago.

1.3.4.2 Data Analysis

Different to the previous section on sample and data collection, which is basically identical for all three working papers, there are considerable differences of course in terms of the data analysis conducted in each of the three papers. Even though all papers are based on the same interview material, the analyses varied along the different analytical questions that I tried to answer in each paper. Before listing these different analytical questions, which also reveal the different units of analysis, there are yet some common grounds and considerations in the various analytic endeavors that can be summarized here, especially since all analyses reflect a different form of discourse analysis. More detailed descriptions of those analyses are provided of course in the individual papers. The common starting point for all analyses was typically the transcription of the 30 audio-recordings, with interviews ranging from 45 to 135 minutes and totaling to more than 36 hours of interview material. Transcribing all interviews on my own, I completed the last transcription on 26 January 2011, which gave me a total of 389 pages or 192,238 words of interview data as a starting point for analysis.

Aspiring to analyze the interview material along a discourse analytical approach, I started to read up on the relevant literature that I assumed would guide me through the process. I soon realized, however, that the biggest challenge in discourse analytical research (which cannot simply be learned from books) lies in the identification of discourses and in delineating what actually counts as discourse.
While discourse analysis in general may resemble a traditional qualitative interview approach, my attention was drawn to the danger of doing little more in the analysis than labeling every-day common-sense categories ‘identified’ in the data as ‘discourses’ (Burr, 2003). After reviewing several empirical papers in the field of organization studies that have applied discursive or interpretative approaches (Alvesson & Empson, 2007; Alvesson & Kärreman, 2004, 2007; Alvesson & Robertson, 2006; Armbrüster, 2004; Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004, 2009; Laine & Vaara, 2007; Meriläinen et al., 2004; Ostendorp & Steyaert, 2009; Sturdy & Wright, 2008; Symon, 2005) and after fervently studying the ‘how to’ literature on data analysis (Burr, 2003; Dick, 2004; Fairclough, 2001; Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Titscher et al., 2000; Wetherell, Taylor, & Yates, 2001), my later analyses were very much inspired as well by a paper from Antaki, Billig, Edwards and Potter (2002) which outlines six analytical shortcomings to be avoided when conducting discourse analysis: (1) under-analysis through summary; (2) under-analysis through taking sides; (3) under-analysis through over-quotation or through isolated quotation; (4) the circular identification of discourses and mental constructs; (5) false survey; and (6) analysis that consists in simply spotting features.

Thus, thanks to this paper I was alert from the very beginning to not merely condense the collected interview material into a prose summary of emerging themes – mostly at the level of content – which would have ignored the discursive effects of that which speakers have uttered. Also, I tried to not take sides by aligning myself with interviewees in the analysis, which was particularly difficult in my case of sharing similar experiences with my interviewees. As a result, some reviewers of my earlier work had indeed detected a slightly biased and negative tone that I initially assumed towards management consultancies (as oppressing the poor consultants). Only over the course of time I could then develop a more neutral tone by not expressing my own moral stance, and by instead showing possible power asymmetries in the detailed examination of what interviewees were saying.

Moreover, I tried not to over-quote or isolate quotations without contextualizing or further analyzing them in the various working papers. On the contrary I tried to find a good balance between using quotes and analyzing them along the analytical questions that each paper tried to address. A little exception to this principle of not isolating quotations can be found in my choice of inserting various
groups of interview vignettes in the overall unfolding of my thesis. This being said, I do not consider these interview vignettes as being part of my discourse analyses, but as being standalone units that give a better ‘taste’ for the richness of the interview material that I have collected. Antaki et al. (2002) also shared a warning to refrain from circular discoveries of discourses, that means from explaining quotes with the very content of the quotes and to avoid (false survey) generalizations. Concerning the latter, I was particular aware all this time, that with my qualitative analysis of 30 interviews I could not make any generalizing claims as it is done in some large survey-based studies. And yet, with the particular research design of my study (interviewing ex-consultants in 6 different working contexts, with different durations in the consultancy and different durations being out of the consultancy), I often had to resist the many invitations that I received for making some more generalizing claims based on the differences that I observed in my data.

The last thing that Antaki et al. (2002) suggested was to avoid a simple spotting of certain features or patterns discovered in the text without further analyzing them, as this would not count as original research. With this clear idea of what not to do, and a more vague idea of what to do instead, the following data analysis was attempted. The first steps taken in what turned out to be an iterative analysis process of moving back and forth between data, literature and analysis, was a repeated reading of the interview transcripts. Rather than hastily jumping into the codification process of empirical material, following the example of Alvesson and Kärreman (2004), the interviews were looked at for a long time ‘in their totality’ in order to become sensitive for the ‘less obvious’, for variation and contradictions. Sharing and discussing a wide range of diverse interview passages with research colleagues helped me to identify first emerging themes, patterns and peculiarities in the data.

What stroke me from the very beginning was that ex-consultants positioned themselves in very different, sometimes extreme ways –both positive and negative – towards their past and/or their new working context. I immediately observed as well, that these different and sometimes extreme positions co-existed within single interviews, thereby indicating certain levels of ambiguity. Therefore, as a second step in the analysis I color-coded (simple word application) all interview passages, in which ex-consultants either positioned themselves positively/ negatively towards the consulting past or positively/ negatively towards the new working context. For each
positioning practice I used a different color and a fifth color was used for interview passages in which former consultants explicitly addressed and reflected upon the issue of career change. I then uploaded the colored transcripts for further analysis into Atlas.ti, a specific software that facilitates the qualitative analysis of large data sets.

Figure 1 Atlas.ti Screenshot of Open Coding

In a third step, I coded the colored (German) text passages in an open and then axial coding process (in English) (Turner, 1981). First codes were generated in a pilot analysis of 8 chosen interviews. These codes were later on applied to and amended in the analysis of the remaining interviews, resulting in a total of 73 open codes. Figure 1 provides a screenshot of what this open coding process looked like in Atlas.ti. With the use of note cards, these 73 codes were then organized/ summarized into 25 axial codes (see Appendix III), showing the different dimensions along which people positioned themselves positively or negatively towards the past or the new working context. The resulting 25 axial codes are listed as follows:

a) **Negative positioning towards the consulting past:**
- Unpleasant working conditions
- Limited impact of one’s work
- Negative work-life balance
- High performance pressure
- Negative self-image
- Bad memories of the past reinforcing the exit decision

b) **Positive positioning towards the consulting past:**
- Steep learning
- Meritocratic career path
- High work ethic

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Keeping strong ties with ex-colleagues
Praising convenient lifestyle
Reproducing consultant image
Due to superiority of the consulting context challenging the exit

c) Positive positioning towards the new working context:
Meaningful work
Developing new skills
Acknowledgement for one’s work
Positive identification with new colleagues/ context
Balanced lifestyle
Improvement towards the consulting past
Considering to stay in the new context

d) Negative positioning towards the new working context:
Slow, less professional work environment
Limited career opportunities
Limited bonding/ identification with new context
Less exciting life-style
Inferiority of the new context, planning the next exit

After establishing these 25 codes, I then organized a large number of interview extracts along these codes, which generated a 57-page-long data report. Even though I had still not conducted any kind of discourse analysis at this stage, the resulting data report yet became a main resource for all subsequent analyses as it helped me to quickly find and retrieve interview passages, to review recurring themes and patterns, and to play around more easily with the material.

To briefly touch upon the consecutive data analyses conducted in the three papers, in Table 4 I list the different analytical questions that have guided the subsequent steps in the individual analyses. As the analytical questions already indicate, each data analysis is based on a different unit of analysis and is thus driven by a different analytical focus. In paper I, I am interested in a broader discourse around the theme of elitism. More concretely, I try to identify those discourses that depicted the consulting past as an elite working context and I pay particular attention to how these discourses of elitism are preserved or not in the new working context. In the second paper I look at different positioning practices, that means, at the different ways in which ex-consultants discursively position themselves towards the consulting past. Moreover I investigate how these positioning practices shift (or not) as interviewees report upon their career move and their positionings towards the new
working context. And thirdly, rather than looking at a recurring discourse across all 30 interviews, or at the various positioning practices that all interviewees draw upon to a different extent, I conduct a narrative analysis that focuses on identity dynamics which can be observed within the unit of single interviews. Even though I am interested again in certain patterns that can be observed across different interviews, namely the narrative and emotional balancing between coherence and ambiguity, the narrative analysis is much more driven by an interest in how individual life stories unfolded.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paper I</th>
<th>Paper II</th>
<th>Paper III</th>
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| 1. What discourses do former management consultants draw upon in their life stories when constructing an (elite) self-image in the context of the management consultancy?  
2. How are these discourses preserved and how do they continue (or not) to affect the identity construction of former management consultants in the post-exit arena?  
3. How do discourses of elitism co-exist with other and possibly competing discourses in the post-exit arena and with what consequences for the process of identity transition in response to career change? | 1. What discursive positioning practices do former management consultants engage in for expressing any form of organizational identification (including dis-identification, schizo-identification and neutral identification) towards either their past consulting context or their present working context?  
2. What discursive resources do interviewees draw upon in their various positioning practices and how do these resources enable or limit shifts in organizational identifications (away from the consulting past towards the new working context)?  
3. What subject positions are created and offered through the various positioning practices? | 1. Through what narrative strategies do former management consultants linguistically achieve and maintain a balance between coherence and ambiguity in the unfolding of their life stories?  
2. With a particular focus on why it might be emotionally worthwhile during times of career change to maintain both, a sense of coherence and ambiguity in the unfolding of life stories, how can the identified narrative strategies be linked to the notion of ego-defenses? |

*Table 4* Overview of Analytic Research Questions
And now, after all this ‘preparation’ and framing of the three working papers, it is time to finally let the papers speak for themselves and to develop their arguments. Before moving on to the first paper, however, I will insert another group of interview vignettes which captures the spirit of the first working paper on the perpetuation of discourses of elitism from the consulting past into a new work environment.
Interview Vignettes II: Glorifying the Consulting Past

Markus (Interview 1): “Welcome to the business world!”

You are 22, and you’re a business man. I don’t know, maybe that’s just something for guys, this image that you arrived in the business world. When you stand at the airport gate with all those bankers, in your black leather shoes, pulling out your blackberry. Just this human feeling that you say: “Welcome to the business world, here I am!”

A management consultancy is characterized by its creative and intelligent employees, because the hiring criteria are very selective, not everyone gets in. To work for a consultancy, you need to have an excellent education. You need to illustrate lateral thinking skills, that’s what they test during the recruiting. A consultancy is distinguished by very good people who deliver very good work. […]

I’m still in touch with some of my consultant colleagues with whom I got along very well. I still take an interest, because I did the job myself for three years and I know how they work over there. And there are many things I can share with my past colleagues which I cannot share with my new colleagues, certain opinions, certain ideas. And sometimes you need to talk to someone who comes from that same environment, same context, and who understands how you tick.

But I also have a more formal relationship with my past employer, because now they are doing projects for us.

Interviewer: So how is it, being in the role of the client now? Does it work well?

It’s a good thing of course. My company has a budget for this and I know, because I worked there myself, that you can really expect something from them, that you can expect the highest degree of professionalism.

I wouldn’t wanna miss this consulting experience any more. I got insight into a world that you normally don’t see in other work environments. I have learned what it means to work professionally, I have seen a lot in this time. I wouldn’t want to miss that any more.
Ferdinand (Interview 21): “I became much more self-confident”

When I look back on how it was, coming out of academia and then joining the consultancy, I found it really sexy that people didn’t run around in worn-out jeans and t-shirts, but that everyone was looking neat, everyone in suits, sitting in stylish offices. That impressed me. This feeling of an institutionalized professionalism, which is not only defined by the contents, but also by the packaging. How do you make slides, how do you conduct yourself, what do you wear.

I have the feeling that I became much more self-confident and goal-oriented during that time. During one of my first days as consultant my project manager told me, rule number one, never go unprepared into a meeting. Even if you are only invited to the meeting and you are not moderating it, always have a few slides with you, because there can be this situation that you are with the client and the client didn’t prepare anything himself. And there you can nicely ask the responsible people in the meeting, if you can present your ideas if they don’t have anything. And that’s exactly the situation – boom – you have hijacked the meeting.

And these simple thoughts allow you to manipulate processes and people. And even though this might sound negative, it is exactly this question: Do you want to be someone who is pushed by others, or do you want to be the one who is pushing. And I think this is something, which you can also use in other contexts. […]

Interviewer: How would your current colleagues describe you if I asked them about you?

I could imagine that my team would say that I am an ambitious, maybe even a bit overambitious, guy who likes to do his job and who has a lot of energy, or as they say in consulting, who has drive. And who is motivated enough to put more energy into his job than what is needed. Who is also engaged personally, with his colleagues in the team, not only work-wise, but also in private. Who tries to do stuff with others in the evening or who brings a bottle of wine to the office, things like that. […]

Interviewer: Would it be an option for you to return to the consultancy at some point?

Well, never say never. As I described it earlier, I didn’t leave with banging doors and I wasn’t invited, as they say [for being fired], to leave the firm. Instead it was my decision to leave and I was told that the firm is supporting my decision. So from what I understood, I didn’t upset anyone and sure, I could imagine to go back any time, I could go back tomorrow, that would not be an issue.
Barbara (Interview 27): “I never worked for such a fantastic company”

I felt really excited in my [consulting] job. I got very busy in all my projects, travelling around, meeting a lot of clients, getting to know everyone, I just had the feeling I found my feet very quickly.

In a way I was working every day, Saturday, Sunday, whatever day it was. Sundays I would work 14 hours, 16 hours. In a way you feel like you're working all the time, because you always think about it. And you take calls on weekends and you're always committed to it, even if you take Friday afternoon off, because you worked like crazy. But I never kept hour, you know, I never kept a note of what I was owed or anything because I didn't feel it was like that. I felt like I was happy to do it.

And then it was a really hard decision to leave [moving to a different country to re-unite with her fiancé]. I had never worked for such a fantastic company before.

The French partners tried really hard for me, [to get an equivalent position in Switzerland] but yeah. I'm still in touch, I still speak to the French partners and the doors, apparently my job is still open and I can go back any time.

Interviewer: Okay. And is that something you have been thinking about a lot?

Every day. Every day, yeah. Every single day.

You know, I need to be proud about what I do. And at the moment I don't feel proud of what I do. I feel quite embarrassed. And whenever people ask me what I do, I begin by telling them what I used to do. Because it just sounds so much better and it makes me feel a bit better about myself, because else you lose your pride. That's quite tragic. I mean also the constellation of moving into another country and being so limited by the [language] restrictions that they have.

I set my standard by, if I'm 85 and I'm looking back on my life, and I look at what I did with it, would I be proud of what I've done? And at the moment, no, I wouldn't. I would be proud of what I have achieved, but would I be proud of what I'm doing at the moment? No. It's all pointless, it's got no aim, it's got no purpose, it doesn't contribute anything.

Also, I haven't mixed as much, I think I'm aware that this is a contract, not a permanent position. Normally I would know everybody in the firm by now and be organizing all the drinks and getting involved. And here I'm just held back a bit and I'm not as interested in doing that. It's a job, it fills my CV and pays me some money.

Interviewer: If you were someone else, what would you advice yourself?

Oh my God. Just go in there, hand in your notice and get yourself something you wanna do.
2 Preserving Discourses of Elitism: The Identity Construction of Former Management Consultants

In this paper we argue that discourses of elitism, which continue to affect the professional identity construction of former management consultants in the post-exit arena, are more powerful and far-reaching than currently acknowledged. Based on 30 life story interviews with ex-consultants our study illustrates how previous consultants – to varying degrees – preserve discourses of elitism that are grounded in the consulting past even when constructing their professional identity in a new working context. By zooming in on how exactly discourses of elitism are continued, revised or replaced after exiting a firm, we present a framework for better conceptualizing discursive identity construction in response to career change, especially when moving from an elite working context to a different work environment. Moreover, as discourses of elitism continue to co-exist with other and competing discourses in the new working context – potentially leading to conflicting self-images – we propose that identity constructions in the post-exit arena are embedded in a complex and possibly ongoing process where career related identity transitions may never come to a full completion.

2.1 Introduction

Many graduates from leading universities and business schools fiercely compete for a position in the so-called gold-collar industry, where prestigious companies such as management consultancies advertise to be an ideal springboard for a promising future career. Even though people – on average – spend only a couple of years in the consulting business, in this paper we argue that discourses of elitism that depict management consultants as being part of a clever and hardworking elite (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006; Armbrüster, 2004) are more powerful and far-reaching in the construction of professional identities than currently acknowledged. With this proposition we aspire to theoretically refine the current understanding of professional identity as being a context-limited construct that can easily be revised or replaced when moving to a new working context.

And indeed, while most identity studies in the context of management consultancies have focused on how people’s identities are successfully shaped within
the boundaries of present employment relationships, little attention has so far been
given to the effects of identity shaping discourses on individuals who exit consulting
firms. Even though exit might be interpreted as an act of discursively and practically
distancing oneself from an organization and its associated image (Mullaney, 2001),
organizational members may yet show strong signs of continued identification even
after leaving the firm (Alvesson, 2000; Beyer & Hannah, 2002; Ibarra, 2005; Wise &
Millward, 2005). As consultancies in particular claim strong alumni-networks that by
far exceed the size of their current global workforce it may be assumed that
identification with the consultancy and its elite network is not contractually
terminated, but continued well beyond the employment relationship (Sturdy & Wright,
2008).

Even if consultants at some point drop out of the consultancy they may still feel
inclined to preserve an elite self-image that is associated with being a consultant.
Thus, in challenging the idea that consultants can easily exit their former professional
context and its discursive interpellation, in this paper we will address the following
research question: In how far do discourses of elitism grounded in the consulting past
continue to affect the identity construction of former management consultants even in
the post-exit arena?

To address this question theoretically we have developed a conceptual
framework along Ibarra and Barbulescu’s (2010) narrative understanding that people,
during times of career change, experiment with and alter their previous professional
self-image by revising and replacing identity shaping discourses of the past. Expanding upon the authors’ model we moreover considered that discourses of elitism
can also be continued into a new working context thereby rendering identity
transitions as more varied, ambiguous and open-ended than currently assumed.

For investigating the research question empirically we conducted 30 life story
interviews with former management consultants who after several years in the
consulting industry had left their consulting careers behind and had started to work in
a different organizational context. The analysis first of all illustrates how former
management consultants drew on discourses of elitism when constructing a self-image
of consultant. Secondly, the analysis zooms in on how these discourses of elitism were
preserved in the post-exit context by being continued, revised or replaced with

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alternative discourses, while in the latter case comparative references were still made to the consulting past.

These variations in how discourses of elitism were preserved in the post-exit arena allowed for some variations as well in terms of how former management consultants constructed a self-image in the new working context. When continuing to draw on discourses of elitism that were grounded in the consulting past, interviewees reproduced the consultant self-image even in the new work setting. When revising discourses of elitism, interviewees tweaked the consultant self-image and slowly re-oriented their identity construction towards the new working context. And when replacing discourses of elitism altogether, former management consultants invented a new self-image that – despite making comparative references – was no longer grounded in the past working context.

Mostly, however, interviewees were not observed to engage in the one or the other; on the contrary we often found that within one single life story, interviewees equally continued, revised and replaced discourses of elitism, thereby constructing a range of different and competing self-images that co-existed in the post-exit arena. Based on these observations we strengthened our claim that, different to current understandings, identity transitions in relation to career change may be an ambiguous and ongoing endeavor that never comes to a full completion.

Prior to going into the analysis, however, we will first review the literature on elite identity constructions in the context of management consultancies. Secondly, we will delineate the conceptual framework around identity transitions in times of career change, which has determined the methodological set-up of the study and eventually guided the analysis.

2.2 Processes of Organizational and Professional Identification

For illustrating how the identities of management consultants can become so strongly tied to discourses of organizational and professional elitism, in this section we will first draw attention to processes of organizational and professional identification more generally as delineated in the literature. Organizational identification is often referred to as the psychological attachment to a specific organization, where members deem the defining characteristics and values of an organization to be congruent with those attributes incorporated in their own self-concepts (Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail,
Borrowing from social identity theory which was first introduced by Tajfel and Turner (1986), Ashforth and Mael (1989) asserted that a member’s tendency to identify with an organization increases with the positive evaluation and distinctiveness of an organization in comparison to other organizations (see also Albert et al., 2000; Hogg & Terry, 2000). Hence, identification is often linked to an organization’s external image, reputation and prestige.

As the perceived attractiveness of an organization increases, also measured by the opinion of esteemed others (Bhattacharya & Elsbach, 2002; Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001), members move from the periphery to the center, thereby increasing their own level of inclusion and organizational participation (Dutton et al., 1994). And – as we set out to highlight in this paper – such a meaningful association may be continued even after leaving an organization (Ashforth et al., 2008). Mael and Ashforth (1992) illustrated this by zooming in on the continued identification of alumni with their alma mater which resulted in the mutually beneficial situation of the alma mater profiting from increased donations, while the alumni were able to preserve a positive self-concept.

Moreover, besides identifying with the prestigious image of an organization, people may also identify with a given professional role such as the role of ‘management consultant’. A professional role, rather than merely comprising a set of tasks and assignments, also includes standards for behavior (Van Maanen & Barley, 1984), that means, formal and informal norms of membership (Anderson-Gough et al., 2002) including a distinct language, ideology and social etiquette, all which are learned in a step by step socialization process (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979).

As some researchers have argued, language plays a vital role in this process of socialization, as the notion of ‘professional identity’ is above all considered a rhetorical achievement (Grey, 1998). According to Fine (1996), repertoires of discourses are drawn upon to create and shape a sense of professional self which allows members of an occupation to maintain their reputation and self-esteem. In the following section we will particularly look at how organizational and professional identities are discursively constructed in the context of management consultancies.
2.3 Elite Identity Constructions in the Context of Management Consultancies

The context of management consultancies may be considered a particularly noteworthy environment for investigating processes of organizational and professional identity constructions. Interestingly, since many attempts by national associations to legally protect the use of the term ‘management consultant’ have failed in the past (Glückler & Armbrüster, 2003), the consulting business remains an unprotected domain with no standards of education or professional experience imposed on its participants. This lack of barriers for entering the consultancy market may partly explain the enormous growth of newcomers into the industry. As a consequence, the notion of ‘professionalism’ in management consulting can at best be understood in terms of individual or collective identity constructions (Glückler & Armbrüster, 2003).

Drawing on Fine’s concept of occupational rhetoric, Kitay and Wright (2007) conducted a study to examine specifically how management consultants drew on different rhetorics to construct an image of professional self. The researchers found that especially large global consulting firms in the area of strategy consulting promoted themselves through powerful discourses of brand differentiation, market reputation and elite identities (Kitay & Wright, 2007). Thus, by discursively aligning their own professional identities with the distinctiveness of the elite consulting firm, management consultants were able to produce a positive image of professional self.

Studies that have investigated this strong identification of consultants with an image of organizational and professional elite (e. g. Alvesson & Robertson, 2006; Armbrüster, 2004; Kärreman & Rylander, 2008) found that for developing and maintaining such an elite image, people needed an ongoing confirmation of the elite status both from discourses within the consultancy as much as from outside discourses. Thus, already in recruiting activities, large global consultancies were found to discursively position the consulting profession as highly elite, claiming to recruit only from leading universities and business schools and signaling exclusivity through high rejection rates where only the ‘best of the best’ are admitted (Armbrüster, 2004).

Moreover, it was observed that by adhering to discourses of elitism that were grounded in notions of professionalism and high work ethic, management consultants
felt they had to prove their elite status by working exceptionally hard. As a consequence management consultants worked most productively and in the best interest of the company (Whittle, 2005), usually fifty to sixty but sometimes even more than 100 hours per week without having to be supervised.

And finally, even symbolic artifacts became part of an elite discourse. Such symbolic artifacts included blackberries, company cars and lavish after work parties, but also business travel and international project work. In the following we will address how management consultants preserve such discourses of elitism even in light of critique or when confronted with some non-elite working realities, thereby rendering these discourses as particularly powerful and persistent.

### 2.4 Preserving Discourses of Elitism

Despite all aspirations to professional elitism the status of management consultants remains highly ambiguous as the consulting occupation continues to attract critical comments, both from consultants themselves as well as from outside spectators (Kumra & Valsecchi, 2012). Besides negative interpretations from the outside concerning overpriced management fads, coldblooded organizational changes or a lack of expert knowledge (Kitay & Wright, 2007), from the inside the consulting profession is particularly scorned for being a ‘stressful job’ where common work stressors such as performance monitoring, deadline pressure and long working hours are more permanent and enduring characteristics than in other industries (Mühlhaus & Bouwmeester, 2012).

But also the notion of elitism itself can be under attack. While the adaptation of a self-pleasing image of elite might at first sight seem highly attractive, workers may yet experience considerable tensions when trying to makes sense of those elite identity constructions in light of some rather ‘non-elite’ working realities (Fleming & Spicer, 2003). Having joined the company mostly for its good reputation, a new consultant may for instance soon find out that contrary to some high expectations, the actual work is made up of pressurized yet highly mundane and standardized tasks: data research, number crunching and the translation of numbers into PowerPoint slides (Simon, 2002).

Based on the high standardization of work, especially at the lower levels of the management consultancy pyramid, junior consultants – rather than living up to an
image of elite – may feel like perfectly exchangeable and therefore insignificant parts in a machine bureaucracy (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2009). This feeling of being exchangeable is continuously reproduced by the consultancy’s so-called up-or-out culture (Sturdy & Wright, 2008), so that even at higher levels of the consulting hierarchy, the working situation may remain unpleasant, hostile or even threatening.

Moreover, consultants are often confronted with quickly changing assignments that come with disrupted patterns of interaction, frequent traveling, incomplete forms of learning, and low-trust relationships between consultants, clients and employers. As the flexible, transitory and insecure nature of consulting work can destruct the experience of psychological and social trust, O’Mahoney (2007) speaks of an ‘ontological insecurity’ or ‘existential angst’ in the project of management consulting where consultants may potentially distance themselves from the dehumanized aspects of their work including calculative rationality, emotional control and immoral deception.

Interestingly though, as Alvesson and Robertson (2006) note, these unpleasant working conditions in management consultancies do not only weaken discourses of elitism, but on the contrary they may even strengthen them. Being confronted with the somehow unexpected impersonal work arrangements in consultancies, the construction of elite identities becomes even more vital for management consultants as a way to compensate for the encountered ‘non-elite’ work conditions.

Moreover, elite identities provide some kind of ‘existential security’ in such insecure and loosely coupled environments where the identification of the individual with the often physically not present elite network of colleagues can be the sole source for creating a positive self-image (Alvesson & Empson, 2007; Alvesson & Robertson, 2006). Given that discourses of elitism are drawn upon even in light of external critique or when confronted with some unpleasant non-elite working conditions, it can be argued that these discourses are particularly compelling and potentially enduring in the construction of employee identities.

2.5 Conceptual Framework: Identity Transitions in Times of Career Change

Having reviewed the literature on how discourses of elitism are vital sources in the construction of consultant identities, in this study we are particularly interested to
understand what happens to these identity shaping discourses when people change careers. To develop a conceptual framework for investigating this question, we will first of all delineate our understanding of how identities are constructed discursively. According to Svenningson and Alvesson (2003) individuals engage in continuous processes of forming, maintaining, revising or repairing identity constructions. In this view an individual ‘emerges’ through processes of social interaction, where identity is discursively constituted and reconstituted every time he or she engages in exchange with others (see also Alvesson et al., 2008; Brown, Humphreys & Gurney, 2005; Burr, 2003; Somers, 1994).

Even though it is well established by now that people construct, revise and alter their identities when engaging in active identity work (see e.g. Ibarra, 1999; Kreiner et al., 2006; Pratt et al., 2006), Ibarra and Barbulecu (2010) claim that little is known however about how exactly people experiment with different discourses and ‘possible selves’ (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Ibarra, 1999, 2005) when facing considerable career changes. In light of this identified gap, Ibarra and Barbulescu developed a dynamic process model that illustrates how career changers explore, retain or reject possible identity constructions when moving to a new working context. More concretely, the authors analyzed the self-narratives of career changers, thereby following an increasingly popular way of conceptualizing identity in the form of a unified and meaningful life story (McAdams, 1987, 2001) where the self is “reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography” (Giddens, 1991, p. 53).

While the life story model can above all be considered a model of integration that connects the past, the present and the anticipated future, in periods of professional transitions identities may become severely contested as people struggle to draw a continuous link between the past and the present sense of self (Brown et al., 2009). To shed more light on exactly these processes of identity construction during times of transition, Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010) examined the ‘narrative repertoires’ that people drew upon and experimented with in order to revise or stabilize their self-narratives in response to career change.

The notion of narrative repertoires is built on the concept of interpretive repertoires – that is discursive building blocks which people selectively draw upon in order to evaluate actions and events (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). The model suggests that by drawing on different repertoires, and by adding or
subtracted to them, career changers are able to revise or replace their narrative repertoires, which also affects identity constructions in the new working context. Particularly in instances of enduring repertoire changes, the model suggests, career changers internalize and express a new professional identity.

Another proposition that Ibarra and Barbulescu make is that there is a somewhat typical succession of identity stages along the transition process. While early in the transition process the identity construction may be marked by experimentation and contradictory possible selves constructed in divergent stories, midtransition narratives will tend to mark ‘midair’ feelings of ‘neither being here nor there’. Over the course of time, however, as potential conflicts between competing repertoires can be settled, the transition process comes to a completion. Repeated storytelling and external validation of the repertoires eventually lead to more coherent narratives and therefore a more stabilized sense of self. In that view, enduring changes in a person’s narrative repertoire also result in some enduring and profound identity changes (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010).

While we consider this model suggested by Ibarra and Barbulescu as highly illuminating and worth following, especially with the focus on identity changes as a matter of revising or replacing existing repertoires, in developing our own conceptual framework we would yet like to diverge from or expand upon this model in several ways. First, rather than looking at narrative repertoires we are more interested in how people integrate, revise or replace larger and partly institutionalized discourses of organizational and professional identity – such as discourses of elitism – into their overall life stories. By pursuing this interest we follow the example of Alvesson and Willmott (2002) who – based on Giddens’ (1991) model of ‘self-identity’ – investigated how employees incorporated “managerial discourses into narratives of self-identity” which then again shaped “their self-image, their feelings and identification” (p. 622). Particularly this shaping of ‘self-images’, which the authors considered an important element in the discursive construction of identity, will also become a vital component within our own framework around elite discourses and identity constructions in the post-exit arena.

Secondly, while we follow Ibarra and Barbulescu on the idea that narrative repertoires, or in our case repertoires of discourses (Fine, 1996), may be revised or replaced along the process of transition, we do not think that these are the only options
for how discursive identity constructions may unfold in the course of career change. Especially with our interest in the preservation of strongly identity shaping discourses of elitism across changing organizational contexts, we rather follow a suggestion by Sturdy and Wright (2008) that the identities of ex-consultants, even within their new work environments, remain closely linked to the prestige and status of their former employers. Based on this claim we assume that discourses of elitism, even if they are grounded in the past working context, may not only be revised or replaced, but instead they may also be continued into a new working context.

And finally, we are doubtful that career transitions, as Ibarra and Barublescu suggest, will always encompass enduring repertoire changes and a stabilization of new discourses which will settle the transition process. On the contrary we propose that when people change careers, moving from an elite and strongly identity shaping work environment to a different working context, discourses of elitism may continue to play a vital role even in the post-exit arena. As discourses of elitism continue to co-exist with other and potentially competing discourses in the new work setting, the transition process may become an ongoing endeavor that never comes to a full completion.

2.6 Refined Research Questions

Based on the reviewed literature that has illustrated how identities are shaped in the context of management consultancies through some powerful and persistent discourses of elitism, and based on the conceptual framework that, expanding upon Ibarra and Barbulescu’s model (2010), has depicted identity change during times of transition as above all a discursive and possibly ongoing endeavor, we have refined our initial research question ‘In how far do discourses of elitism grounded in the consulting past continue to affect the identity construction of former management consultants even in the post-exit arena?’ into the following, more nuanced analytical questions:

1. What discourses do former management consultants draw upon in their life stories when constructing an (elite) self-image in the context of the management consultancy?
2. How are these discourses preserved and how do they continue (or not) to affect the identity construction of former management consultants in the post-exit arena?

3. How do discourses of elitism co-exist with other and possibly competing discourses in the post-exit arena and with what consequences for the process of identity transition in response to career change?

In the methods section on ‘data analysis’ we will explicitly delineate how these different analytical questions have guided the analysis process and structured the presentation of results. Before doing so, however, we will first lay out the methodological set-up that we have chosen for investigating these questions.

2.7 Methodology

2.7.1 Sample and Data Collection

We conducted 30 life story interviews (McAdams, 2001) with ex-consultants who are now working in different organizational settings. While all of the interviewed ex-consultants formed a rather homogeneous group, i.e. all expert consultants coming from a major global strategy or management consultancy, there was yet a good amount of diversity among the interviewees, especially as interviewees were chosen from the following six different organizational contexts: 1) Academia, 2) Non-Governmental-Organizations, 3) Entrepreneurs, 4) Industry 5) Financial Services and 6) In-house Consulting of a large Swiss bank.

Other relevant parameters of variation were the time spent in consultancy (thereby also comprising different levels of seniority), which ranged from less than 1 year to 10 years with an average of 3 years spent in consultancy, and the time that people had been out of the consultancy when doing the interview, which ranged from less than 1 year to 9 years, with an average of 2 years. 8 of the interviewees were female (27%), which somewhat reflects the ratio of men and women in most German or Swiss based management consultancies.

At the beginning of the interviews, we gave brief information on our current research interests, namely the construction of identity across changing organizational contexts. We explained that we were above all interested in stories rather than pure
facts and encouraged the interviewees to share their stories by imagining, that they, in a couple of years, would have the idea of writing up their life story in a book. We asked interviewees to delineate the important chapters and to think of interesting and remarkable aspects or episodes that they would feel worth sharing in that book. Given the time constraint of approximately one hour (interviews ranged from 45 to 135 minutes), the ex-consultants were then asked to only reveal their stories starting from the time they entered university.

2.7.2 Data Analysis
The first step taken in what turned out to be an iterative data analysis process of moving back and forth between data, literature and analysis, was a repeated reading of the interview transcripts. Sharing and discussing a wide range of diverse interview passages among the authors and with other research colleagues helped to identify first emerging themes, patterns and peculiarities in the data. As a second step we color-coded the various transcripts according to how interviewees positioned themselves and their self-image either towards the consulting past or the new working context.

To better structure our further analysis, we have then organized the analysis and later presentation of results around the various analytical questions delineated earlier. That is, we first of all analyzed the life stories of ex-consultants with regards to their identity construction in the context of the management consultancy. Rather than investigating the full complexity of how identities were constructed in relation to the consulting past, in our analysis we deliberately focused on those discourses that interviewees drew upon when constructing their past consultant self-image as being elite. In this way we could identify the following three – what we call – discourses of elitism: the discourse of exclusivity, professionalism and luxury.

In a second step we then investigated how these discourses of elitism that were grounded in the consulting past were possibly preserved when reporting upon the new working context. And indeed, for each of the identified discourses of elitism we found various examples in the interview data of how ex-consultants continued, revised or replaced them in the post-exit arena, thereby affecting their identity construction in the following ways: reproducing the consultant self-image by continuing discourses of elitism, tweaking the consultant self-image by revising discourses of elitism, or inventing an entirely new self-image by replacing discourses of elitism.
Thirdly, by staying at the unit of the life story we noticed that people did not only engage in one particular form of discourse preservation when constructing their self-image in the new working context. By re-reading several life stories in their entirety we actually found that all these interviews contained a mix of different discourse preservations. While some interviewees mostly replaced discourses of the consulting past, others continued them more consistently, but overall we found interviewees to switch between discourses and related identity constructions frequently, thereby leading to a range of competing self-images in the post-exit arena.

To illustrate this finding we have chosen to stay at the unit of one single life story that gives a good example of how discourses were equally continued, revised and replaced – an approach which Costas and Fleming (2009) have very effectively applied as well to better focus on consistency, variation, ambiguity and contradiction in their data. While the single interview method certainly has its limitations in terms of generalizable findings, it yet allowed us to draw attention to a co-existence of competing identity constructions within one single interview, which else we could not have portrayed (also with respect to limited space). This one interview stands in place however for the other interviews which to varying degrees all illustrated a mix of different discourses and competing identity constructions. In the following section we will then delineate the findings of our analysis.

2.8 Findings

2.8.1 Constructing the Consultant Self-image by Drawing on Discourses of Elitism

We observed that former management consultants in the overall unfolding of their life stories drew on three different discourses when reporting upon their elite consulting past and when constructing an elite self-image of consultant. One particular discourse that former consultants drew upon was the discourse of exclusivity that depicted both, the consulting profession as well as the organizational context as highly distinct and superior, thereby setting elite consultants apart from other just ordinary people:

The most exciting thing about this job is really the other people. [...] I belong to those people, if I want to do a good job, I quickly do it on my own so then at least I know that it is good. And there [in the consultancy] I had to learn that when you give it to someone else the result will be even better. That I find
fascinating because normally with all other jobs that I did before, experience has shown that it is not like that (Interview 19).

By working on his own to ensure that results will be good, the interviewee makes a clear distinction between himself as producing these good results and the other colleagues whom he encountered before joining the consultancy, who did not meet his expected standards. At the same time he willingly shares the notion of exclusivity and elitism with his previous consultant colleagues. There he generously grants that others might even do the job better, thereby constructing a gap between ‘fascinating’ consultants and ‘normal’ employees. This positive depiction of his previous consulting colleagues produces an overall image of consultants as being part of an exclusive elite.

This exclusiveness is linked to yet another discourse of elitism that former management consultants drew upon for producing a consultant self-image, namely the discourse of *professionalism*. The discourse of professionalism, which is built around notions of high commitment, high performance standards and a willingness to work long hours, also grants a sense of belonging to an elite workforce:

> It’s all based on reliability. [For a consultant] a commitment is a commitment and it will be kept at any price. A deadline will be met no matter what. An analysis will be delivered in the highest quality. And if that is not possible for any reason whatsoever you raise the flag early enough to indicate that there is an issue. And if you don’t, well, then you very quickly get into trouble (Interview 2).

While the discourse of professionalism on the one hand produces an image of the highly committed consultant who is driven by his or her own work ethic, also the wider organizational context of the consultancy is constructed as adhering to these rules. If someone does not meet the expected standard of professionalism or diverges from the usual script, some immediate feedback in the form of ‘trouble’ can be anticipated.

A third discourse that interviewees drew upon to produce an elite self-image when describing their past consulting role was the discourse of *luxury*. In the discourse of luxury, ex-consultants highlighted the large budgets that consultancies had spent on them in terms of latest gadgets, expensive parties, lavish company
retreats or high end traveling. In the discourse of luxury these elements all become signifiers of elitism:

I flew to Abu Dhabi, which was quite cool. Flying business class for the first time, five star hotel [laughing]. So within six weeks I had travel expenses of 19 thousand dollars – only for the hotel. That was crazy [laughing] (Interview 8).

Coming straight out of university and being placed in such a luxurious environment, the interviewee is baffled by the high expenses that he incurred. While finding the high costs ‘crazy’, he also admits that he found this new style of living and traveling ‘cool’, giving evidence of the value that the company and the client placed on his consulting work.

Thus, by drawing on discourses of exclusivity, professionalism and luxury, an image of consultant is constructed as someone who works in a highly distinct work environment, surrounded by other, highly professional, hardworking and committed colleagues who live a luxurious lifestyle. In the following sections we will investigate to what extent these discourses of elitism still play a role in the post-exit arena, particularly with regards to the identity construction of ex-consultants.

**2.8.2 Reproducing the Consultant Self-image by Continuing Discourses of Elitism**

One way of how former management consultants constructed a self-image in the post-exit arena was by continuing discourses of elitism. In this way former management consultants established a discursive bridge between their past and their present self-image which allowed them to reproduce the consultant self-image even in the new work setting. When continuing the discourse of *exclusivity* for instance, interviewees claimed to still be part of a distinguished group of people:

We also work a lot, especially when compared to the rest of the organization. We do not drop our pens at 5 pm, but instead, the spirit, the culture here is probably driven by the ex-consultants. [...] That’s also what we have a good reputation for among the management of the organization (Interview 2).
Here, in the context of an in-house consulting department composed of many ex-consultants the discourse of exclusivity which depicts consultants as belonging to an exclusive and hardworking elite is maintained seamlessly. The high work ethic, the spirit and the culture – all grounded in the consulting past – continue to be a source of elite identity construction.

But also when not surrounded by other ex-consultants, elite consulting discourses were still continued into the new work environment. The following example shows how the discourse of professionalism was continued into a more ‘non-elite’ work environment:

I can put a lot of pressure on people, or I can be really authoritative and say: “this needs to be re-worked all over again.” And there I believe that I am very coined by the previous [consulting] job (Interview 23).

As depicted earlier, the discourse of professionalism is built on the notion of high performance standards that have to be met at all costs in order to avoid instant and possibly harsh feedback. In this example the interviewee claims to be authoritative in a consultant-like manner, thereby continuing the discourse of professionalism into the new working context and applying it to colleagues who might not have been trained along the same professional standards as prevalent in the consultancy. By holding on to the discourse of professionalism, however, the consultant self-image of the past is reproduced in the new environment.

Another way of reproducing an elite self-image in the new working context was by continuing the discourse of luxury. In the following example an interviewee points out the surprising similarity that he found between his previous and his current job in terms of conveniences and markers of luxury:

I still remember in the last weeks at STEEL [the consultancy] I bought myself a laptop and so on because I thought I need to have an infrastructure and I am somehow going back to Stone Age. On my first day of work I got a laptop, I was completely surprised, a mobile phone and so on, I had not expected that. […] I traveled a lot, spent a lot of time at airports in my first year, so that was also very similar (Interview 25).
Also here, by claiming to have an equally good infrastructure and to continue business travel, a certain consultant lifestyle and thus a previous consultant self-image is discursively reproduced again. It may be concluded that by continuing discourses of exclusivity, professionalism and luxury that are grounded in the consulting past, ex-consultants are able to reproduce an elite consultant self-image even in the post-exit arena.

2.8.3 Tweaking the Consultant Self-image by Revising Discourses of Elitism

Another way of how ex-consultants constructed a self-image in the new working context was by revising discourses of elitism. When revising discourses of elitism, former management consultants still continued to draw on discourses grounded in the consulting past while at the same time mixing them up with other discourses. In this way they could tweak the consultant self-image in the post-exit arena, that means, they could maintain a sense of elitism even when re-orienting their self-image along other dimensions.

When revising the discourse of *exclusivity* for example, the following interviewee still constructed the new work environment as exclusive in the sense of being similar to the consulting environment, while at the same time adding a new dimension that is different to the consulting experience:

The work is very intense and similar to the consulting work. And I don’t find that everything is slower here. Here we do the implementation of course, which is never done in consulting (Interview 6).

By depicting the new work as being intense and keeping pace with the fast and elite consulting context, the notion of working in an exclusive work environment is successfully preserved. Yet in contrast to just continuing the discourse of exclusivity which would construct the two work environments as identical or interchangeable, the discourse becomes revised as it is mixed up with a discourse around ‘doing different work’. As a person’s sense of self is linked as well to the type of work that he or she engages in, introducing a discourse of doing different work bears the potential of tweaking the existing consultant self-image.
In a similar fashion we observed that interviewees mixed up existing discourses of elitism with discourses of autonomy and flexibility. In the following example we give an illustration of how the discourse of *professionalism* was revised in this way:

The nice thing is, and this is also a bit what fosters creativity: I am so free. That is, if I say at 10 am, I wanna go running for an hour, then I go running at 10 am. That does not mean, that I do less work. Or it does not mean, that I don’t get as far. It just means, that this point in time is right for going for an hour of running, right? And while I go running I might have an idea that later on saves me another hour, no (Interview 12)?

The entrepreneur’s statement “I am so free” indicates that he considers his new work environment – that is his own start-up – as more liberal and therefore more likeable compared to the consulting past. At the same time the interviewee is careful to point out that this new autonomy does not compromise his sense of professionalism in any way, as there is no decline in terms of how much work is done and how good the working results can be. In that way the previous image of professional self is tweaked only on the boundaries.

Also when revising the discourse of *luxury*, the following interviewee admits that he still identifies with the kind of luxurious lifestyle that he encountered when being a consultant. By mixing this discourse up however with a discourse of a better work-life balance and the notion of living more ecologically, he at the same time expresses a readiness to tweak his previous self-image:

You know what you’re missing of course. My life is much less spectacular than it used to be. Back then I could do much more duty free shopping [laughing]. But for me personally, I feel better. I have time to do sports and I have a bit of a contrast program. I fly a bit less, voilà, but I’m more eco-friendly which is fine as well (Interview 7).

While ‘duty free shopping’ becomes associated here with frequent traveling and thus a spectacular and luxurious lifestyle, missing out on these markers of elitism is admittedly not so easy. Only when revising the luxury discourse by allowing other dimensions such as sports and eco-consciousness to play a role, the previous consultant image becomes tweaked at the boundaries.
In summary, when revising discourses of elitism grounded in the consulting past and when mixing them up with other discourses, a new self-image is discursively produced that does not mark a complete break with the consulting past, but rather signifies a smooth process of tweaking the past self-image and re-orienting it towards the new working context.

2.8.4 Inventing a New Self-image by Replacing Discourses of Elitism

A third way of how ex-consultants positioned themselves in the new working context was by replacing discourses of elitism that were grounded in the consulting past with alternative discourses. When replacing previous discourses around notions of exclusivity, professionalism, and luxury with alternatives, people made sense of their new working lives and professional identities along different dimensions. In this way, despite making comparisons to the consulting past, a new self-image could be invented in the post-exit arena.

In the following example a former management consultant now working as an academic replaced the discourse of exclusivity grounded in the consulting past with an alternative discourse that provided a sense of meaning in the new working context:

In the university context we are involved in the early phases of the knowledge creation process. That means we work on problems which cannot be sold to a client today or tomorrow. […] Consulting firms work with tools and concepts that from an academic standpoint are not so new (Interview 21).

Rather than only constructing the new work environment as different to the consulting context, the interviewee instead makes a direct comparison between the past and the present along a discourse of novelty which highlights the originality of ideas and avant-garde thinking encountered in the university context but not in the consultancy. Moreover, by introducing this alternative discourse the consultancy is no longer positioned as being exclusive or superior, in that way potentially losing its attractiveness for one’s identity construction in the post-exit arena.

Another discourse that interviewees drew upon to replace for instance the discourse of professionalism was the discourse of acknowledgement within the new work setting:
People totally appreciate my work. [...] And you think, before I would have done something similar in the consultancy and they would have said “this is not enough”. And now it’s just great (Interview 9).

Again this interviewee explicitly compares the consulting past with the new working context. While in the consulting context high professionalism is expected, taken for granted and possibly “never enough”, in the new working context this taken for granted assumption of professionalism is replaced by acknowledging the work that people do. In that way the interviewee constructs the new context as a more friendly and appreciative work environment which makes space for inventing a new self-image in the post-exit arena.

Another compelling discourse that replaced discourses of elitism, including the discourse of luxury, was the discourse around a better work-life balance:

For my private life things have also changed considerably of course. Because now I go home instead of going to some hotel room and watching telly, or having a beer with colleagues. Instead I actually have a second life again at home. [...] That’s just a change from the job and that’s very, very good for me (Interview 1).

By emphasizing that a second life outside of work is very good for him, the interviewee makes space for a self-image that is no longer defined by the luxury of business travel and of staying in expensive hotels, but on the contrary by a lifestyle that allows time for being at home and for spending time with his family. Different to the previous example where an interviewee only tweaked the consultant self-image by holding on to the luxury discourse around frequent travelling and airport shopping which he considered more “spectacular” than his current life-style, in this example a new self-image is invented that possibly renders the consulting past as no longer attractive.

Interestingly, even when replacing discourses of elitism with discourses of novelty, acknowledgement or better work-life balance, the consulting context still remains an important point of reference and comparison. Yet, by replacing discourses of exclusivity, professionalism and luxury, interviewees no longer constructed a self-image that was grounded in the consulting past. Instead, by replacing dominant
discourses of the past, room was made for inventing a new self-image in the present working context.

2.8.5 Reproducing, Tweaking and Re-inventing the Consultant Self-image Simultaneously

While the analysis has thus far illustrated a variation of what happens to identity shaping discourses when people move from the consultancy context into a new work setting in terms of being continued, revised or replaced – all in neat isolation – in this section we will highlight how the different variations of discourse preservation (continuation, revision and replacement) were actually observed to co-exist, thereby resulting in a range of different and sometimes competing identity constructions in the post-exit arena. In order to shed more light on this co-existence we found it necessary to stay at the unit of the life story, which allows us to show that the different ways of how elite discourses were preserved and how identities were constructed in the post-exit arena did not only vary from interview to interview, but in fact also varied within the course of one single life story.

So for illustrating this co-existence within one life story, we will zoom in on one particular interview (25) of an ex-consultant who had served in the military for a short time and worked in the financial sector for several years prior to joining a management consultancy. After three years in the consultancy he had then moved on to work for an NGO. At the time of the interview, the former management consultant had been working at the NGO for some nine years. While this particular life story does not mark any exceptional case – a good range of other interviews could have been chosen for the same cause – it nicely depicts the variation of how discourses of elitism were preserved in the post-exit arena.

In the following comment for instance the interviewee constructs a self-image that is strongly tied to the new working context, the NGO:

For me it is very difficult to imagine to not work for an NGO, that’s very difficult to imagine. Like to work for a firm where in the evening you put down your identity. In the sense of, in the evening you are no longer the bank employee. But in the evening I am still the NGO’s employee, you don’t put that down. […] Several times I had the opportunity to change jobs, but I was always happy to stay. I never followed up on the other options.
This strong identification with the new working context is not build on discourses of elitism, but instead marks the replacement of past discourses with a discourse of doing meaningful work which is very important for the interviewee’s sense of self, even in his free time. By claiming that he never followed up on alterative career opportunities he even strengthens his sense of identification.

In surprising contrast to this new self-image grounded in the NGO context, when asked whether he could consider returning to the consultancy, he admits that he had already been thinking about it. Even more so, he does not rule out a return to the consultancy:

**Interviewer:** Could you imagine returning to the consultancy?
**Interviewee:** I have thought about it before. Because interestingly, indeed, STEEL [the consultancy] is starting to work very strongly in the NGO field. They have done a lot of good work in the sustainability area and they are working together with NGOs now […] So if they were really gaining momentum in this field, that would be a reason to consider a return. But I don’t think so.

Here the discourse of *professionalism* is taken up again where the consultancy is constructed as “doing good work” and therefore as an interesting organization to potentially work for. At the same time the previous discourse of professionalism is being revised in this example as it is mixed up again with a discourse of doing meaningful work. Only when the consultancy engages in meaningful work a return would be considered. In this way the self-image of consultant is not fully reproduced. Instead, only a tweaked version of the consultant self-image is indicated, as a return to the consultancy remains conditional and even unlikely.

Within the same life story, however, we also observed the interviewee to continue discourses of the past and to reproduce the consultant self-image in the new working context. When asked, for instance, whether his new colleagues in the NGO still recognized the (ex-) consultant in him, the interviewee convincingly replied:

**Interviewee:** [laughing] Yesterday someone just said that to me after a conversation. He said: “One can still very much spot the consultant in you!”
**Interviewer:** After nine years?
**Interviewee:** [After] nine years, yah, yah.
In this comment the former consultant gives evidence that, besides replacing and revising discourses of elitism, he had also been continuing discourses grounded in the consulting past along with a certain consultant behavior. As a consequence his colleagues could spot the consultant in him some 9 years after the exit.

It may be concluded that career related identity transitions mark a complex process where people simultaneously continue, revise and replace discourses of elitism with alternative discourses in the post-exit arena. Especially when people co-construct a range of competing self-images, such as the strong NGO self-image versus the reproduced consultant self-image, this may lead to some ongoing tensions in the construction of professional identities.

2.9 Discussion: Career Change as an Ongoing Endeavor

Having based our analysis on the assumption that management consultancies are rather successful in shaping the identities of their employees through discourses of elitism that may have long-lasting effects, it was not surprising to observe that ex-consultants indeed could not easily exit these identity shaping discourses when changing their career path. Instead, we observed that all interviewees to a certain degree preserved discourses of exclusivity, professionalism and luxury in the new working context. At the same time we noted a good degree of variation in terms of how discourses were preserved as they were continued, revised or replaced altogether by alternative discourses in the post-exit arena.

We discerned that this variation of how discourses were preserved had an impact as well on how former management consultants constructed their identity in the new work environment by reproducing the consultant self-image, tweaking it or by inventing a new self-image altogether. Moreover, after making this clear distinction of how discourses of elitism were preserved in three different ways, overall we found that interviewees, in the course of unfolding one single life story, varied between continuing, revising and replacing discourses of elitism, in that way simultaneously constructing different self-images in the post-exit arena that were sometimes competing with one another.

Overall these findings suggest that discourses of elitism continue to affect the identity construction of former management consultants even in the post-exit arena. These effects were most strongly felt when people continued discourses of elitism
effortlessly into the new working context, thereby reproducing the consultant self-image even in the post-exit arena. This finding renders discourses of elitism as being more powerful and far-reaching even than already acknowledged. While discourses of elitism were originally circulated for the sake of establishing a sense of professionalism in an unprotected and therefore precarious consulting industry (Glückler & Armbrüster, 2003), by now, we argue, these discourses have developed into a powerful and identity shaping force that operates independently of its organizational origin.

Even though, in the literature on management consulting, discourses of elitism have already been noted as being particularly persistent in light of critique or when confronted with some non-elite working conditions in the consulting apparatus (Alvesson & Empson, 2007; Alvesson & Robertson, 2006; Kitay & Wright, 2007), we aspire to further advance this understanding by illustrating how discourses of elitism affect identity construction even in a totally different work environment that does not itself make any claims to elitism.

By following closely how discourses of elitism were perpetuated from the consulting context to a different work environment in the form of being continued, revised or replaced, we have also tried to shed more light on processes of identity construction in the post-exit arena. By zooming in on this post-exit arena – an organizational grey area that has so far received little attention in the identity literature – we tried to take the analysis of identity construction beyond the employment contract. So in contrast to most scholars in the broader field of identity studies who have treated identity as a context-limited construct that is shaped exclusively within the boundaries of the present employment context, in this paper we have emphasized the temporal (Brown & Humphreys, 2002) and context-spanning dimensions of discursive identity constructions, which to date remain poorly theorized. This may be considered a first step towards empirically and conceptually developing the notion of ‘post-exit identity construction’, a concept which bears the potential of providing a context-bridging understanding of identity and therefore calls for further research.

Along those lines, by zooming in on the identity construction of former rather than current management consultants, we have acknowledged a group of professionals which so far has been rendered ‘absent’, ‘invisible’ or ‘identity-less’ in organizational research. Given that the widely dispersed group of ex-consultants goes basically
unnoticed both in organizational research and practice, it is not surprising that members of this ‘consulting diaspora’ (Sturdy and Wright, 2008) end up in an ongoing process of negotiating between competing identity constructions in a seemingly individual rather than collective way. By making explicit the commonalities and variations in the post-exit identity construction of former management consultants, in this paper we have tried to depict the possibilities and limits of making emancipatory post-exit moves in terms of continuing, revising or replacing discourses of elitism.

And finally, by taking note of these identity transitions as being embedded in a potentially ongoing process that never comes to a full completion we would like to provide a better understanding for how discursively constructed identities evolve in response to career change. As previous studies have already indicated, during times of transitions different self-images may co-exist as people draw on multiple and sometimes incompatible discourses in their self-narratives. Beyer and Hannah (2002) for instance found that career changers described their personal identities in the transition process as both being based in the past as well as in the present. This indicates that people do not easily give up what they appreciated in their former job. On the contrary, people hold on to their previous status and prestige, their security or ‘golden handcuffs’ as well as their once desired vision of the future that was grounded in the old career path (Ibarra, 2005).

While acknowledging this continued association with the past, Ibarra and Barbulescu’s (2010) yet claim that identity transitions in response to career change sooner or later come to a full completion, namely when new discourses are stabilized in the process of constructing a self-image. In contrast to that view we argue that new discourses and resulting self-images may not always stabilize in the new working context, especially when the continuous perpetuation of past related discourses prevents identity transitions from reaching a harmonious closure. And indeed, as our analysis has revealed, identity construction in the post-exit arena may continue to be complex, multiple and continuously up for negotiation. This ongoing process of identity negotiation, we argue, deserves full attention as it may conflict with people’s desire of achieving and maintaining an integrated sense of self during and after a change in career.
2.10 Conclusion

In our paper we have shown that discourses of elitism continue to shape the identity constructions of former management consultants even in the post-exit arena. A first reaction to this key finding could be that this per se is not a problematic discovery. In fact, as some research indicates, holding on to the past – especially during times of transition – can even have a range of positive consequences as it may increase people’s psychological well-being and their emotional capacity to cope with challenges in the present (e.g. Brown & Humphreys, 2002; Routledge et al., 2011). Particularly when continuing to tie their identities to the prestige of their past organization and professional network, ex-consultants may be able to preserve positive self-attributes and positive self-regard (Sedikides et al., 2008).

Another value could be that new employers of former management consultants benefit from a set of “consultant qualities” that people bring along when aiming to maintain a certain standard of professionalism and work ethic also in the new working context. And finally, management consultancies themselves may benefit if discourses of elitism continue to be effective in the post-exit arena. Not only would that preserve the elite image of the organization, but it would also help consultancies to generate an active body of alumni through whom they can ideally acquire and contract new project assignments.

By taking a more critical perspective, however, we would like to draw attention above all to the potential difficulties that may arise when people preserve discourses of elitism, thereby primarily grounding their identity construction in a past working context. More generally, it is regarded unwise in the Western culture to ‘live in the past’ or to be past-oriented. This idea is based on the understanding that, when grounding their sense of self primarily in discourses of the past, people may feel discouraged to explore and embrace new opportunities for identification, in that way constraining processes of re-orientation (Brown & Humphreys, 2002).

More concretely, the preservation of consulting discourses in the new work environment may perpetually confront ex-consultants with an interface between an elite self-image grounded in the consulting past and the social reality of their new working context that can be at odds with the ideal of the past. As a consequence, people may continue to draw on the consulting past as an ongoing source for identification while the new working context may become a source of discontent or
even frustration. In such a set-up a strong affiliation with a past self-image would alienate people from their present working context and prevent them from adopting a new identity (Kärreman & Spicer, 2009).

Even though many consultants aspire to go into consulting for only a couple of years, hoping to stay immune towards the strong corporate culture that is known to shape the identities of its employees (also referred to as “brainwashing”), our analysis has indicated that through discourses of elitism identities are so profoundly shaped that even after spending only a short period in the consultancy (the average of our sample was 3 years, with some interviewees working less than one year in the consultancy), these discourses continued to affect the identity constructions of ex-consultants even in the new work environment, thereby making it difficult for people to easily re-orient their professional self-image towards a new working context when changing careers.

By sensitizing both researchers and practitioners to the dynamics of post-exit identity constructions and by showing the variations of how to possibly respond to identity shaping discourses in the post-exit arena we hope to provide some insights for more informed and reflexive identity work during and after times of career change.
Interview Vignettes III: Praising the New Working Context/ Life Style

Nick (Interview 12): “The work provides me with a sense of meaning”

The decision [to leave the consultancy and start my own business] came relatively early.

Interviewer: Does that mean that it was an unemotional or easy farewell.

Very unemotional, or even happy, in that direction.[...]

Since I’m self-employed and the boss or actually the owner of the company, there is nobody who tells me what to do. Nobody defines my agenda. That’s the creative freedom, the creative chaos of letting your thoughts wonder around. But when you are in a firm where you have someone above and below you, you first have to solve the problem of the one who’s above you and then define the tasks for the person below you.

But as soon as you are your own boss, you are the one who has to take the decision. In this way you learn to take decisions, you are thrown into the cold water. Either you swim or you drown. Either you learn to take decisions, or you don’t.

And the work itself provides me with a sense of meaning. In the evening, or late afternoon ideally, you come out of the office saying that this was a great day. That was fantastic. And you are motivated and in a good mood. And the next morning you wake up and think, today will be a good day, today I want to do this and that. The intrinsic motivation to do a job – that is very important.

I wake up relatively early, just because I’m so motivated to do something.

Paul (Interview 17): “I can stay in this job for another while”

And since this time [that I am no longer working in the consultancy], we enjoy life even more extensively.

Interviewer: Because your time has gained new value.

Yes. We learned to live with little money. We learned to live with little time. Now we have a bit of both. And without being rich, and even with doing our jobs, we are very contented with what we have. This really fulfilled private life with enough time for the family, the home and the hobbies; really to enjoy our life. We have reached our biggest goals, we have worked for that, and now we are allowed to enjoy that as well.
Work wise it is a really quiet environment. That means less stress, less pressure and at the same time, very competent colleagues with a lot of experience and I have to say, at the end of the day we come to very good solutions as well, even though we achieve them with less stress. We take time to discuss certain things, we can also park an issue for a while, and so on. With such a workload, I always have a little reserve of about 10%. That’s a very enjoyable way of working, isn’t it?

I also have a super relationship with my office neighbor. He is around 40, he’s gay and he’s in a long-term relationship and we just get along really well. He is a corporate lawyer and I have this technical background. He is a very thoughtful person and we just enjoy it. We respect each other – he with is background as lawyer and I with my technical background, that works really well. […]

I think I can stay in this job for another while.
Interviewer: For how long?
Six years? [laughing] Let’s see.

John (Interview 2): “You have much more autonomy”

My degrees of freedom are much higher now compared to the consultancy. Sure, in the consultancy you could also quickly disappear [over lunch, etc.], but culturally that came close to a bodily injury to your supervisor and the team.

Here it is much more relaxed in the sense of, if I’m meeting a friend in the city and I’m away over lunch for two, three hours, I can easily do that. Or when I want to leave a bit earlier today because I have a private event, that’s not an issue. Or if I come later because I have a doctor’s appointment, nobody accuses me for that. It is more that everyone knows what he or she has to do and there are certain deadlines when things have to be ready. But how you do it, when you do it and how you get there, that’s up to you. That’s in your own responsibility, to raise the flag if you’re stuck somewhere.

Here you have much more autonomy as well in the sense that you have full overview and that you are in charge for an entire project.

That means that I have much more responsibility and people trust in me. That’s also how I was promoted to become a team leader after just 9 months into the job. In the sense of, I trust in you, I have seen how you work and now I want to promote you into a new position.

Everything that I’ve seen so far in terms of leadership style is much more participative, much more with a focus on diffusing leadership while providing some general guidance, but in a very pleasant way with a coaching element. It is much more a culture of, the more you can contribute, the more you can bring to the party, the more you are invited to do so autonomously.
Interview Vignettes IV: Frustration with the New Working Context

Daniel (Interview 16): “There are so many idiots running around”

*When I want to work for a company then I would of course like to work in a consulting-like environment again, because in consulting you don’t have any idiots running around. It is somehow tougher or whatever you wanna call it. But at least there are no idiots running around. In every other firm there are so many idiots running around. Then it’s better to have the one or the other nerd instead of having a workforce where 60% are idiots.*

*In that which I do and how I work, especially because it was my first real job, I identify very much with the consultancy. When it is a matter of how I do something I would always say “we” when referring to the consultancy. “We” do it like this or that. That I haven’t stopped and I will not stop it either. [...] Well, in that sense I am still brainwashed.*

*Here you give someone a task and ask the person to look something up for you. When you get something back, it comes mostly too late because people don’t work with time lines. And when it comes back, either on time or not, only half of the work is done or something completely wrong was done. They don’t even ask for clarification. Because in industry, nobody shows you how to do it.*

*I remember an incidence, we were really under stress. And we really had to get something done. And then there was one guy, right, who happened to be tired, so he went home at half past five. We hadn’t finished yet. And I just thought: what’s going on? He can’t just do that! But he was going “well no, I’m not up for it anymore”. Yes but this is, that’s even normal. That is even accepted.*

*Well, I wouldn’t say that for me personally, but I would say this is true for everyone who comes out of consulting: When you go into industry and you do your work just like you did in the consultancy, then you already do things 200 times better than everyone else [laughing].*

*And I actually have to watch out. My previous boss who hired me here in my current position, he once said to me [after not doing a task so well], that was kind of a wake-up call “you’re already infected with this industry virus” [of not performing well].*

*Interviewer: It sounds like this is not a long-term option for you.*

*No, no, definitely not. I am actually looking into other options right now.*
John (Interview 2): “Corporate world is much more political”

[In consulting] it’s all based on reliability. A commitment is a commitment and it will be kept at any price. A deadline will be met no matter what. An analysis will be delivered in the highest quality. And if that is not possible for any reason whatsoever you raise the flag early enough to indicate that there is an issue. And if you don’t, well, then you very quickly get into trouble.

Here I had to learn a lesson in terms of reliability – you cannot take that for granted. Here you really have to nail people down with meeting protocols to document “what we have agreed upon”, else people will lie to your face, saying that this was never agreed, no matter how often we talked about it. Or they say, we agreed to do this on a “best effort” basis, but it didn’t work out. That’s why you have to document everything.

It is also a blaming culture. Who can prove, that someone else has failed to deliver on a promise. If you can prove that, you can get another person into trouble. And as soon as there’s a culprit, everything is fine. That means that people save all kinds of mails so that in case of doubt, when the worst comes to the worst, you have proof. And that really distinguishes the bank from the consultancy where you have a completely different code of ethics.

You could complain about many things in consulting, but there was no competition among colleagues. Within a team you did not have any advantage when holding back information or when trying to sabotage anything. Quite on the contrary, the culture was helpful and cooperative. I had no advantage from someone else failing.

So the corporate world is much more political, especially on the higher ranks. That certainly correlates with this “blame me, blame you” or “who can prove what” culture. It’s a lot of political maneuvering, where people defend principalities within the organization. And that is not decided logically and rationally of course, it is clearly driven by personal interests.
Markus (Interview 1): “Everything is moving much slower”

When I started here I already realized that it’s quite a different pace over here. You don’t find the drive that you have in a consultancy, which every consultant brings along, the respect for the work.

I once witnessed how we were writing a bill for a client and there were a few minor mistakes on that bill. And then a colleague made the comment: “Oh, the client probably won’t notice it anyways. Let’s just send it like it is, else we’ll sit here for another hour”. In that moment I was really shocked. This was not at 2 am in the night; it was at 5pm in the afternoon. But when the bus leaves at 5.18 pm and the husband is waiting at the station at 6.02 pm, that’s how it is. Then I don’t care what’s happening at work, whether the whole thing collapses.

I also realized that you cannot change the pace. There are people who have been working here for 30 years. And they have no understanding if someone comes and says, well, we have to switch from the third into the forth gear now. They systematically refuse to do that. And in a business like that you have 80-90% of people like that.

Interviewer: What about the other 10-20%?

That’s the people who come from consulting. They have learned in the consultancy what it means to work, what it means to deliver. There are of course some other colleagues who feel bad when they notice that I worked for another 3-4 hours after they left. And they realize, that I also accomplish much more than they do. And then they think, “oh, we are on the same level, but I deliver much less”. So for the colleagues it is a thorn in their flesh; not so much for my supervisors obviously, but for my colleagues it is.

But I think it also has to do with the size of the company. Here we have 5000 employees, so it’s much bigger with way more rules and regulations, so everything is moving much slower. […]

It is certainly an advantage for me, that I worked in a consultancy before and that I know how things could go differently. Most employees here have no idea of how things could be done differently, how one could work differently, how people work in a consultancy. They just know the nine to five. They have never seen anything else.
3 A Critical Matter: Exploring (Shifting) Organizational Identifications through Discursive Positioning Practices

By introducing positioning theory to the analysis of organizational identification, in this paper I attempt to move its current conceptualizations out of a domain that is problematically associated with functionalist and cognitive framings. Instead I suggest a critical-discursive understanding of organizational identification which takes note of the limiting, complex and potentially shifting attachments that people can have towards an organization. More concretely, by showing six positioning practices that former management consultants engage in for expressing different forms of identification towards a past or present working context, this paper indicates the emancipatory potential that lays within these positioning practices as they invite different subject positions that either help to reinforce or escape imperatives for organizational identification.

3.1 Introduction

Both scholars and practitioners have typically framed organizational identification as a desirable phenomenon which is believed to foster a sense of meaning and belonging among organizational members, thereby leading to high performance and employee retention (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004). A few critical scholars have voiced their concern however, that over-identification with an organization may lead to conformity, a lack of organizational flexibility and individual vulnerability (e.g. Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004; Pratt, 2000). In line with these critical voices, in this paper I try to shed more light on the potentially limiting effects that strong imperatives for organizational identification may have on people who get ‘locked into’ certain subject positions which they cannot easily alter or evade.

Moreover, it has been noted in the literature that organizational identification, rather than being a static one-time process, is best understood as a dynamic and ongoing process that allows people to vary in how and to what degree they identify with an organization (Pratt, 2000). In this paper I argue that a complex understanding of identification is particularly relevant in the context of ‘ambiguity intensive’ organizations such as management consultancies (Alvesson, 1993; Alvesson, 2001), which due to their controversial nature (e.g. Kumra & Valsecchi, 2012, O’Mahoney,
may invite a range of different and potentially even conflicting forms of identification. I furthermore claim that such conflicting identifications can particularly be observed in instances of career changes, when people try to shift their organizational identification away from a past working context towards a new organization.

In her expanded model of identification, Elsbach (1999) highlights this complexity of organizational identification by delineating a range of different possible relationships that individuals may engage in when linking their sense of identity to that of an organization: identification, dis-identification, schizo-identification, and neutral identification (see also Humphreys & Brown, 2002; Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004). While this model certainly provides a more nuanced and multifaceted understanding of organizational attachments than most studies that exclusively focus on processes of attaining positive organizational identification, in this paper I argue that Elsbach’s model, like most existing literature on organizational identification, is based on the premises of social identity theory, which understands identification as primarily a function of cognitive processes of self-categorization and social comparison (Tajfel, 1982; Turner, 1985).

This being said, studies on organizational identification which are based on SIT are facing some growing critique (e.g. Brown & Lunt, 2002; Kenny et al., 2011) for reducing identification to a cognitive phenomenon which is part of human nature rather than viewing it as a social process in which identities and decisions of whom to identify with are constructed discursively (Kenny et al., 2011). As a response to this critique, in this paper I aspire to shift the focus away from such cognitive assumptions towards an understanding of organizational identification through positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990). More concretely, in this paper I set out to study organizational identification through discursive positioning practices which take note of the complex social dynamics that can be observed as people discursively position and re-position themselves towards particular working contexts.

Thus, in order to study organizational identification in a critical-discursive way which takes note a) the potentially limiting effects of identification imperatives, b) the potentially shifting dynamics of organizational identification in response to career change, and c) the complex social processes through which people may position themselves towards an organization, I have formulated the following research
What positioning practices do former management consultants engage in for expressing various forms of identification towards their past and present working context, and with what effects in terms of reinforcing or escaping organizational imperatives for identification?

For investigating this research question empirically, I conducted 30 interviews with former management consultants who at the time of the interview worked in one of the four organizational contexts: corporate business, NGOs, academia or own business start-ups. For analyzing the possible range of different (and shifting) identifications, I particularly examined the discursive positioning practices that former management consultants engaged in for either expressing their close attachment, their (simultaneous) distancing attempts, and/or their neutral stance in relation to a given work context. The analysis indicates that former management consultants engaged in six different positioning practices through which they expressed identification, disidentification, schizo-identification, and/or neutral identification towards their past or new working context.

In general it could be observed that work contexts which offered a broader repertoire of discursive resources for positive identification than others (own business start-ups versus managerial business positions), made it easier for people to shift their organizational identification from the past towards the new working context. Another interesting finding was that neutral identification, which was only observed in response to new working contexts, was primarily expressed through shifting focus away from the work context to other identity relevant non-work spheres of life. This, I argue, may be the most emancipatory move for escaping identification imperatives.

In terms of theoretically developing current understandings of organizational identification, this paper aspires to move its current conceptualizations out of a domain that could be considered as functionalistic (with an aim to improve organizational effectiveness) and cognitive (framing identification as a cognitive link between an organization and a person’s self-concept). More concretely, by introducing positioning theory to the analysis of organizational identification I hope to provide a critical-discursive framework which helps to better understand the potentially limiting effects of identification imperatives on the subject positions of organizational members, the potentially shifting dynamics of organizational identifications that can be observed in response to career change, and the complex social dynamics through
which people position, and re-position themselves towards certain organizations in various ways.

In the following now I will review the literature around management consultancies as ambiguity intensive work contexts that make the study of organizational identification particularly worthwhile (see also Alvesson & Empson, 2007). This will be followed by an introduction of Elsbach’s (1999) expanded model of identification, which appears to be a good starting point for studying the complexity of different and sometimes even conflicting organizational identification. In the conceptual framework I will elaborate upon positioning theory as an alternative route for theorizing the complexity of organizational identification in a critical (rather than functional) and discursive (rather than cognitive) way.

3.2 Management Consultancies as Ambiguity Intensive Working Contexts

Organizational scholars have depicted management consultancies as being highly successful in terms of inviting strong identifications among their employees (Meriläinen et al., 2004), especially through discourses of elitism (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006; Armbrüster, 2004). According to Sturdy and Wright (2008) this organizational identification can be so strong that management consultants continue to identify with their past working context even after leaving the firm. In this paper I set out to challenge this somewhat linear narrative around a positive and continued identification among (former) management consultants by claiming that organizational identification in the context of management consultancies is more complex and ambiguous than currently depicted. While conflicts among multiple and competing organizational identifications can be found across many working contexts (Fine, 1996), it could be argued that such tensions are more likely to be observed in firms like management consultancies, which due to their controversial nature have been categorized as ‘ambiguity intensive’ organizations (Alvesson, 1993; Alvesson, 2001).

For better understanding the contradictions that underpin the consulting assignment (O’Mahoney, 2007) it might be worth noting that management consultancies do not have the same kind of regulation, codified knowledge base and formal education associated with traditional professions (like accountants or lawyers).
As a result, consultants have to establish legitimacy of their expertise differently (Kitay & Wright, 2007) and convince both outsiders as well as insiders that consulting services are worth the money that consultancies charge (Alvesson, 2001; Furusten, 2009). In their attempt to establish this legitimacy, some large global consulting firms have been very successful in establishing a strong corporate brand towards the outside (Kärreman & Rylander, 2008), while towards the inside inviting close identification and a sense of belonging through a strong organizational culture (see also Kitay & Wright, 2007; Kumra & Valsecchi, 2012) where consultants are constructed as belonging to those ‘chosen few’ who – coming from prestigious universities and business schools – can be expected to confidently excel in every aspect of their work (Mühlhaus & Bouwmeester, 2012).

Despite these claims to legitimacy and elite aspirations, management consultancies also attract critical comments however from management practitioners, academics and the business press, who continue to question consultants’ expertise and the merit of their services (Kitay & Wright, 2007; Kumra & Valsecchi, 2012). Management consultants have been accused for example of circulating management fads, promoting costly and harmful organizational changes, or engaging in ethically dubious activities (Kitay & Wright, 2007). Mühlhaus and Bouwmeester (2012) moreover note that management consulting is a very stress intensive industry, where consultants – in order to operate profitably – are under constant pressure to deliver results to the client (see also Meriläinen et al., 2004). These characteristics have led to negative images and interpretations of the consulting job which clearly clash with the elite consulting image depicted earlier. The resulting ambiguity renders management consultancies as a good site for critically examining processes of complex and shifting organizational attachments. In the following section I will delineate Elsbach’s expanded model of identification which seems to be a good starting point for addressing this complexity.

3.3 Organizational Identification – A Complex Phenomenon

In her expanded model of identification, Elsbach (1999) delineates a range of different possible relationships that individuals may engage in when linking their sense of identity to that of an organization. In this way, Elsbach recognizes the notion that “an individual’s identity is defined by what a person connects to, what a person
disconnects from, and what a person neither connects to or disconnects from” (Elsbach, 1999: 178), thereby introducing concepts of positive identification, dis-identification, schizo-identification, and neutral identification (see also Humphreys & Brown, 2002; Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004).

While positive identification signifies the degree to which people define themselves in terms of their membership to an organization (Bamber & Iyer, 2002; Dutton et. al., 1994; Mael & Ashforth, 1992), dis-identification respectively indicates the degree to which a person defines herself as not sharing the same characteristics that she believes define the organization (see also Hogg & Terry, 2000; Turner 1985; Turner et al., 1987). This may entail a person’s conscious separation from the organization’s mission and culture if these are found to be objectionable. Employees may even go as far in their dis-identification as to conceal from others their actual place of employment. Given the deep conflicts felt between detached members and the organization, dis-identification is often framed as undesirable, either resulting in high costs of turnover or harmful behavior if individuals are unwilling or unable to leave the organization (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004).

Schizo-identification (Elsbach, 1999; Humphreys & Brown, 2002), also referred to as conflicted or ambivalent identification (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004), describes a state in which people hold two contrary positions. Given the complex and multifaceted nature of organizations which often invites mixed feelings, people have been observed to move towards, away from and sometimes even against their organizations (Pratt, 2000). It has been argued that this display of both identification and dis-identification may in fact occur simultaneously (Elsbach, 1999; Humphreys & Brown, 2002; Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004). Research has shown that such an ambivalent state of simultaneously being pulled in two different directions is not uncommon and can be maintained over long periods of time (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004; Thompson & Holmes, 1996). At the same time, schizo-identification is not too well received as mixed messages about one’s identification can lead to perceptions of hypocrisy, isolation or even pressures to conform (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004; Meyerson & Scully, 1995).

Another form of identification that Elsbach (1999) mentioned is that of neutral identification (see also Humphreys & Brown 2002; Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004). It refers to a self-perception of being impartial towards an organization, marked by an
explicit absence of either feeling attached or detached from the organization (Kenny et al., 2011). Interestingly, this weakness of affiliation is not understood as the mere absence of a phenomenon. On the contrary, even neutral positioning towards an organization may be acknowledged as a salient self-definition in its own right where people – possibly on the basis of past experiences – consciously decide to avoid extreme attachments. And yet, based on the believe that neutral employees are less engaged and committed to contribute to the organization’s goals, mission and values, such a weak attachment is often framed as suboptimal for organizations (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004).

While Elsbach certainly provides a helpful framework for investigating the complexity of organizational identification, it must be noted that her model is based on the premises of social identity theory (SIT), which explains the phenomenon of identification through cognitive processes of self-categorizations and social comparison (Tajfel, 1982; Turner, 1985). Consequently her contribution to the field, in her own understanding, is “a theory of organizational identification that includes three new cognitive processes” (Elsbach, 1999: 163). With the aim of moving away from this cognitive framing of organizational identification, which is contested by now for artificially separating the individual as a rational agent from the organization (Brown & Lunt, 2002) and for remaining insensitive to discourse and thus the notion of political domination (He & Brown, 2013), in the following I will introduce the concept of positioning practices for better delineating, through a discursive rather than cognitive model, how different forms of identification can be achieved.

3.4 Studying Identification through Discursive Positioning

In the course of spelling out their positioning theory within a social psychology of selfhood, Davies and Harré (1990) delineated a concept of ‘positioning’ which refers to the discursive production of selves, where people – in conversational talk (McInnes & Corlett, 2012) – adopt and commit themselves to inhabit certain positions. When people take up a specific position in discourse, they interpret the world from a certain perspective and vantage point which momentarily calls them into a given subject-position (Smith, 1988; Davies & Harré, 1990). Once an individual’s intentions are structured by that subject position, he or she may increasingly become bound by it (Harré & Gillet, 1994). In view of that, organizations often try to influence – e.g.
through discourses of professionalism, team work and loyalty – how people position themselves towards their workplace (Coupland & Brown, 2012). And despite some predictions that in liquid modernity organizations would be governed in less hierarchical and less normalized ways (Clegg & Baumeler, 2010), it has been argued that managerial efforts for achieving organizational attachments have only become more subtle and shifty (Coupland & Brown, 2012).

Dis-identification, which has been delineated earlier, can hence be considered a way for employees to resist certain imperatives for identifying with a company. This involves negotiating or even refusing certain organizational discourses and the subject positions which they make available. To change one’s subject position therefore means to alter, sometimes drastically, a prevalent storyline and to position oneself in another (Harré et al., 2009). Harré (2001) moreover noted that people can in fact position themselves within a colorful and varied repertoire of different life stories, all providing different accounts of organizational attachments. It is not surprising then that people stand in multiple, and potentially contradictory positions towards an organization.

Davies and Harré (1990) consider this to be the strength of their theory, namely that it helps to explain both the constitutive force of discursive positioning, as much as it recognizes people’s capability of exercising choice in light of alternative positioning practices. Within this framework there is no definite answer to the question of organizational identification, but rather it is a ‘shifting answer’ that depends on the multiplicity of positions made available within one’s own and within the discursive practices of others. In this view, alternative positioning is often a matter of actively creating and bringing hidden possibilities to the surface (Kuhn, 2009).

By investigating the various positioning practices that former management consultants engage in when reflecting upon their past and present working contexts, in this study I set out to shed more light on the complexity of how exactly identities are positioned and re-positioned discursively in response to career change. Based on the idea that organizational contexts make available and sometimes strategically employ particular discursive resources for increasing organizational attachment among their members (Kuhn et al., 2008; Taylor, 2007), I will moreover pay attention to how different discursive resources enable or limit shifts in organizational identification as people move from one organizational context to another.
3.5 Refined Research Questions

The reviewed literature has depicted management consultancies as ambiguity intensive organizations which invite a whole range of different and potentially conflicting identifications. These different forms of identification have been elaborated upon along Elsbach’s (1999) model of expanded identification, while theoretical concepts around positioning practices have guided the way towards investigating the complexity of organizational identifications in a critical-discursive rather than functionalistic and cognitive research orientation, especially in light of career changes which may encompass a shift in identifications.

To steer the analysis process accordingly, I have refined the broader research question of “What positioning practices do former management consultants engage in for expressing various forms of identification towards their past and present working context, and with what effects in terms of reinforcing or escaping organizational imperatives for identification?” into the following, more nuanced, analytical questions:

1. What discursive positioning practices did former management consultants engage in for expressing any form of organizational identification (including dis-identification, schizo-identification and neutral identification) towards either their past consulting context or their present working context?

2. What discursive resources did interviewees draw upon in their various positioning practices and how did these resources enable or limit shifts in organizational identifications (away from the consulting past towards the new working context)?

3. What subject positions were created and offered through the various positioning practices and how may these subject positions reinforce or escape organizational imperatives for identification?
In the ‘data analysis’ section I will elaborate on how these analytical questions have guided the analysis process and structured the presentation of results. Before doing so, I will first lay out the methodological set-up of the study.

### 3.6 Methodology

#### 3.6.1 Sample and Data Collection

I conducted 30 interviews with ex-consultants who are now working in different organizational settings. While all of the interviewed ex-consultants formed a rather homogeneous group, i.e. all expert consultants coming from a major global strategy or management consultancy, there was yet a good amount of diversity among the interviewees, especially as interviewees were chosen from the following different organizational contexts: 1) corporate business, 2) NGOs, 3) academia, and 4) own business start-ups.

Other relevant parameters of variation were the time spent in consultancy (thereby also comprising different levels of seniority), which ranged from less than 1 year to 10 years with an average of 3 years spent in consultancy, and the time that people had been out of the consultancy when doing the interview, which ranged from less than 1 year to 9 years, with an average of 2 years. 8 of the interviewees were female (27%), which somewhat reflects the ratio of men and women in most German or Swiss based management consultancies.

At the beginning of the interviews, I gave brief information on my current research interests, namely people’s positioning practices across changing organizational contexts. I explained that I was above all interested in stories rather than pure facts and encouraged the interviewees to share their stories by imagining, that they, in a couple of years, would have the idea of writing up their life story in a book. I asked interviewees to delineate the important chapters and to think of interesting and remarkable aspects or episodes that they would feel worth sharing in that book. Given the time constraint of approximately one hour (interviews ranged from 45 to 135 minutes), the ex-consultants were then asked to only reveal their stories starting from the time they entered university.
3.6.2 Data Analysis

After fully transcribing all interviews, the first step taken in what turned out to be an iterative data analysis process of moving back and forth between data, literature and analysis, was a repeated reading of the interview transcripts which helped to identify first emerging themes, patterns and peculiarities in the data. As a second step I color-coded the various transcripts according to how interviewees positioned themselves either towards the consulting past or the new working context. To better structure the further analysis, I then organized the analysis and later presentation of results around the various analytical questions delineated earlier. That is, I first analyzed the positioning practices that former management consultants engaged in which expressed various forms of identification towards the consulting past as well as their new working context. For this I particularly focused on the discursive resources that interviewees drew upon across the various positioning practices.

While all interviewees drew on the same set of available discursive resources when positioning themselves towards the past consulting context, I observed some considerable variations – based on the differences in the new work settings – in terms of what discursive resources interviewees drew upon when positioning themselves towards the new working context. Secondly, and again with a focus on discursive resources, I paid attention to the extent that identification with the new working context marked a potential shift in people’s (continued) identification with the consulting past. And finally, I made some suggestions for the potential subject positions that these various positioning practices invited, also taking note of the emancipatory potential of these positions.

The analysis indicates that former management consultants engaged in six different positioning practices that enabled them to a) (continuously) identify with the consulting context by ‘reviving the past’, b) to dis-identify with their previous consulting context by ‘closing the past’, c) to identify with the new working context by ‘embracing the present’, d) to distance themselves from the new context by ‘degrading the present’, e) to position themselves as overtly ambivalent (schizo-identification) in light of their career change by ‘remaining ambiguous’, and finally f) to show more neutral identification with the new working context by ‘shifting the focus’ to some non-work related aspects of their identity. These positioning practices respectively invited subject positions of ‘nostalgic ex-consultant’, ‘legitimate career
changer’, ‘contented career changer’, ‘frustrated ex-consultant’, ‘undecided career juggler’ and ‘well rounded individual’.

3.7 Findings

3.7.1 Reviving the Past

One positioning practice that former management consultants engaged in was that of reviving the past, through which they exhibited continued identification with the consulting context. By drawing on discursive resources which highlighted cultural, interpersonal, developmental and reputational aspects of the consultancy, the past working experience became depicted as still being relevant for identity positionings in the new working context.

When drawing upon the discursive resource of a strong organizational culture, the following interviewee positioned himself as still being absorbed in the glorified consulting past:

In that which I do and how I work, especially because it was my first real job, I identify very much with the consultancy. When it is a matter of how I do something I would always say “we” when referring to the consultancy. “We” do it like this or that. That I haven’t stopped and I will not stop it either. [...] Well, in that sense I am still brainwashed (Daniel, Industry, Interview 16).

Daniel, who at the time of the interview is working in the commodity industry, acknowledges that the continued identification with the consulting past – two years after exiting the firm – may be attributed to some kind of “brainwashing”, a term that indicates his awareness of how identities are shaped in the context of management consultancies through a strong organizational culture. Despite the negative connotation around the term brainwashing, Daniel is eager to hold on to his affiliation with the past working context, thereby assuming the subject position of ‘nostalgic ex-consultant’ which signifies the ongoing effects of past imperatives for identification. Related to the notion of organizational culture is the discursive resource of having established strong personal bonds in the consulting past which remain relevant even in the post-exit context. Some interviewees claimed that they had made friends for a lifetime, thereby pointing out the ongoing importance of these personal ties.
Another discursive resource that former consultants drew upon for reviving the consulting past was that of a steep learning curve which is framed as being a major asset in one’s overall professional development:

The entire training was excellent, where on the one hand you get the theoretical know-how and on the other hand you get to apply it really quick. […] This is how you get involved in very important questions even as a young person. […] Even today I still profit a lot from what I have learned (Steve, NGO, Interview 25).

By recalling the trainings and his learning experience as being “excellent”, and by claiming that he still profits from this experience today as he is working for an NGO, this discursive resource enables a positioning that reflects continued identification with the past working context.

Moreover, by drawing on the discursive resource of prestige (which is also related to the discursive resource of good compensation) some interviewees made explicit why it can be very appealing to continuously identify with the consulting past, and why the subject position of (nostalgic) ex-consultant can be an attractive position to assume even in the new working context:

[The consulting background] gives me the prestige and the standing that I always wanted to have. I knew that this would help me later for moving into a different area. And I do feel flattered when I can say that I was in consulting and I get this recognition (Karl, Social Entrepreneur, Interview 8).

Even though prestige is clearly linked to the consultancy, for Karl it continues to be a source for recognition even in his new social enterprise where he can take pride in his affiliation with the past working context.

3.7.2 Closing the Past

A second positioning practice that former management consultants engaged in was that of closing the past. In this positioning practice interviewees drew on discursive resources that expressed dis-identification towards the consulting past by retrospectively constructing it as an unpleasant experience. In that way interviewees justified their exit decision, constructed it as an ultimate and irrevocable step (thereby closing the past) and positioned themselves as ‘legitimate career changer’ which may be understood as a liberation from past imperatives for organizational identification.
In the following interview passage, Tom who at the time of the interview is working in academia, draws on the discursive resource of high performance pressure to position himself critically towards the consulting past:

We had a project leader who was completely overworked. Somehow he didn’t sleep anymore. That was ridiculous. He was a grown-up man who started biting his fingernails again. These were images that simply lacked a bit of dignity. Well sure, towards the client he was always professional, but if you saw him like that, that was just very, very disturbing. Because I don’t believe that you can work like this (Tom, Academia, Interview 7).

By uncovering the ‘Janus face’ character of consulting, where consultants come across as extremely professional to the outside world, while behind the scenes they deteriorate psychologically, Tom makes a strong case for this being an intolerable working condition. By stating his irritation and his doubt that one can “work like this”, he clearly dis-identifies with the consultancy and its unsustainable working practices, thereby assuming the position of ‘legitimate career changer’.

Another discursive resource that ex-consultants drew upon when engaging in the positioning practice of closing the past was that of doing meaningless work:

I reached a point for myself where I saw I wanted to do something meaningful. And that is not going to change in the consultancy. That is the nature of the business that you are optimizing businesses in the private sector. This is just not anything I care about. In hindsight I have used the consultancy as a training which is now completed. There is no point of going back (Lea, NGO, Interview 23).

By depicting the consulting business as rather static – “that is the nature of the business” and “that is not going to change” – Lea makes particularly explicit the closure of her consulting experience as something which belongs to the past, which is “now completed” and which holds no return option for her in terms of “going back”. This allows Lea to clearly distance herself from the past working context and to emphasize that this is no longer relevant for her current identity positioning within the NGO.

Another discursive resource that interviewees drew upon for distancing themselves from the past was the recalling of negative consulting images:
In the beginning, when I entered into consulting, I had this ‘concept of the enemy’, something that I never wanted to become. And I realized how you slowly develop into that. That really makes you think and that becomes a cry out for help that it’s time to quickly move on (Josha, Entrepreneur, Interview 19).

When realizing that he had gradually been developing into the direction of ‘the enemy’ himself – a ruthless and arrogant profit maximizer as he later explains – he almost renders himself as a passive victim to a manipulative consultancy culture that left him with no choice but to ‘cry out for help’. Distancing himself from the consultancy past is not only an effect of ‘quickly moving on’, that is, of exiting the consultancy, but also of positioning himself in this critical corner.

3.7.3 Embracing the Present

A third positioning practice that former management consultants engaged in was that of embracing the present where they expressed their positive identification with the new working context. This positive identification was often supported by comparative assessments between the past and the present which depicted the new working context as being better in a certain aspect than the consultancy, thereby indicating a shift in identification. As indicated earlier, different working contexts provided interviewees with a range of different discursive resources for shifting organizational identifications. This variation will be delineated in the following.

The business context was often depicted as relatively comparable to the consulting context, especially when people had moved to a managerial or in-house consulting function that required a similar kind of work or expertise. Despite this similarity and comparability – or maybe even because of it – interviewees in the business context often drew on the discursive resource of experiencing more appreciation of their work:

People totally appreciate my work. […] And you think, before I would have done something similar in the consultancy and they would have said “this is not enough”. And now it’s just great (Amelie, Consumer Goods Industry, Interview 9).

Amelie, who at the time of the interview was managing change projects in a multi-national organization, points out here that content-wise her work did not differ very
much when compared to past consulting projects. At the same time, the way in which her work is perceived and valued has changed for the better, thus providing a more enjoyable working atmosphere. More appreciation of people’s work also led to faster promotions and an overall feeling of achievement and recognition, inviting the subject position of ‘contented career changer’, which marks a shift away from past identification imperatives towards the acceptance of new invitations to identity with the present working context.

Interviewees who had moved to an NGO or academic working context seemed to have a wider repertoire of discursive resources available for alternative identity positionings in the new working context, and thus for a shift in organizational identification. Additional to the discursive resource of more appreciation of one’s work, interviewees in these new working contexts drew on discursive resources that by comparison to the consulting past depicted the new working context as being morally or intellectually superior. Interviewees from the NGO, by drawing on the discursive resource of doing more meaningful work, strongly emphasized their sense of purpose associated with the new working context that aimed beyond profit-maximizing:

People [at the NGO] are purpose-driven else they would not be here. That makes a huge difference of course. We are not hired guns; we act out of conviction (Steve, NGO, Interview 25).

Based on his sense of purpose, Steve depicts himself and his colleagues at the NGO as being highly committed to and thus strongly identified with their work assignment.

In a similar vein, and parallel to the notion of moral superiority, ex-consultants moving to an academic context framed this setting as being intellectually superior to the consulting past in terms of producing more innovative and avant-garde knowledge:

In the university context we are involved in the early phases of this knowledge creation process. That means we work on problems which cannot be sold to a client today or tomorrow. […] Consulting firms work with tools and concepts that, from a scholarly standpoint, are actually not so new (Ferdinand, Academia, Interview 21).
While interviewees moving to the NGO and academic context seemed to have a broader repertoire of discursive resources to draw upon than people now working in a business context, the group of entrepreneurs seemed to have the richest repertoire of resources available for shifting their identification towards the new working context. One discursive resource they drew upon quite frequently was ‘more autonomy/decision-making power’ which became a key anchor for identification in the new setting:

As consultant you can sell things very nicely and you can impress people with slides and then you leave again. But yes, whether it works or not, that you will never find out. […] Since I am my own boss now, nobody tells me what to do. […] I find it much more exciting to push my own topic. The decisions I made six months ago, they still have an impact today (Michael, Entrepreneur, Interview 10).

While the consulting context is described as a restricting environment where one cannot see the impact of one’s work, the new entrepreneurial context is experienced as liberating and meaningful. The potentially most powerful discursive resource for identifying with the new working context was probably that of having found one’s ‘calling’:

I can tell that this is the place where I belong. Where on the one hand I can learn something, where I move on, where I feel good, but on the other hand I am also needed here. And I have the feeling that I am the ideal person to make this happen in Switzerland (Karl, Entrepreneur, Interview 8).

Overall it was found that entrepreneurs had most discursive resources available for embracing the present and for assuming the subject position of ‘contented career changer’.

3.7.4 Degrad ing the Present

When engaging in the positioning practice of degrading the present, interviewees drew on discursive resources that expressed dis-identification towards the new working context. In this positioning practice the new working context – especially when being compared to the consulting past – is depicted as being inferior and not enjoyable to work for. It could be argued that this positioning practice overall limited shifts in
organizational identification. Again, the degree of dis-identification varied with the repertoire of discursive resources available in the different working contexts for constructing a distance between themselves and the new work setting.

As mentioned earlier, discursive resources for positive identification with the new working context were most limited in the business context. Respectively, the positioning practice of degrading the present was also most prevalently observed among this group of interviewees. One discursive resource that enabled people to actively distance themselves from the new working context was that of politics in the world of corporate business:

Management consultancies are usually meritocratic. [...] Corporate world is much more political, especially at higher levels. As I said, this might correlate with this “blame me, blame you” or “who can prove what” culture. [...] And this of course is a huge difference compared to a management consultancy where you have a completely different code of ethics (John, In-house consulting, Interview 2).

While the notion of meritocracy associated with the consultant context is associated with fairness, transparency and a particular code of ethics, the political firm culture in the business setting by contrast is said to have a negative impact on one’s career advancement as this is susceptible to political games.

Another discursive resource for dis-identifying with the business context was the lack of professionalism, especially when compared to the consulting past:

When you go into industry and you do your work just like you did in the consultancy, then you already do things 200 times better than everyone else. [...] When you get something back, it comes mostly too late. [...] And when it comes back, either on time or not, only half of the work is done or something completely wrong was done. They don’t even ask for clarification (Daniel, Industry, Interview 16).

By depicting the new working context as well as the new colleagues as being inferior, or even calling them “idiots” as he does in a different interview passage, Daniel experiences this lack of professionalism as a source of frustration which clearly limits his inclination to identify with the new working context, thereby inviting the subject position of “frustrated ex-consultant”. This subject position signifies that past
imperatives for organizational identification are still prevalent, while invitations for alternative identification in the new working context are refuted.

In contrast to this negative depiction of the career shift towards a new business context, people moving to an NGO or academic context were often more positive in their narrations. But even these interviewees drew on some discursive resources that reflected dis-identification towards the new working context. Especially in comparison to the consulting past the new working context was often produced as slow and less energetic thereby limiting a shift in organizational identification. Ferdinand, the same interviewee who in an earlier quote had praised the academic environment for its intellectual superiority also sees potential downsides in this context:

Sometimes I think, well, three years ago I would have done things much more efficiently. I would not be going home yet, but instead I would sit down again and finish a task. But this drive is not individually sustainable. Over time you cannot maintain this drive on your own. You cannot preserve the energy; that needs to come from the environment. No matter how much drive you have, if you are surrounded by people who have no drive it will be very difficult to have a lot of drive (Ferdinand, Academia, Interview 21).

By attributing his lack of “drive” to the new environment and his new colleagues, this discursive resource becomes a source for dis-identifying with the present context. Another discursive resource for dis-identification, also drawn upon in the business context, was a lack of professionalism. Particularly in situations when new colleagues by comparison did not show a desired or expected level of professionalism, interviewees returned to the positioning practice of reviving the past which again limited the possibilities for shifting organizational identification towards the new working context.

And finally, in line with the observation that interviewees from the entrepreneurial context had the broadest repertoire of discursive resources available for embracing and positively identifying with their new working context, I also found that they were least negative about anything in the new working context. Discursive resources for potential dis-identification at best revealed the difficulties associated with starting one’s own business, such as lacking an infrastructure, finding the required funding and having to establish oneself in a certain field:
Of course the competitive pressure is much higher because you are selling yourself as a private person. You don’t have an organization, you do not have research staff, you have no branding. You’re selling yourself by competence. And that of course is extremely difficult (Timon, Entrepreneur, Interview 20).

Even though most entrepreneurs reported such starting difficulties as Timon does, these difficulties were mostly framed as challenges rather than obstacles within the new working context.

### 3.7.5 Remaining Ambiguous

In the positioning practice of remaining ambiguous interviewees reported upon being torn between different positionings of either positive identification and disidentification, especially when comparing their present and past working context and the related discursive resources that may either enable or limit a shift in organizational identification. The following interviewee admits that he often thinks of his good compensation in the consultancy and even doubts his decision to exit. At the same time he is very clear that he is not planning to return to the consultancy either:

> I have to admit that in hindsight I have the tendency to glorify things. There I have to be a bit careful. When I see that it's the same shit for less money then I think that maybe I should have stayed for a year longer, until the next level or so. [...] But that I would actively apply again to the consultancy, I am miles away from that (Jens, In-house Consulting, Interview 6).

Even though Jens admits to glorify the consulting past by often thinking of the good money, there are other dimensions to his professional identity that rule out a possible return to the consultancy. At the same time Jens has difficulties to find discursive resources for alternative identity positionings in the new working context. By making comparative references he mostly highlights aspects that were better in the consulting past, thereby assuming the subject position of ‘undecided career juggler’. This subject position, it could be argued, reflects an ambiguity which is triggered by the liberation from and a simultaneous reinforcement of past identification imperatives, which likewise results in an ambiguous positioning towards new invitations for identification in the present working context.
Therefore, in this positioning practice former management consultants also reflected upon their career move as either being a right or wrong decision:

The question is whether career-wise I should have stayed a bit longer [in the consultancy]. Probably yes, but maybe I was not patient enough. On the other hand it was just not the right thing. I was just too lazy or too consequent and have then decided [to go]. Well, we will see whether this was wise or not. For the moment it's okay (Tom, Academia, Interview 7).

While on the one hand drawing on the notion of “being too lazy” and “not patient enough” to endure the unpleasant consulting environment, and thereby challenging his exit decision as being based on low motives, Tom on the other hand asserts his decision again by drawing on the idea of being “consequent”, explaining that this was “not the right thing” for him. Rather than making a final assessment of his career move he maintains that the future will show whether it was the right thing to do or not, thereby upholding the ambiguous positioning that surrounds his career move.

And finally former management consultants admitted to face ambiguity when trying to let go of a previous (prestigious) identity positioning. In the following meta-reflection the interviewee is rather puzzled about his continued association with the consulting past:

And that’s the tragedy. People are really wasting their time in consulting because they chase after an ideal image, something which they don’t really want to be. And still they are captured by this status thinking and wanting to prove that they belong to the best. […] And there’s also that part inside of me that cannot let go. And I think that’s crazy because I finally arrived at a place where I feel good, where I enjoy the work, where I actually don’t need this. But I can tell that this part is still there (Karl, Social Entrepreneur, Interview 8).

Despite having arrived at a work environment that provides meaningful and enjoyable work, and thus a range of discursive resources for alternative identity positionings, Karl clearly points out that he continues to have a (consultant) “part inside of him” that will not let him come to a rest.

3.7.6 Shifting Focus

In the positioning practice of shifting focus, interviewees drew on discursive resources that were not directly related to the new working context, but on the contrary were
grounded in some non-work sphere of life. In that way, a more neutral relationship was (indirectly) indicated towards the arena of work. This positioning practice was almost exclusively observed when interviewees reported upon their new working contexts and it was mostly observed among interviewees working in business or academia. In these contexts, interviewees particularly drew on the discursive resource of having more time for the family after their career change:

Now I have the freedom, let’s say, to have my children and to be well involved as their father (Klaus, In-house consulting, Interview 3).

While the consulting context is described as leaving little space for non-work engagements, the business work context – even when holding an in-house consulting position – often made available more time for better balancing work and family commitments. Besides having more time for family, and especially for children, another discursive resource was that of engaging in alternative activities such as sports, other hobbies or social commitments that were not directly related to a person’s job:

For my private life things have also changed considerably of course. Because now I go home instead of going to some hotel room and watching telly, or having a beer with colleagues. Instead I actually have a second life again at home. […] I have another responsibility in an association, where I am actually quite involved during the week as well. And yes, that’s just a change from the job and that’s very, very good for me (Markus, Financial Services, Interview 1).

All these other areas of life were recounted as contributing to one’s overall happiness. This happiness, based on the notion of enjoying life more generally, became a discursive resource itself, allowing for an overall more neutral identification with the workplace:

We learned to live with little money. We learned to live with little time. Now we have a bit of both. And without being rich, and even with doing our jobs, we are very contented with what we have. This really fulfilled private life with enough time for the family, the home and the hobbies; really to enjoy our life. We have reached our biggest goals, we have worked for that, and now we are allowed to enjoy that as well (Paul, Research Institute, Intervivew 17).
In this interview passage, Paul makes very clear that him and his wife have worked very hard in the past, making many sacrifices in terms of working long hours, sometimes even for a modest pay. This he takes as a basis for legitimizing that career advancement was no longer his primary concern, but that after reaching his biggest goals, he feels entitled to enjoy his achievements. This more neutral positioning towards the new working context invites the subject position of ‘well-rounded individual’, where imperatives for identification towards the present working context, it could be argued, are undermined by shifting the focus to other areas for identification.
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*Table 5* Overview Scheme for the Different Positioning Practices
3.8 Discussion/ Conclusion

As the results of the analysis – summarized in Table 4 – indicate, six different positioning practices have been observed that former management consultants engaged in for expressing their various identifications towards their past and their present working context. In this paper I argue that these different positioning practices – together with their associated form of identification, the resulting subject position, and the potential to reinforce or escape identification imperatives – suggest a new way for how to conceptualize organizational identification in a critical-discursive rather than functionalist and cognitive way. In the following I will elaborate how this can be achieved and what consequences this may have for how to understand processes of organizational identification in a novel way.

First of all, the suggested reading of organizational identification through positioning theory which takes note of the potentially limiting effects that identification imperatives may have on the subject positions of organizational members, stands in clear contrast to most studies on organizational identification which can be situated within a functionalist research orientation that is driven by a technical interest (Habermas, 1972) towards improving organizational effectiveness. This being said, studies with a functionalist research orientation that investigate ways for controlling parameters of employee commitment, loyalty and motivation have been criticized for a bias towards positive organizational identification and for taking an exclusive interest in instrumental utility (Pratt, 2000), which in post-structural thinking is rather condemned for drawing over-simplified, linear cause-and-effect relationships (Alvesson et al., 2008).

Even though a few scholars have started to also explore the ‘dark side’, that is, the potentially negative effects of organizational (over-)identification on both individuals and organizations (e.g. Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004; Pratt 2000), these more critical studies have almost exclusively looked at processes of dis-identification, through which employees may attempt to block or escape imperatives for identification (Kärreman & Spicer, 2009). While dis-identification can indeed become a way for resisting identification imperatives, this paper has indicated though, that rather than always creating a distance towards a particular working context, dis-identification in co-existence with positive identification may actually lead to schizo-identification which can potentially ‘lock people in’ to an ongoing state of ambiguity,
thereby creating the subject position of ‘ongoing career juggler’ who is neither fully subjected to nor effectively liberated from imperatives for identification. This calls for a more critical investigation of dis-identification and its potential for resistance.

Also, shifting organizational identifications – away from a strongly identity shaping context of the past towards a new work environment – could at first glance be mistaken for an emancipatory move. And yet, my analysis of positioning practices has illustrated how people, when moving from a strongly identity shaping working context (such as a management consultancy) into other identity relevant work environments (such as social enterprises or NGOs) actually progress into the same direction of adhering to organizational imperatives for positive identification. In line with that argument, research has illustrated that in numerous nonprofit organizations, where monetary compensation is kept at minimum, discursive resources are made available to people for compellingly framing their work as a sacrifice or spiritual calling, thereby positioning themselves as advocates for important causes (Dempsey & Sanders, 2010; Kuhn et al., 2008). Likewise, studies which have examined people’s responses to the increasing pressures of new public management reforms in university and business school settings (e.g. Clarke et al., 2009; Garcia & Hardy, 2007) have illustrated that people are often complicit with the new demands for accountability as they integrate them into their sense of academic identities, thereby generously overlooking the sometimes instrumental demands that are progressively being imposed on them. This again could lock people into subject positions which they cannot easily change or resist.

Therefore, with a critical perspective on imperatives for organizational identification and their effects on the subject positions of organizational members, in this paper I claim that even if it can have benefits when working contexts provide meaning to their employees, a healthy form of organizational identification is probably one that also leaves space for alternative sources and areas of identification that are not only associated with one’s working life (Kuhn, 2009). For that, people might have to resist subject positions made available in larger organizational discourses and instead be active in the construction of alternative discourses. And indeed, as the analysis in this paper indicates, shifts in identity positionings do not only stem from work-related contexts, but they can be built upon discourses of family, hobbies and life-style which encompass meanings beyond organizational discourses.
When identity positionings move into the direction of primarily being placed in such non-work spheres of life, it could be argued, organizational identification becomes increasingly more neutral (see also Kuhn, 2009).

By emphasizing that neutral identification is not necessarily just a lack of organizational identification and commitment, but potentially a way to achieve a healthy balance between the work and private sphere of life, this paper has depicted positioning practices that achieve such a more neutral identification as potentially being a promising emancipatory step to counter positive, negative or ambiguous forms of over-identification, thereby challenging the mostly functionalist framings and providing a more critical and therefore emancipatory reading of organizational identification, especially in the context of career changes.

Mentioning the notion of career change which I have associated with complex and shifting organizational identifications, in this paper I have moreover supported Elsbach’s (1999) claim that processes of organizational identification are more complex and multifaceted than often assumed in managerial practices as well as in the organizational literature. This may be even more so, I have argued, for people working in strongly identity shaping, yet ambiguity intensive working contexts such as management consultancies. To further extend upon this point I suggested that the complexity of organizational identification can particularly be observed in relation to career changes which may additionally encompass a shift in identification away from a past working context towards a new organization. While embracing Elsbach’s model of complexity, in this paper I have above all aspired to further develop and refine current understandings around complex organizational identifications by problematizing the theoretical assumptions that Elsbach’s theory – and the theory of social identity more generally – are built upon.

Ever since Ashforth and Mael (1989) developed the concept of organizational identification by borrowing from Tajfel’s (1982) and Turner’s (1985) social identity theory (SIT), SIT has remained the most prominent theory for exploring notions around organizational identification, asserting that a member’s tendency to identify with an organization increases with the positive evaluation and distinctiveness of an organization in comparison to other organizations. While there is great consensus in the literature on the conceptualization of organizational identification from a social identity perspective, and thus, as primarily being a cognitive construct, I agree with
scholars – including discursive psychologists (e.g. Billig, 1997; Edwards, 1997; Wetherell & Potter, 1992) – who find the predominantly cognitive depiction of identification problematic. More generally it can be argued that the domination of one particular perspective or school of thought can stifle the theoretical understanding and development of a particular social phenomenon. Especially, when there is a lack of critical debate, deviant voices and counter-ideas, there is little room for alternative views (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011).

Alvesson and Sandberg (2011) problematize such a colonization of particular research areas and encourage scholars to actively question and critically scrutinize established knowledge in academia by revising existing theorizations in the pursuit of reflexivity, creativity and imagination, especially when developing a broader understanding of metatheoretical standpoints. They state that “what makes a theory interesting and influential is that it challenges our assumptions in some significant way” (p. 247). While other identity scholars such as Kreiner and Ashforth (2004) or Humphreys and Brown (2002) have also tried to advance our understanding of organizational identification by drawing on Elsbach’s model, they have done so – even when embedding the model into a narrative framework – without explicitly challenging the cognitive assumptions that Elsbach’s theory and SIT more broadly are built upon.

More innovative theorizing, as Alvesson and Sandberg (2011) argue, may require a reconsideration of the antecedents of a theory however, where scholars go back to challenge the underlying assumptions of a given theory (see also Brown & Lunt, 2002). Thus, when going back to the predominant cognitive theorizing of organizational identification based on SIT it may be problematized for instance how this theory artificially separates the individual as rational agent from society (Brown & Lunt, 2002). Moreover, it may be criticized that by remaining insensitive to discourse and thus the notion of political domination, SIT ignores wider processes and relations of power in which statements on identity are made and forgotten, championed or contested (He & Brown, 2013).

Critics have therefore argued that for understanding organizational identification as a genuinely social rather than cognitive process, the mainstream tradition would greatly benefit from alternative explorations and theorizations of the concept (Brown & Lunt, 2002). Accordingly, in this study in which I have explored
the identity constructions of ex-consultants through their various organizational attachments towards their past and present employers, I have tried to shift focus away from the cognitive assumptions underlying SIT by suggesting positioning theory as an alternative route for conceptualizing organizational identification. More concretely, by examining organizational identification through a variety of different discursive positioning practices that people engaged in for expressing their multiple and sometimes conflicting organizational attachments as they moved from the ambiguity intensive working context of a management consultancy towards a new work environment, I have tried to shed more light on the complex social dynamics that are in place as people position and re-position themselves discursively towards a particular working context.

In summary it could be said that by introducing positioning theory to the study of organizational identification, I have suggested a new conceptualization of the phenomenon which is neither grounded in a functionalistic research orientation that primarily aims to improve organizational effectiveness, nor is it based on the premises of SIT and thus a cognitive framing of identification which only provides a limited understanding of the complex social and potentially shifting dynamics of organizational identification. On the contrary, by investigating the discursive positioning practices that former management consultants engaged in as they moved from the ambiguity intensive working context of a consultancy to a new work environment, I have provided a critical-discursive framework which helps to understand organizational identification as a dynamic, intrinsically social and potentially shifting process which allows people to position and re-position themselves in different ways towards an organization, while still taking note of the potentially limiting effects that identification imperatives may have on the subject positions of organizational members. Moreover, I hope that this paper provides a first step as well towards moving out of a dialectic discussion between studies that on the one hand promote organizational identification as a desirable achievement and those studies that on the other hand exclusively focus on dis-identification as a way to resist identification imperatives. By highlighting the emancipatory potential that lies within neutral positionings towards a particular working context, I hope that my study opens new avenues for investigating matters of identification in a different way.
Interview Vignettes V: Ambiguity, Contradictions, Competing Positions

Tom (Interview 7): “I was just too lazy or too consequent”

We had a project leader who was completely exhausted. Somehow he didn’t sleep anymore. That was just, that was ridiculous. He was a grown-up man who started biting his fingernails again. These were images which simply lacked a bit of dignity. Well sure. Towards the client one always displays countenance, but if you saw him like that, for me that was very, very disturbing. Because I don’t believe that you can work like that. That you can deliver good results like that. [...] 

What is quite remarkable also is that the company’s name is spelled all in capital letters. I mean, when you think of other English terms that are spelled like, all in capitals, these are other things. For me personally these things don’t play on one level, what such a firm can be. And then also this commitment, it is a certain religiousness or a sect like behavior that you develop.

But this also leads to the fact that results are normally very good. Because I don’t think I have worked anywhere with so many people, who are good on the one hand, but also motivated accordingly. Because that doesn’t exist “oh I’m not up for it”. It will simply get done and then we look further. They are also very reliable. Normally, when I say, okay until that time you need to have something, either you hear something beforehand that things don’t work out, or you get something. And if things don’t work out, there must be a good reason for that. I really, really appreciated that.

Interviewer: Was it difficult then to take this step of leaving the consultancy.

Yes, you know what you’re missing of course. My life is much less spectacular than it used to be. Back then I could do much more duty free shopping [laughing]. But for me personally, I feel better. I have time to do sports and I have a bit of a contrast program. I fly a bit less, voilà, but I’m more eco-friendly which is fine as well [laughing].

The question is whether career-wise I should have stayed a bit longer. Probably yes. And I could probably have had my dissertation financed [by the consultancy], but, yes maybe I was not patient enough, not enough, I don’t know. But it was just not the right thing. And then, yes, I was just too lazy or too consequent and have then decided [to go]. Well, it will show, whether this was wise or not. For the moment it is okay.

But if you care about money and career, then consulting is a very good way. There are many who do it well and I believe that the system is right. If you can do it and you want to do it, then you probably have to do it.
Josha (Interview 19): “I’m not the type of guy who has to tell others how great I am, I rather let them feel it.”

The most exciting thing about this job is really the other people. [...] I belong to those people, if I want to do a good job, I quickly do it on my own so then at least I know that it is good. And there [in the consultancy] I had to learn that when you give it to someone else the result will be even better. I find that fascinating because normally with all other jobs that I did before, experience has shown that it is not like that. [...] But in general, this can also come across as negative. There’s a certain arrogance in how I analyze things really quickly, also in everyday situations, where I come to a conclusion very fast. And some people feel patronized by that.

Because this aggressive way, using imperatives, taking decisions, convincing others – I think in the private sphere there are other dimensions that weigh more. So this dominance and self-confidence that you need in the job, that is not always so well received by your friends. Normally it’s okay, but sometimes I can just overdo it [laughing].

Because I’m not the type of guy who has to tell others how great I am, I rather let them feel it. [...] In the beginning, when I entered into consulting, I had this ‘concept of the enemy’, something that I never wanted to become. And I realized how you slowly develop into that. That really makes you think and that becomes a cry out for help that it’s time to quickly move on.

Whenever I came home from work, I had to take off my tie and my suit, the stuff that symbolized how important I was, how business-like. I had to take it off and purposely put on my worn-out clothes again just for a visual difference, that this is over now, that now I am in my life again. [...] I would still say, that strategy consulting is really the highest form of consulting. Where you have the highest leverage, financially speaking, for helping a firm, a client. There you have the biggest potential to do the wrong thing or the right thing. That’s why it’s attractive, that’s why it’s exciting.
Lea (Interview 23): “It is just the easiest way, to put a lot of pressure on people”

And then there are all these events, offsites, Christmas parties, whatever. These are not events for people to relax or to just talk to one another. These events have a tight agenda. You celebrate the company and you do so with a lot of alcohol. An insane amount of alcohol. I noticed again and again how little there is to eat during these events, and how much alcohol. I think they do it on purpose.

When you work in consulting, you spend so much time with these people, there’s only that world. It’s like a sect. And this is also celebrated during those parties. It’s all about consulting, consulting, consulting, the consultants.

And you are always a consultant. You will always be a consultant. When I meet consultants today, I’m a consultant again. […]

In the consultancy I often had the feeling that it is management by fear. That started with the partner who was scared of the client. The manager was scared of the partner, that he would scream at him. The project leader was scared of the manager and so it continued. And the junior consultant was shaking when he saw the project leader, but when the manager came, oh God, that was Darth Wader [laughing].

But if you are scared to take a wrong step, you will never be able to grow.

[In my new position] I can put a lot of pressure on people, or I can be really authoritative and say: “this needs to be re-worked all over again”. And there I believe that I am very coined by the previous [consulting] job.

I also find it difficult, because this is just the easiest way, to put a lot of pressure on people. Not that people are scared, but that they have respect and that they don’t think “oh, whatever”. That’s just the cheapest way and the easiest way to get things done at a quality level that is acceptable. And I believe that it would be important to learn how this could be done in a different way.
4 Narrative Identity Construction: An Emotional Balancing Act Between Coherence and Ambiguity

This paper aims to bridge the strong divide between studies that either depict identity as narratively constructed through a coherent and integrated life story and studies that conceptualize identity as a radically decentered process of fluid and uncertain becoming. To reconcile these one-sided and seemingly incompatible framings I aspire to provide a more nuanced view which illustrates how ambiguity and coherence are produced simultaneously in the narrative construction of identity. For this I investigate a set of life stories which zoom in on reported episodes of professional career change – periods that are often experienced as anxiety producing ruptures in an overall life story. By adopting a psychoanalytic framework for analyzing the narrative strategies that interviewees drew upon when balancing coherence and ambiguity in their self-narratives of transition, I pay particular attention to why it might be emotionally worthwhile to preserve both: coherence for a sense of self-continuity and ambiguity for a sense of openness. In suggesting that self-narration is emotionally mediated through ego-defenses that continuously balance between coherence and ambiguity I aspire to refine and develop the current understanding of narrative identity construction as being a more than conscious endeavor.

4.1 Introduction

While a wide range of narrative studies, following a ‘life story approach’ (McAdams, 1987, 1988, 2001), have highlighted notions of coherence and continuity in the construction of identity (McLean, 2008; Pals, 2006; Singer, 2004), an increasing number of researchers is turning towards concepts of ambiguity and complexity, claiming that identities must be considered above all as linguistically and socially constructed, multiple, fragmented and never completed (Brown, Humphreys and Gurney, 2005; Humphreys and Brown, 2002; Somers, 1994). Refraining from this well established debate, however, the current paper may be positioned among those few studies (see Chreim, 2005; Clarke, Brown and Hailey, 2009; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003) that subscribe to an understanding that in order to avoid a depiction of identity as being fixed and enduring it is not necessary to move to the other corner of assuming identity to be a radically decentered process of fluid and uncertain
becoming, as both extreme views would mark a too simplistic perspective on the matter.

Instead, by drawing on the work of Ezzy (1998) and Steyaert (2007), in this paper I aspire to provide a more nuanced view of identity as both a coherent and yet ambiguous construct, thereby trying to reconcile the seemingly radical and incompatible framings of narrative identity construction as delineated in the literature. More concretely, by investigating a set of life stories which zoom in on reported episodes of professional transitions and career shifts – periods that are often experienced as anxiety producing ruptures in an overall life story – in this study I seek to analyze how ambiguity (contradictions, frictions and competing interpretations) and coherence (claiming continuity, drawing causal links, mitigating disparate accounts) are produced simultaneously in the narrative construction of identity.

By assuming a psychoanalytic perspective (Gabriel, 1998; Gabriel, Gray and Goregaokar, 2010; Brown and Starkey, 2000), I will combine the narrative investigation of ‘how’ this co-existence of ambiguity and coherence is achieved linguistically with a framework for interpreting ‘why’ it might be emotionally worthwhile to consciously or unconsciously preserve both: coherence for a sense of self-continuity and ambiguity for a sense of openness. To address these issues I have formulated the following research question: How do people balance coherence and ambiguity in their self-narratives of transition and with what underlying emotional desires?

The empirical analysis of this question, which I will unfold along the in-depth engagement with one exemplary interview case, illustrates three narrative strategies through which interviewees manage to maintain a sense of coherence without mitigating the ambiguity and multiplicity produced in their narrative accounts, namely through ignoring the ambiguity (but not entirely), making the ambiguity explicit (to make it bearable) or escaping the ambiguity (by taking refuge into a wishful future). By linking these narrative strategies to the ego-defenses of denial, rationalization and fantasy, I draw attention to some of the underlying emotional desires for balancing both coherence and ambiguity. In taking into account the unconscious and emotional forces at work during times of professional career change, a new conceptualization of career related identity transitions may be provided with the potential of enriching the narrative approach.
Before delineating the psychoanalytic framework and going into the analysis, however, I will in the following sections first provide an overview of the literature on narrative identity construction including studies that explain and emphasize notions of coherence or ambiguity, as well as studies that call for a balancing between these concepts.

4.2 Narrative Identity Construction – A Life Story Approach

The creation of identity has been conceptualized from a wide variety of disciplines (Horrocks and Callahan, 2006) and a seemingly endless number of different avenues (Alvesson, 2010), thereby covering a vast range of topics. One increasingly popular way of exploring identities would be to look at them through practices of storytelling (Gabriel, 1995; Brown, Gabriel and Gheradi, 2009; Slay and Smith, 2011; Watson, 2009; Watson and Watson, 2012). Narrative accounts are deemed to produce rich data on how people experience, interpret and make sense of interpersonal interactions (Horrocks and Callahan, 2006), thereby producing a wealth of knowledge that might not be available through other forms of analysis (Wright, 2009).

A narrative approach to identity is grounded in the idea that people are most appropriately described as *homo narrans*, that means as a storytelling animal (Currie, 1998; Fisher, 1984; MacIntyre, 1981). In that view “we become who we are through telling stories about our lives and living the stories we tell” (Bruner, 1994: 53). Ricoeur (1988) in his theory of narrative identity suggests that through narratives people develop a conception of self-identity where, in a reflective process, the self is discovered in its own narrational acts. And to take this point further, some theorists even suggest that narratives are in fact identities as people come to know who they are through the stories which they tell (Slay and Smith, 2011).

Researchers applying a narrative framework often use the terms narrative and story interchangeably (Watson, 2009; Wright, 2009) as there are no hard and fast rules, nor any consensus, for distinguishing between narratives (narrativisation) and stories (storytelling) (Brown et al., 2009). What is common to both the notions of narrative and story however is the idea of emplotment. According to Ricoeur “emplotment is the process that synthesizes experience in a narrative” (Ricoeur 1991: 21), integrating and weaving together a complex set of episodes into a single story. In line with the idea of a consistent plot, researchers have tended to locate and analyze
identity constructs – that is the beliefs of what people regard to be most significant about themselves – in the context of biographical self-narratives (Humphreys and Brown, 2002). Taking serious the notion that self-identity is “the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography” (Giddens, 1991: 53), many narrative identity researchers have followed the influential work within personality and self-developmental psychology of McAdams (1987, 1988, 2001) who proposed that identity itself takes the form of a unified and meaningful life story (personal myth).

With an upsurge of interest in biographical self-narratives (Singer, 2004), a life story perspective has become the sensemaking lens (Weick, 1995) for filtering life experiences. The life story model can above all be considered a model of integration, that means of temporal and spatial emplotment where open-ended, confused and ambiguous stories become ‘readable’ by creating an internalized sense of unity, self-continuity and coherence (Clarke et al., 2009). This sense of coherence is achieved by imaginatively construing and vividly integrating an evaluation of the past (how did you become the person that you are), the present (who are you) and the anticipated future (where are you headed) into a meaningful story of identity (McAdams, 2001; McLean, 2008; Pals, 2006). Creating temporal continuity hence becomes a task of ‘storying’ the self (McLean, 2008) in terms of beginnings, middles and endings (Clarke et al., 2009).

4.3 Narrative Identity as an Ambiguous and Ongoing Social Construction

Having provided an overview on how narrative identity is framed as an individual achievement of integration through a somewhat coherent and continuous life story, postmodern researchers have moved away from such an understanding. Rather than assuming that life stories are private concerns (Humphreys and Brown, 2002) narrated independently of a wider social context, many scholars consider biographical narratives to be embedded in an already existing repertoire of cultural narratives. As Somers (1994: 606) points out, we “come to be who we are (however ephemeral, multiple and changing) by being located or locating ourselves (usually unconsciously) in social narratives rarely of our own making.”
Moreover, Somers noted that there is a limited repertoire of discursive resources which people can draw upon, but which they can also appropriate, resist and potentially alter (Steyaert, 2007) for turning their ‘raw experience’ into a socially acceptable personal narrative. Such discursive resources of cultural narratives find expression in literature, myth, popular entertainment and ethnic family histories (Brown et al., 2005; Singer, 2004). They are governed by or sanctioned through for example social or religious conventions, community scrutiny, legal norms and family obligations (Humphreys and Brown, 2002). In that way, narratives with a particular audience in mind become created to fit into a historical-cultural niche and to meet the demands of social roles (Singer, 2004).

A second element setting apart studies with a focus on coherence and studies with a focus on ambiguity is the recent tendency in social sciences to question the claimed durability of identity by pointing out its dynamic and processual nature and by depicting the supposedly simple, clear and fixed structure as illusory (Ezzy, 1998; Gioia et al., 2000). This notion of identity is supported by the idea that individuals, rather than producing a singular overall life story, hold the capacity to create several more or less contradictory fragments of identity stories at different times and in different contexts (Clarke et al., 2009). From this stance, narratives are neither considered as static, nor are they considered to be ever completed. Instead, they are viewed in a process of being constantly assembled, refined and embellished which reconceptualizes identity as a potentially disparate, chaotic, precarious and mutable construct that is repeatedly up for redefinition and revision (Gioia et al., 2000).

Thirdly, identity in the postmodern framing is seen as in a constant process of becoming (Horrocks and Callahan, 2006; Somers, 1994; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Steyaert, 2007) that cannot be finished in the description of lived time. Along those lines, Somers (1994) promotes the concept of ontological narratives which can be understood as stories through which actors make sense of their lives, rendering identity and the self as something that one becomes. This ontological view goes back to the understandings of Nietzsche (1968) who objected the idea that one could describe a person as a stable object of ‘being like this or that’. Rather he assumed that a person is in a constant process of becoming and thus never to be captured even through psychological diagnostics (Steyaert, 2007).
4.4 Narrative Identity Balanced Between Coherence and Ambiguity

After having broadly reviewed the literature that either constructs narrative identity as an individual achievement of integration and coherent sensemaking, or else as a social construct that is ambiguous, complex and constantly in the making, this paper takes a particular interest in the few studies that do not fall into this dichotomy. One framing of the co-existence between coherence and complexity is given by Steyaert (2007) who considers storytelling as an enacted performance where the narrative construction of identity is effected by a continuous yet subtle ‘balancing act’ between complexity and coherence that is never really completed. In this way, Steyaert neither positions narrative identity as limitless self-constitution nor as a self that is overwritten by cultural or public narratives. Instead he considers it a balancing act where both the personal and individual as well as the social and cultural are considered part of the ontological identity process of becoming.

Also Ezzy (1998) acknowledged a need for preserving both complexity and coherence when he stated that “narrative identity is coherent but fluid and changeable, historically grounded but ‘fictively’ reinterpreted, constructed by an individual but constructed in interaction and dialogue with other people” (p. 246). For moving forward this more nuanced (and less simplistic) understanding of narrative identity as suggested by Steyaert and Ezzy, some empirical studies have been reviewed which investigated the co-existence of coherence and ambiguity (or related concepts) as interwoven in biographical accounts.

With a particular interest – which also motivates the current paper – in identity constructions during times of transitions, Chreim (2005) for example examined how elements of continuity and change were managed discursively in interviews on organizational change, maintaining that both continuity and change permeated identity constructions. This co-existence of continuity and change created a state of ‘confluence’ where streams from the past persisted and flew alongside new streams from the present. The idea of confluence (Schmiedeck, 1979) in identity suggests that continuity and change are not to be considered as contradictory elements, but rather as complementary and interwoven. Confluence may become evident in interview accounts for example when a person keeps moving back and forth and alternating between references to either continuity or change (Chreim, 2005).
In another example, Clarke et al. (2009) examined how managers drew on mutually antagonistic discursive resources when authoring self-conceptions. The identity narratives of these managers were neither found to be very coherent nor completely fluid or fragmented, yet they seemed to incorporate contrasting and antagonistic positions rather unproblematically without falling apart. Clarke and her colleagues concluded from this that “identities may be stable without being coherent, and consist of core statements but not be unified” (p. 341). That means, even though the reported life stories were perceived as open-ended and lacking a sense of clarity, they still came across as readable rather than confused, giving the impression of continuity rather than complexity.

Even though the number of studies that have empirically investigated this co-existence of ambiguity and coherence is rather low, still less research has provided a transparent and in-depth account of how exactly, that means through what emotionally mediated narrative processes, this co-existence between coherence and ambiguity is established and maintained in biographical narratives. Chreim (2005), as an exception, has tried to shed more light on the discursive strategies through which continuity and change in identity narratives were achieved. She noted that for establishing confluence in narratives, interviewees drew on strategies of selective reporting, of juxtaposing the ‘attractive’ with the ‘undesirable’ and of using persistent labels for bridging past, present and future. While Chreim has above all looked at constructions of organizational identities, the current study will focus its attention on the construction and re-construction of professional identities during times of transition and career shifts. By assuming a psychoanalytical framework, as will be delineated in the following section, the study will particularly take note of the underlying emotional desires that could explain the balancing between coherence and ambiguity.

4.5 A Psychoanalytic Approach: Taking Note of Underlying Emotions

The first analytical challenge for studying the co-existence of coherence and ambiguity in identity narratives would be to develop concepts and to device a vocabulary (Steyaert, 2007) that would allow the researcher to bring together these notions without reconciling them. Moreover, it would be crucial to delineate and make transparent the analytical process through which this co-existence can be investigated.
And finally, it would be worthwhile to draw upon a framework that allows the researcher to understand and discuss why it might be important for individuals to narratively construct an identity that is both coherent and ambiguous at the same time.

Instead of inventing new concepts and a new language for studying narrative identity, however, in this paper, and in line with an increasing number of organizational researchers (e.g. Brown, 1997; Brown and Starkey, 2000; Driver, 2009; Fotaki et al., 2012; Gabriel, 1995), I will draw upon psychodynamic theory which may inform and enrich the narrative approach by taking note of the underlying affective and unconscious forces in the construction of identity. And indeed, since its earliest days, starting with the work of Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), psychoanalytic theory has largely been dedicated to the study of emotions, feelings and affects in the analysis of individual life stories. Particular attention was thereby given to the possible origins, motivations and meanings of different emotions, as well as to the way in which they got communicated (Gabriel, 1998). In that way, psychoanalysis opened new avenues for analyzing human beings as desiring, emotional and passionate.

Along those lines, one of Freud's major contributions was his work on the unconscious (Hall, 2004) which at that time marked a turning-point in the conceptualization of identity. It most directly contested a taken-for-granted, blind faith in rational control over the self. In that way, psychoanalysis provided original insights into the world of complex human behaviors, desires and interactions, including those that can be found in all kinds of organizational contexts (Tsoukas et al., 2008).

This being said, however, for a long time, in the supposedly passion-free arena of organizational life, psychoanalysis had been looked upon – both in theory and practice – with suspicion as a seemingly esoteric, conservative and potentially dangerous grand narrative with realist truth claims. Thereby it had been ignored, as Tsoukas et al. (2008) maintain, that psychoanalysis suggests one of the most complex and encompassing theories of human identity with a clear emancipatory potential. In fact, some of the most current identity frameworks have their roots in psychoanalytic conceptions of the individual (Bendle, 2002; Carr, 1998) and by close examination one will realize that psychoanalysis, despite being a broadly contested terrain of analysis, has largely shaped the vocabulary of Western thinking, that is, the way we
see, talk about and express ourselves in everyday life, but also in the arts, in literature, as well as in the social sciences.

In fact, no twentieth-century discussion of identity has remained untouched by the Freudian understanding of self-hood (Mansfield, 2000). And indeed, when looking at the phenomenon of interest in this study, namely the emotionally mediated balancing between coherence and ambiguity in the construction of identity, a psychoanalytic perspective can provide both a language as well as valuable insights for deepening our (conceptual) understanding on how identities are constructed through narratives, especially during times of professional transitions and career shifts.

4.6 Identity Transitions and Ego Defenses

In periods of professional transitions, difficulties in the construction of identity may arise when new work settings do not allow people to draw on their past experiences as resources for sensemaking. That means, if people are not able to draw a continuous link between the past and the present sense of self, identities may become severely contested and call for an adjustment in the new working context (Brown et al., 2009). This in turn can produce reactions of insecurity and leave individuals with feelings of inauthenticity (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010; McLean, 2008).

Thus – to give a psychoanalytic reading – periods of fundamental and difficult identity change may often be marked by anxiety and therefore be experienced as painful. Anxiety, which holds a privileged position in psychoanalytic studies (Gabriel, 1998), can be understood as an ubiquitous and unsettling threat to identity, potentially leading to decreased levels of self-esteem (Petriglieri, 2011). It is assumed that due to this imminent danger which the state of anxiety poses to a positive sense of self (Gabriel, 1998), people have a desire to preserve or even defend their identity constructs in order to maintain feelings of self-esteem, self-efficacy and self-consistency (Brown and Starkey, 2000; Wright, 2009).

These positive feelings towards the self, from a psychodynamic perspective, are regulated through ego-defenses (Brown, 1997), that is the capacity to deal with or to protect oneself from existential anxieties that may be produced for example by ambiguous stimuli encountered in periods of change (Brown and Starkey, 2000; Wright, 2009). More generally, defense mechanisms are a common part of people’s
everyday behavior in the protection of one’s sense of self where emotional discomfort is repressed, rejected or reinterpreted, in most instances unconsciously (Vince and Broussine, 1996). By not questioning existing self-concepts, ego-defenses help to reduce ‘dis-ease’ and to increase self-confidence.

Only when taken to one of two extremes, that means a complete lack of such ego-defenses, or on the other extreme, an over-functioning of them, people may lose their sense of balance when trying to construct their identity (Brown and Starkey, 2000). On the one extreme, a lack of ego-defenses (underdefended sense of self) may lead to very low self-esteem and a lack of self-confident action, rendering the person as overly vulnerable to an external threat which may eventually inhibit processes of personal or professional development. On the other extreme, an over-functioning of ego-defenses (over-defended sense of self) may result in excessively high and almost inadequate self-esteem, reducing the ability to sense complexity and to reflectively engage with alternative interpretations. Such a premature closure in the process of identity construction may result in too tight a self-image that makes the person feel alienated from his or her ‘true sense of self’ (Brown and Starkey, 2000; Costas and Fleming, 2009).

On the contrary, with a willingness to engage with ego-threatening matters – such as the ambiguity experienced during times of career shifts – in a balanced way, ego defenses may help to reduce on the one hand uncertainty and doubt and thereby increase self-confidence, while on the other hand permitting space for ambiguous and complex phenomena and multiple interpretations. Such a balanced operation of ego-defenses may be experienced as destabilizing yet bearable, providing both a sense of integrity in the experience of self as well as some openness for a less foreclosed and more provisional identity (Brown and Starkey, 2000). Such a balanced operation of ego-defenses, it could be argued, is mirrored in the narrative balancing between ambiguity and coherence in the unfolding of a life story.

4.7 Methodology

4.7.1 Sample and Data Collection

This study, which addresses how people discursively balance coherence and ambiguity in their self-narratives of transition and with what underlying emotional desires, was undertaken as part of a larger project with the broader purpose of
investigating the identity construction of former management consultants across changing organizational contexts. For this I conducted 30 audio-recorded interviews with ex-consultants, who moved from the strongly identity shaping work context of a large global management consultancy (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2004; Meriläinen, Tienari, Thomas, and Davies, 2004) to pursue a career in one of the following organizational contexts: 1) academia, 2) NGO, 3) start-up, 4) industry, 5) financial services or 6) in-house consulting.

Other relevant parameters of variation were the time spent in consultancy, which ranged from less than one year to ten years with an average of three years, and the time that people had been out of the consultancy when doing the interview, which ranged from less than one year to nine years, with an average of two years. Eight of the interviewees were female (27%), which somewhat reflects the ratio of men and women in most German or Swiss based management consultancies. Since all 30 interviewees had pursued a university degree, spent several years in a management consultancy, and then at least entered one new organizational context, each interviewee reported upon a minimum of two major changes in his or her life; first the transition from university to a working context and then from the consultancy to a new working environment.

27 interviews were conducted face-to-face, while three interviews were conducted via Skype. The face-to-face interviews were conducted either in people’s offices, at the university office, or in more informal settings in the evenings where interviewees could talk more freely. Even though no formal follow-up interviews were conducted as such, I kept close contact with one third of the participants over a period of two years to keep track – through numerous informal conversations, emails and social media – on people’s further career development. This additional contextual knowledge strengthened the credibility of the collected interview data and aided some of the interpretations made during the textual analysis.

The interviewing method itself was inspired by Gabriel’s (1995) research on organizational storytelling and McAdams’ (2001) life story interview approach. I invited respondents to narrate freely their life stories from the date they entered university to their current working day by imagining that in a few years’ time they would have the idea of writing up their personal life story in a book. I made explicit my interest in the discursive construction of identity across changing organizational contexts.
contexts, but else kept the interviews minimally structured. To tap deeply into the interviewees’ experiences I asked them to delineate the important chapters in their study- and work-life and to think of interesting aspects or episodes that they would feel worth sharing in the book. As the interviews unfolded, I naturally asked some deepening questions, for instance around the decisions made concerning transitions and career shifts. Interviews lasted between 45 and 135 minutes.

4.7.2 Data Analysis

After fully transcribing and listening to each interview recording several times, also to take note of the tone and mood in which the story was unfolded, in the textual analysis for this study I particularly zoomed in on reported episodes of professional transitions as these passages very nicely revealed some linguistic efforts of simultaneously maintaining coherence and ambiguity in the construction of identity. In order to detect the narrative strategies (see also Gabriel et al., 2010) through which consultants linguistically achieved and maintained a balance between coherence and ambiguity in the unfolding of their life stories, following the example of Chreim (2005) I particularly focused on text passages that, despite coming across as overall coherent, linguistically showed markers of ambiguity such as inconsistencies, contradictions, either-or constructions and competing interpretations. Or else, I looked at text passages that came across as mostly antagonistic and confusing while still not falling apart in the overall story.

With a (micro-discursive) interest in how exactly coherence was achieved in the narrative without mitigating ambiguity (or vice versa), I identified three different narrative strategies – along those linguistic markers – for balancing ambiguity and coherence: 1) ignoring the ambiguity (but not entirely), 2) making the ambiguity explicit (to make it bearable), and 3) escaping the ambiguity (by taking refuge into a wishful future). With a particular focus on why it might be emotionally worthwhile for a person during times of professional transitions to maintain both, a sense of coherence and ambiguity in the unfolding of his or her life story, I then (re-)interpreted the various text passages from a psychoanalytic perspective. In this way I could link the three narrative strategies that I identified earlier to three specific ego-defenses: denial, rationalization and fantasy. For each of these ego-defenses I have indicated the general emotional desire ascribed to it, while also taking note of its
potential consequences in case of losing balance, that means in case of a total lack of, or an over-functioning of these defenses. In doing so I aspire to provide a better understanding of why it may be emotionally worthwhile to balance both, coherence and ambiguity in the narrative construction of identity.

4.7.3 Case Illustration

To provide an in-depth analysis and to give as detailed an account as possible for how coherence and ambiguity were produced simultaneously and with what (possible) underlying emotional desires, I have decided to present the data analysis along just one particular life story of a former management consultant (who from now on will be called Steve). This single case approach has also been effectively applied by a range of other researchers (see e.g. Costas and Fleming, 2009; Johnsen et al., 2009; Muhr, 2011, 2012; Svenningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Watson, 2008, 2009) with the aim of presenting thick data, going into empirical depth and developing concepts for theory building. As the single case approach is not primarily directed towards a generalization of results, I hope to provide above all a rich and detailed analysis which allows for nuanced insights and a first theoretical proposition concerning the emotional mediation of coherence and ambiguity in the narrative construction of identity.

Steve’s life story was chosen as an illustrative case as it nicely unfolds the various narrative strategies applied by interviewees for emotionally balancing coherence and ambiguity. Rather than being singled out as a unique example, however, Steve’s balancing attempts very well reflect what was commonly observed across interviews, so a good range of other life stories could have been chosen for the same purpose. In general it was found that some interviewees tended towards telling an overall more coherent narrative for why they had entered the consultancy in the first place, why they stayed for the amount of time they did and why they left the consultancy again to pursue a different career path, often emphasizing continuity over time and across changing contexts.

In contrast to that, other life stories were overall more fragmented, contradictory, making room for a multiplicity of self-identities that were not always compatible. Overall, there was not a single life story, however, that exclusively produced coherence or ambiguity. On the contrary, each interview case illustrated
balancing efforts between the two. Steve in particular told a very compelling and seemingly coherent story, which was yet marked by many frictions, contradictory accounts and an open engagement with ambiguity. To provide more background on his case, I will summarize some key aspects of his life story before presenting the results of the analysis.

Steve’s life story comprises a time-span of approximately 20 years. After completing his undergraduate degree in Political Sciences, Steve joined the military for one year. He then worked three years for an international bank before he pursued a master degree in Business Studies at one of Europe’s most prestigious universities. Shortly after returning to the bank, a friend of Steve suggested that he should apply for a position as management consultant in the same consultancy that he himself was working for. Attracted by the highly competitive recruitment process, Steve applied and got a position in one of the most globally renowned (strategic) management consultancies (which from now on I will call STEEL).

Even though Steve was contented with his projects, the overall working atmosphere and the positive performance evaluations that he received, like many other interviewees he reported doubts whether the consultancy was “the right thing” for him. Even though he was well integrated, both personally and professionally, he had yet some reservations towards the organizational culture which he partly experienced as arrogant and therefore disturbing. Not seeing a future for himself in the consultancy, Steve then decided to pursue a career that would provide him above all with a greater sense of meaning. So after 3.5 years in the consultancy he moved into a new working context: an NGO that he strongly identified with. Within the NGO Steve could well apply his previous work experience and he was soon promoted into a senior position. At the time of the interview, Steve had been working at the NGO for some nine years.

4.8 Findings

4.8.1 Ignoring the Ambiguity (but not entirely)

A first identified strategy that former management consultants drew upon for discursively balancing coherence and ambiguity when reporting upon an experienced episode of change was the narrative strategy of ‘ignoring the ambiguity’. By drawing
on this strategy, interviewees – even in light of apparent changes or linguistic markers of ambiguity – ignored or discursively minimized any difficulties that they experienced when reporting upon a bigger life change or transition period, thereby making the inherent claim that ‘nothing has changed’. At the same time, as some signs of change or ambivalence were not entirely ignored, a balance could be achieved between ambiguity and coherence.

To illustrate how interviewees linguistically achieved such a balance by (partially) ignoring the ambiguity I will zoom in on three episodes in Steve’s life story where he tried to make sense in that way of past transitions or where he reflected upon potential future career moves. In the first instance, Steve reflects upon the time when he had moved from his previous banking job into consultancy. In this example he very strongly promotes the notion that ‘nothing has changed’ by claiming that he carefully refrained from adapting a consultant identity when changing jobs, thereby emphasizing continuity and coherence in his overall life story:

Steve: I was one of two consultants out of 170 who every morning took the bus for getting to the office. And it was not my world. This was not problematic in the teamwork, but I noticed this particularly during large company events.
Me: How would you explain that you were one out of two to take the bus?
Steve: Generally I did not adapt my lifestyle and I didn’t want that either. This would have limited me in my possibilities. We lived in a shared flat back then and we stayed there as well. I saw no reason for doubling my expenditure just because my salary had doubled.

By not changing modes of transportation and by not moving into a different apartment, Steve apparently makes a strong point about not changing “who he was” when transferring from the bank to the consultancy. In fact he even exhibits a certain degree of resistance towards the consultant lifestyle (“this was not my world”) as he “didn’t want that” and saw “no reason for this” either. To balance a bit this coherent narration of “nothing has changed”, one thing that Steve does not entirely ignore however is the doubling of his salary, which after all does mark a change in his personal and professional status, even though he chose not to make it explicit in his lifestyle. Also the little notion that the consultant way of being “was not problematic in the teamwork” allows for some ambivalence in the overall rejection of the
consulting culture, thereby enabling Steve to balance continuity and ambiguity in the reported change episode.

The next interview extract covers another transition experience, namely Steve’s transition from the consultancy to the NGO context where again he discursively ignores or minimizes the experience of ambiguity in order to construct continuity in light of change. In this reported episode he finds the new working context to be surprisingly more similar to the consulting environment than previously expected:

What surprised me when I started here, I would have expected the contrast to be much bigger. I still remember in the last weeks at STEEL I bought myself a laptop and so on because I thought I need to have an infrastructure and I am somehow going back to Stone Age. On my first day of work I got a laptop, I was completely surprised, a mobile phone and so on. I had not expected that. […] I traveled a lot, spent a lot of time at airports in my first year, so that was also very similar. […] And I did a lot of presentations as I had done at STEEL. That was another commonality. I worked together with international teams to solve problems; that was also the same. And nevertheless, content-wise it was of course, it was completely different. NGO. And exactly, as I said, the purpose was there which was missing before.

By juxtaposing expectations of great discrepancies with the actual experience of high similarities, the notion of continuity becomes particularly emphasized. Linguistically, coherence is achieved through expressions such as “very similar”, “commonality” and “that was also the same”. Towards the end, however, after having established a ‘convincing story’ about two almost identical work settings, Steve can no longer hold up the continuity is his narration. With the phrase “and nevertheless” (as a marker of ambiguity) he makes space for a rather significant contrast between the consultancy and the NGO. By admitting that along other dimensions “of course it was completely different”, the notion that “nothing has changed” becomes severely contested. Only by creating coherence with yet another storyline, namely the rationale for resigning the consultancy job which was “missing a purpose”, a balance is created again between coherence and ambiguity.

And in the final example, which in the overall unfolding of the story stands in clear conflict with the first claim of not having adapted a consultant identity, Steve gives evidence not only of having adapted a consultant identity, but of actually preserving his consultant identity even now, that he is working in the new context of the NGO. In this way Steve consistently follows the pattern of (largely) ignoring the
ambiguity related to a profound change in professional identity, thereby constructing continuity in his overall story line:

**Me:** Would people say that you do things like a consultant?

**Steve:** [laughing] Yesterday someone just said that to me after a conversation. He said: “One can still very much spot the consultant in you!”

**Me:** After nine years?

**Steve:** [After] nine years, yah, yah. I also asked, well, one could take this as a compliment now or as an offense. And he said: “No, it’s just the way that, when a lot is being discussed by many people, you can pick exactly those things and recite them back to people to finally get the conversation landed at the point that you were heading for.” [laughing] And that I found interesting, because I didn’t even know where I was heading for in the conversation, it was a pretty chaotic conversation. But just the impression, that it came across like that.

In providing ‘evidence’ for still being recognized as a (previous) consultant some nine years after leaving the consultancy, a powerful image of ‘nothing has changed’ across all those years is provided, ruling out any indication of ambivalence in the process of career change. Only by claiming that his consultant-like behavior was not deliberate (“I didn’t even know where I was heading”) Steve mitigates again the overall notion of continuity, thereby striking a balance between a more coherent and a more ambiguous sense of self.

To give a psychoanalytic reading of this first narrative strategy of ignoring the ambiguity, I would conceptually link it to the ego-defense of denial. Denial, from a psychoanalytic perspective, marks a ‘magical’ yet ‘primitive’ unconscious process with the underlying desire of bridging the differences between one’s actual and one’s ideal self-image (Brown, 1997). The latter may be particularly exposed when entering a new working context which requires a set of new skills and behavioral norms that still have to be learned.

As noted earlier, a complete lack of ego-defenses would make it difficult for a person to cope with ambiguity during times of transition as this may induce painful anxiety, intolerable conflict and emotional distress. On the other hand, through an over-functioning of denial and the blind subscription to the claim that “nothing has changed” – even in face of significant changes – feelings of discomfort may be concealed in a potentially self-deceptive way. As a total denial of ambiguity would mark a considerable break with the experienced reality of the transition, there might
be a desire instead, to maintain a certain degree of ambiguity that is yet not threatening to a coherent sense of self.

Such a more balanced way of just partially denying feelings of insecurity in light of threatening identity changes, as illustrated through the life story episodes of Steve, could be achieved by holding on to a past identity that is more familiar and more comfortable (Brown and Starkey, 2000), while slowly re-orienting one’s sense of self towards a new working context.

4.8.2 Making the Ambiguity Explicit (to make it bearable)

Another way for balancing between coherence and ambiguity in the construction of identity was achieved through the second discursive strategy of ‘making the ambiguity explicit’. By admitting to be in a state of ambiguity, torn between two equally likeable or dislikeable positions, this destabilizing experience is seemingly dealt with in a conscious and reflective manner. This makes the experience of ambiguity more bearable and allows the overall story to not fall apart. Coherence in light of ambiguity is thus achieved through the general notion: “It’s all under control”.

For illustrating this second narrative strategy along the life story of Steve, I will first draw attention to an episode where he openly reflects upon his ambivalence concerning the consulting job as he reports upon his past career change from the consultancy to the NGO:

There was always a kind of ambivalence regarding the identification with the [consultancy] firm. On the one hand, first of all very fascinating, also good interpersonally, on the other hand just, I realized, this is not my thing.

By listing “on the one hand” those factors that constructed his previous job as desirable and even “fascinating”, while “on the other hand” revealing his overall mismatch with the consultancy which “was not his thing”, Steve makes explicit the ambiguity that he felt around his career move from the consultancy to the NGO. By stating, however, that there was “always a kind of ambivalence” regarding the consulting job, Steve is able to link the experienced ambivalence with a sense of continuity, framing ambiguity as an enduring and manageable aspect of his previous identity.
Also when reflecting upon his continued post-exit identification with the consulting past, Steve’s explicit awareness of ambiguity prevails:

[The consulting past] is just one part of my biography. Yet it’s a part that is still very present even though it’s a while ago. And it will always be a part of me somehow. At the same time it is not part of my current self and I totally don’t regret that it is not.

Despite – or even in line with – the earlier claim of always having felt ambivalent towards the consulting past, Steve admits that even now, 9 years after leaving the consultancy, his consulting past is still very present in his life. He even expects that it will always continue to be a part of his identity. This clear construction of continuity across different working contexts is jeopardized, however, by “at the same time” acknowledging that the consulting past is not part of his current self which creates ambiguity is his overall account. This ambiguity is balanced once more in the statement of “no regrets”, which overall restores the notion that everything is “under control”.

Another example of how a balance between coherence and ambiguity was achieved through this second strategy of ‘making the ambiguity explicit’ is given in the following life-story extract where Steve reports upon his conscious choice of disparate career moves:

Even before I had done career jumps that were not aligned. […] And the same basically happened when I joined the NGO. Some people completely didn’t understand it. […] I never had the ambition, career-wise, to follow a logical path or in my social environment to stay in a homogenous environment. I would find that extremely boring.

Coherence is created in this account by framing ambiguity, related to not following a logical path both on a professional or social level, as a context-spanning experience which Steve does not only tolerate, but which in fact he desires. In that way ambiguity is addressed as being unproblematic, enduring and not to be resolved, as this would become “extremely boring”. By embracing ambiguity and paradoxical combinations as recurring and therefore continuous patterns across various situations and career moves, a balance is created once more between ambiguity and coherence.
In taking a psychoanalytic perspective, I would associate the second discursive strategy of “making the ambiguity explicit” with the unconscious, ego-defensive processes of *rationalization*. Rationalization is marked by the underlying desire of justifying seemingly unacceptable feelings, motives or behaviors in a way that would make them appear plausible and creditable, thereby reducing dissonance (Brown, 1997; Brown and Starkey, 2000). Especially during difficult times of career related identity transitions, as reported upon by Steve and the other interviewees, individuals may feel that they become more emotionally expressive than socially accepted when dealing with ambiguity.

With a complete lack of ego-defenses, such an emotional expressiveness may put in danger a person’s stable sense of identity. Rationalization, on the contrary, can help people to disguise psychologically draining and overwhelming emotions by displaying more rational responses to the experience of ambiguity. At the same time, if an over-functioning of such rationalization mechanism eliminates all expressions of emotional experience, a person might feel strongly alienated from his or her actual feelings and thus search for more openness, i. e. for ambiguity loopholes that allow for a balance between ambiguity and coherence.

4.8.3 Escaping the Ambiguity (by taking refuge into a wishful future)

A third discursive strategy that interviewees drew upon for achieving a balance between ambiguity and coherence was that of ‘escaping the ambiguity’, namely by taking refuge into a wishful future, that means into an idealized or even romanticized time ahead that is less ambiguous and that puts the individual in command of the situation. In the unfolding of their overall life stories, many interviewees created coherence by directing attention away from a currently ambiguous and difficult life situation in the inherent claim: “It will all be good.”

Former management consultants escaped their present reality by claiming that one day they would start their own business and would no longer have to submit to the will of their superiors. Others depicted a future career path where they could combine their work with their passion, such as becoming a chef or opening a wine bar. And yet other interviewees fled into a future vision where they took a time out from work to travel to exotic places and go “dolphin watching”. As the projection of a clear vision
into the (still undefined) future does not, however, resolve the ambiguity of a current situation, there constantly remains a balance between ambiguity and coherence.

Returning again to the illustrative case of Steve, his life story provided yet another variation of ‘escaping the ambiguity’. More concretely, Steve’s vision for the future is one of stability and continuity:

For me it is very difficult to imagine to not work for an NGO, that’s very difficult to imagine. Like to work for a firm where in the evening you put down your identity. In the sense of, in the evening you are no longer the bank employee. But in the evening I am still the NGO’s employee, you don’t put that down. […] Several times I had the opportunity to change jobs, but I was always happy to stay. I never followed up on the other options.

In this interview passage there is no indication of ambiguity as such. On the contrary, by giving testimony of his strong identification with his current working context, the NGO, Steve creates an image of the future where he could not imagine to work outside the walls of his current employer, which depicts a future scenario of never-ending continuity. All suggestions for a career shift, one would assume, could therefore be rendered as uncalled-for. Yet, when looking at Steve’s overall life story again in terms of consistency and fragmentation, it becomes obvious in the juxtaposition of the previous and the following interview extracts, that he in fact is not that unambiguous regarding his current employer and therefore regarding his future career path. So when asked about a possible return to the consultancy, a different if not to say contradicting future scenario is depicted:

Me: Could you imagine returning to the consultancy?
Steve: I have thought about it before. Because interestingly, indeed, STEEL is starting to work very strongly in the NGO field. They have done a lot of good work in the sustainability area and they are working together now with NGOs. And that would have been unthinkable when I was still there. So, on both sides things have moved on. In that regard the worlds are not so different anymore. When they really gain momentum now in the NGO sector, that would be a reason to consider a return. I don’t believe so. But it would, it would not be impossible.

Just by admitting that he himself had pondered upon the question of returning to the consultancy beforehand presents a rupture with his earlier account that “it is very
difficult to imagine to not work for an NGO”. In fact, there is evidence that he has well engaged with the idea of returning to the consultancy, and that there would potentially be good reasons for such a return. Even though the two reflections upon possible future (non-)transitions seem to stand in contrast, there are yet three markers of continuity between them.

First of all, the return to the consultancy would still allow for a continuation of work in the NGO field, thus creating coherence between the two antagonistic accounts. Secondly, a previously unthinkable return to the consultancy is only considered an option now as “things have changed on both sides” and finally, the little note of “I don’t believe so” still privileges the first future scenario of staying with the NGO over the scenario of returning to the consultancy. While preserving credibility for the first claim, the definite depiction of staying with the NGO is loosened up by introducing other (related) options. In this way the balance between coherence and ambiguity can once more be maintained.

From a psychoanalytic standpoint, the third discursive strategy of ‘escaping the ambiguity’ may be linked to the defense mechanism of fantasy. Fantasies as a form of escapism mark an excursion into a dreamworld (Gabriel, 1995) with the underlying desire of constructing a stable and unique sense of self (Brown, 1997; Driver, 2009), even in destabilizing or ego-threatening situations such as career transitions. A lack of ego-defenses in such situations may result in experiences of helplessness and disintegration. Unconscious fantasies of the self, on the contrary, may help to overcome these feelings.

This may be achieved by constructing a compelling and idealistic fantasy where the person unconsciously projects an ideal and invulnerable image of self into a golden future (Gioia and Thomas, 1996; Ybema, 2004). Yet with an over-functioning of such a projected fantasy, a fully determined future plan may create new anxieties of limiting a person’s possibilities for self-expression. Thus, a certain degree of ambiguity and openness for various options and possible trajectories, as we have seen in the life story of Steve, would be crucial for allowing a more balanced projection of the wishful future, so that it can be either this or that and is not discursively fixed.
4.9 Discussion

With an interest to better understand how people – in response to career changes – discursively balance coherence and ambiguity in their narrative construction of identity, and with what underlying desires, I identified three narrative strategies through which former management consultants achieved this balance in their life stories: ignoring the ambiguity (but not entirely), making the ambiguity explicit (to make it bearable) and escaping the ambiguity (by taking refuge into a wishful future). While the labeling of these narrative strategies may at first sight suggest a bias towards coherence which undermines or overrules ambiguity, I have tried to illustrate in the analysis that both coherence and ambiguity play an equally important part in the narrative construction of identity.

By linking these strategies to concepts of denial, rationalization and fantasy, I have suggested that the narrative balancing between ambiguity and coherence – as mediated by ego-defenses – is emotionally driven. From a psychoanalytic perspective, ego-defenses are motivated by an unconscious desire of simultaneously wanting to maintain both: coherence for a sense of self-continuity and ambiguity for a sense of openness. And indeed, as Brown and Starkey (2000), drawing on the work of Mitchell (1993), note: “Where there is too much discontinuity, there is a dread of fragmentation, splitting, dislocation, or dissolution – dread of the ‘not-me’ – and where there is too much continuity, there is dread of paralysis and stagnation” (p. 111).

Returning to the exemplary case of Steve it is not difficult to imagine how an over-functioning of these ego-defenses could easily have led to such paralysis or stagnation when constructing a sense of self. With an over-functioning of denial Steve might have totally regressed to a more familiar past identity by claiming “that nothing has changed”. With an over-functioning of rationalization the confident assumption that “it’s all under control” might have been turned into a self-deceptive strategy that would have constituted a barrier for developing a new self-concept when changing careers. And finally, with an over-functioning of fantasy which depicts an ideal future self-image where all ambiguities of the present become mitigated in the claim “it will all be good”, too much coherence might have been imposed on the narrative, thereby closing off a range of alternative (future) self-concepts.
On the contrary, while there were clear indications of the three ego defenses being at work in the unfolding of Steve’s life story – and thus no complete lack of ego-defenses or an under-defended sense of self – there were also no signs of over-functioning or an over-defended self-image. Instead I observed a balanced operation of ego-defenses which allowed for realistic self-esteem, a moderate use of fantasies and self-knowledge including space for curiosity and complexity (Brown and Starkey, 2000).

When taking a step back to zoom out again of the micro-discursive analysis of particular episodes in the narration, and when looking once more at the overall unfolding of Steve’s life story, it becomes obvious that indeed Steve did not overemphasize coherence or ambiguity in his narrative. By holding on to his past self-image of being a consultant while at the same time claiming strong identification with his new working context, Steve is able to preserve a past identity along some new identity elements, thereby allowing for continuity and discontinuity to co-exist. When zooming out even further, it is worth mentioning that this emotionally mediated balancing between coherence and ambiguity was not only observed in the analysis of Steve’s life story. On the contrary, I observed that all 30 interviewees – while some tended more towards coherence and others displayed more ambiguity – kept going back and forth between markers of coherence and ambiguity.

As a first step towards theorizing this broadly observed phenomenon, and towards turning it into a proposition concerning narrative identity construction as being an emotionally mediated endeavor of balancing between coherence and ambiguity, I would like to link it to Winnicott’s (1974) notion of play. According to Winnicott it is through play and role play that we cope with anxiety as we experiment with different futures and different self-concepts that reconcile the tension between inner desires (coherence) and external realities (ambiguities). This is what makes play inherently exciting and at the same time precarious. This also relates to Steyaert’s (2007) understanding that openness and playfulness are important elements in the embodied performance of storytelling where people stretch and play with available strings and where contradiction and incoherence imply that “no story is ever the whole story” (p. 733). It is the telling and retelling of stories which creates coherence but also keeps the story open. It provides a ‘wiggle room’, as Clarke et al. (2009) claim, for authoring different, antagonistic, but at the same compatible self-images. It is in
this way as well that Steve, in the unfolding of his life story, creates a coherent story while he playfully experiments with different strings and knots of the story that eventually turn into different versions of self.

While critics may consider a psychoanalytic perspective on narrative identity construction as partial, eclectic and merely one of many possible approaches for investigating identity narratives, I have tried to illustrate that a psychoanalytic approach may encompass a critical theory that has wide-ranging explanatory power for thinking about identity construction in traditional as well as new ways, thereby offering different possible readings rather than claiming a regime of truth. I have also tried to counter the widely held view that the study of emotions in organizations goes beyond the reach of textual analysis as the latter—so the argument goes—is not adequate for attending the physical, the affective and the aesthetic qualities of organizational life (Chia, 2000).

While I acknowledge that the textual analysis of interview material may have its limits for making analytical claims regarding underlying emotions and unconscious desires, according to Hoedemakers (2010) it is exactly the “pronounced use of oppositional logic in self-narratives” (p. 383), as illustrated in the narrative strategies of ex-consultants, where the emotional and the unconscious may be studied in otherwise conscious interview material (see also Muhr and Kirkegaard, 2013). It is through contradictions in the interview material that the emotional subtext is brought to the surface, thereby allowing for a reading of the unconscious without fully entering it. In that way a psychoanalytic interpretation may further and substantialize our understanding of narrative identity construction, especially during times of transition, as not being a consciously controlled endeavor but rather an emotionally mediated balancing act between coherence and ambiguity.

### 4.10 Conclusion

In organization studies, narrative analysis has particularly been applied for studying professional identities and self-concepts by examining career stories in which workers construct narratives around their interactions with organizational institutions (Slay and Smith, 2011). As organizational life is often marked by instances of fragmentation and instability (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003), however, such as experiences of professional transitions and career shifts, in this study I have investigated self-
narratives of former management consultants who reported upon such experiences of transition in their professional careers.

While in a conception of storytelling as being ‘coherent’, job transitions would be responded to with processes of sensemaking that are deemed to provide a sense of plausibility and continuity (Brown et al., 2009; Weick, 1995), from a postmodern perspective, where “[t]he self is a story which is forever being rewritten” (Bruner, 1994: 53), career shifts would be framed quite differently. Rather than emphasizing notions of sensemaking during times of change, these studies with a focus on ambiguity would rather explore notions of sensebreaking, senselosing and sensegiving as ways to deal with changing identity projects, thereby pointing out that stories of self may facilitate changes but also bear the potential to subvert or block them (Patriotta and Spedale, 2009).

In not taking sides with either of these (extreme) positions, I have chosen an analytical framework that would allow me to investigate both, coherence and ambiguity in the narrative construction of identity. More concretely, by assuming a psychoanalytical framework which challenges the idea that a person has easy access to his or her operating identity story through phenomenological reflection (Polkinghorne, 1996), I have drawn attention to the underlying desires that drive people – through the workings of ego-defenses – to emotionally balance between coherence and ambiguity when narratively constructing a sense of self. The proposition that narrative identity construction is emotionally mediated, that means constructed and re-constructed in competing yet compatible ways, stands in support of Steyaert’s (2007) claim that no matter how much coherence one can bring to a story, the story – unless it is history – will continue to resemble “a ball full of strings and knots” (p. 734).

In choosing this theoretical framing and methodological set-up of the paper I have aimed to enrich the narrative approach for studying identity by providing a less simplistic and more nuanced view of identity as both a coherent and yet ambiguous construct. Secondly, in combining a narrative understanding of identity with a psychoanalytic framework, as other scholars have done before (e.g. Costas & Fleming, 2009; Gabriel, 1995), I have aspired to touch upon an ongoing discussion that puts into question whether textual analysis bears the potential – or actually falls short – of capturing emotional aspects of organizational life. Since psychoanalytical theory provides both a language and concepts for analyzing emotions in the unfolding
of life stories, I see much potential in future research for further developing this intersection of narrative analysis and psychoanalytical readings, thereby potentially leading to a refined understanding of narrative identity construction as being a more than conscious endeavor.
5 A Threefold Conclusion

Having started this doctoral thesis with a personal introduction on how I position myself towards the theme of my study, moving on to a theoretical introduction around the concept of identity more generally and a variety of discursive understandings on identity more specifically, I added a third introduction for delineating the thematic field of my study and its empirical set-up. It only seems logical now to also respond to these three introductions with three corresponding conclusions for rounding off the themes that were raised in the very beginning, for showing some synthesis – as announced – deriving from the three individual working papers, for giving a little outlook on what a hypothetical continuation of this study (and thus a new beginning) could possibly look like, and finally, to have a little re-assessment of where I stand today, almost five years after leaving a management consultancy.

This time, however, I will reverse the order of introductions and start with a thematic/practical conclusion which sets out to discuss once more the key findings of the thesis. Given that each individual working paper already contained its own discussion of results and a concluding note, there is little value of course in merely summarizing and adding up the individual findings of each paper in a separate section. Therefore, the main trajectory for this thematic/practical conclusion is to break away from the structure of the three working papers and to make more explicit the relevance of my overall findings for better illuminating the dynamics of identity transitions in response to career change, especially when moving from a so-called elite working context such as a management consultancy towards a new work environment. One daring thing would of course be to also make a few statements about how the results of my study could inform practitioners, that means people who consider to join a strongly identity shaping context such as a management consultancy, who already work in it, who contemplate to exit it, or who have already left such a working context just like the interviewees in my study. What would I tell them? How would I advise them? And would I actually be doing them a favor by advising them?

In the theoretical conclusion to this thesis I want to again take up the various theoretical contributions my study aspires to make by highlighting the context-spanning, complex, as well as conflictual dynamics that can inform, enrich and help to refine existing conceptualizations of discursive identity construction. To go beyond these individual contributions, once more, in this conclusion I will also try to point out
the overall theoretical contribution that my study aspires to make by not only drawing on one discursive understanding, but instead, by formulating three distinct research questions and thus, by analyzing a particular set of interviews from three slightly different theoretical angles. By doing so I hope to point out the benefits of multiplying oneself in the process of theorizing, of complicating oneself in order to prevent linear and oversimplified depictions, and of slowing oneself down to avoid hasty, partial and premature conclusions. Moreover, after pointing out some limitations of this study I will also try to give an outlook on what a hypothetical development of this study could possibly look like and what the implications would be for further research.

And finally, in the personal conclusion to this thesis I will reflect upon and try to put into words once more what the findings of this study mean for me personally, how I make sense of this study as both a researcher and ex-consultant, and how those past few years of working in an academic environment have allowed me (or not) to leave behind an identity and self-image that was grounded in a past working context. Even though I do not consider my own experiences and sense-making attempts as being relevant per se for underlining or challenging the findings of my research, I hope that by raising my voice once more as both the subject and potential object of my study, I will stay sensitive to the controversial power that findings of such research projects can have on the identity construction of those researched. This, I argue, calls for some great care with regards to how research results are framed and communicated.
5.1 Thematic/ Practical Conclusion

When recapitulating the overall research question that I had formulated in the thematic introduction to this thesis, namely “How does the discursive identity construction of people change (or not) as they go through career transitions and move from one working context to another?”, the one core theme that seems to combine all three working papers in this study is an interest in identity dynamics in relation to a career change, particularly in the context of strongly-identity shaping work environments such as management consultancies. This being said, there is already a good amount of studies within the field of organization and management studies that focus on the working context of management consultancies (see e.g. Berglund & Werr, 2000; Deissler, 2006; Fincham, 1999; Furusten, 2009; Glückler & Armbrüster, 2003; Kärreman & Rylander, 2008; Kitay & Wright, 2007; Meriläinen et al., 2004).

A much larger number of studies has even been published on the theme of identity in the context of organizations (see e.g. Ashforth et al., 2008; Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Albert et al., 2000; Alvesson, 2000, 2001, 2010; Alvesson et al., 2008; Brown, 1997; Brown & Humphreys, 2002; Brown et al., 2005; Brown & Starkey, 2000; Carr, 1998, Clarke et al., 2009; Collinson, 2003; Coupland & Brown, 2012; Dutton et al., 1994; Elsbach & Bharracharya, 2001; Fleming & Spicer, 2003; Ford & Ford, 1994; Garcia & Hardy, 2007; Gioia and Thomas, 1996; Hoedemaekers, 2010; Hogg & Terry, 2000; Humphreys & Brown, 2002; Kreiner et al., 2006; McInnes & Corlett, 2012; Petriglieri, 2011; Pratt, 2000; Slay & Smith, 2011; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Watson, 2008, 2009; Watson & Watson, 2012; Whittle, 2005).

And there are even some studies that look specifically at certain identity dynamics in the context of management consultancies (see e.g. Alvesson & Empson, 2007; Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; Armbrüster, 2004; Muhr & Kirkegaard, 2013; Sturdy & Wright). All the above mentioned studies have been published in outlets such as Organization, Journal of Management Studies, Organization Studies, Human Relations, Culture and Organization, Scandinavian Journal of Management, British Journal of Management, Academy of Management Review, Academy of Management Journal and Administrative Science Quarterly. Interestingly, and in contrast to this long list of studies on the themes of identity and management consultancies, only few scholars in the field of organization and management studies have taken an interest in
the notion of career change (for exceptions see Beyer & Hannah, 2002 - *Organization Studies*; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010 - *Academy of Management Review*; LaPointe, 2011 - *doctoral thesis*).

Thus, while my overall study – that is the composition of my three working papers – could mainly be framed as revolving around the theme of career (change) related identity transitions, I have to admit that I could not really identify an ongoing debate in the field of organization and management studies to which my study could have connected easily. Therefore, each of my working papers has more been placed within an ongoing debate around the notions of professional identity construction, organizational identification or identity transition in the context of ambiguous and potentially changing work environments. When trying to read up on the theme of career change, I mainly had to take refuge in career counseling publications such as *Career Development Quarterly*, *Career Development International*, *Journal of Vocational Behavior* and *Research in Human Development*. And even though I could find some studies in these outlets that would either look at issues of career and identity (e.g. Adamson, 1997; Khapova et al., 2007), or the role of narratives in career construction (e.g. Bujold, 2004; Del Corso, & Rehfuss, 2011), I did not come across studies that looked at the dynamic interplay between identities, discourse and career change.

This, I believe, could well be a gap that the overall composition of this thesis can adequately address, thereby delineating the overall thematic contribution of my study. Before going into the details of how my three working papers can help to better illuminate the link between discourse, career change and identity transitions, I will first elaborate on the theme of career change more generally, which to this point has only been touched upon briefly in my study.

### 5.1.1 Developing an Overall Contribution along the Concept of Career Change

Until recently, traditional theories have conceptualized careers as bureaucratic, linear, hierarchical and rigid developments, where people throughout their working lives progress along a set of institutionally defined occupational stages within the confines of one single organization. This norm, however, is increasingly being supplemented by emerging concepts of career as ever-evolving, dynamic, boundaryless and multi-directional, where people change career trajectories periodically (Ibarra, 2005; Louis,
A change in career may by definition be regarded as non-institutionalized since it does not follow the logic of a pre-defined role progression or organizational career path, but instead marks a move into a new and sometimes considerably different line of work (Ibarra, 2005).

The impetus for a change in career may be a voluntary choice, but it can also be imposed such as in the case of job loss. Involuntary unemployment can be assumed to pose considerable identity threats (Louis, 1980a; Ibarra, 2005), but even voluntary career changes, which are more relevant to the current study, are often not experienced as smooth processes either, as non-institutionalized transition processes in many occasions are not well established, but rather disjunctive (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). Moreover, it would be naïve to assume that in instances of voluntary career change, agents are entirely free to choose a new profession and thus to freely reconstruct an alternative image of professional self. Instead, certain institutional environments can be rather directive in providing career scripts that influence people’s future career choices (Chreim, Williams & Hinings, 2007). In these scripts only a succession of jobs that progress in salary, title, hierarchy and prestige is framed as socially desirable, while career moves that depart from this convention represent a major discontinuity and thus require extensive justification (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010).

When investigating people’s motives for voluntary career change, Wise and Millward (2005) found a combination of push and pull factors to account for these shifts. Push factors referred to aspects of considerable discontent with the previous job, including meaningless work, unfulfilled potential and reduced career prospects, while pull factors marked a positive connotation with an expectedly more appealing, alternative future profession. Pull factors included the desire of seeing a purpose in one’s work, of having the opportunity to learn and grow and of achieving a better work-life balance. In line with these push and pull factors, when making retrospective sense of their career change, so-called ‘transitioners’ indeed stated a sense of self-development, fulfilled potential and of having better aligned own values and actions (Wise & Millward, 2005).

Despite the predominance of reported benefits, when moving from one career to another, transitioners necessarily have to undergo a number of adjustments which in the organizational literature has been referred to as “socialization process”, that is a
process of learning, internalizing and making sense of new skills and daily routines (Wise & Millward, 2005). This socialization process often marks a difficult transition period that is experienced with a kind of foreignness, disorientation and sensory overload, as all professional and social changes are experienced simultaneously at the moment of entry with no possibility of gradual or step by step confrontation (Louis, 1980b). Feelings of ambiguity, conflict and role overload particularly arise when career changers receive conflicting signals in the new working context of what is expected of them. As a consequence, Wise and Millward (2005) observed that transitioners, when experiencing uncertainty and ambivalence, were keen to hold on to their knowledge, skills and abilities which they had acquired in their previous jobs. Likewise, in being highly organized and structured throughout the transition period, familiar and comforting patterns were established in an environment that was strikingly new. To maintain a stable sense of self during the transition period, individuals were also observed to bring along with them their favorite office objects such as coffee mugs and photographs, or to enact long-established rituals such as reading the newspaper in the morning (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010).

Not surprisingly then, (as mentioned before in this study) Beyer and Hannah (2002) found that career changers describe their personal identities as both based in the past as well as in the present. This again may induce identity conflicts however, as some untested projections of a future self are not able to keep up with well-grounded and historically defined self-images (Ibarra, 2005) where people have to give up what they appreciated in their previous job such as status and prestige, security or “golden handcuffs”, as well as a “once desired” vision of the future that was grounded in the old career path. The transition period is thus marked by the feeling of being “in-between” competing commitments and incompatible identifications with the past and the present.

As career changers have already begun to feel emotionally disengaged and separated from their former identity, they may at the same time not have fully developed and moved on to a new identity (Rossiter, 2009). Instead, “people oscillate between ‘holding on’ and ‘letting go’, between a desire to rigidly clutch or grieve for the past and the impulse to rush exuberantly into the future” (Ibarra, 2005: 26). When people are still intensely involved in their old work identity (even though this was no longer appealing), while they are already committed to, yet unsure about what the
future holds, the question arises how transitioners are able to develop alternative images of self that are not primarily grounded in the past.

5.1.2 Career Change and Discursive Identity Transitions in the Context of Management Consulting

Going back to the three working papers of this thesis, their analyses and findings, and relating them back to what has been stated in the literature about the dynamics of changing careers, some of my findings may seem to be nothing but old wine in new bottles. Emphasizing the complexity of how former management consultants positioned themselves in various and sometimes conflicting ways towards their past and present working contexts (paper II) may not be surprising when reading about Beyer and Hannah’s (2002) observations of career changers who described their professional identities as both being simultaneously based in a past as well as in a present working context. Also, when taking note of Ibarra and Barbulescu’s (2010) finding that people, when changing careers, have a tendency to hold on to everything that is familiar – their working patterns, routines, their knowledge and skills, and even some physical objects – my observation that former management consultants perpetuated certain familiar discourses from the consultancy into their new work environments (paper I) may seem almost self-evident.

And lastly, when considering Ibarra’s claim that career transitions are marked by feelings of being in-between competing commitments and of oscillating between ‘holding on’ and ‘letting go’, one is quickly reminded of the debate around coherence and ambiguity, and how this becomes emotionally balanced (paper III), especially in times of career changes. Is that to say that much of what my study has investigated, analyzed, and ‘produced’ as its findings is something which elsewhere has already been discussed in some detail? I would not jump to that conclusion too hastily. On the contrary I would claim that there are at least three contributions that my study can make to current understandings of identity transitions in response to career change. First of all, by pointing out the peculiarities of management consultancies as strongly-identity shaping and yet ambiguous work environments, a slightly different and more nuanced understanding of career change in this particular work environment can be provided, which may also be relevant for other contexts with a similar appeal.
Moreover, by looking at the different discursive dynamics and their effects on professional identity construction, organizational identification as well as people’s sense of coherence and ambiguity during times of transition, a different way for approaching, studying and conceptualizing career change can be developed. And lastly, by linking discursive understandings of identity to issues of career change (something which all three papers at least touch upon briefly), this study can help to bring the interesting theme of career change, which is certainly most relevant for how people construct an image of self in the contemporary workplace, more to the attention of organization and identity scholars. In the following I will briefly elaborate upon these three potential areas in which my study, in its overall composition, can hopefully make a contribution.

5.1.2.1 The Peculiarities of Career Change in the Context of Management Consultancies

As noted earlier, many career starters join a (strategic) management consultancy thinking that it will be an ideal springboard for a promising future career. Often they frame their time in consulting as being above all an important learning experience, an extension of their university studies where in a short time they get to see many different industries, get to work on a variety of projects that expose them to different strategic problems and a range of possible solutions to these problems, where they learn to apply consulting tools to ‘crack any case’, to communicate elegantly, effectively and to the point, and where they can grow and develop both professionally as well as personally by working with a group of highly selected, ambitious and clever people.

At the same time, given the unsustainable working conditions that characterize most consultancies, and the negative image that management consultancies have gained themselves in terms of manipulating and brainwashing their employees by imposing on them strong cultural codes and by trying to infuse a so-called ‘company DNA’, many prospective consultants plan to stay in the consultancy for only a few years before they choose an alternative career path. Also the notorious up-or-out culture (Sturdy & Wright, 2008) of management consultancies that only allows the very best candidates to rise to the top, while suggesting the average consultant to find a position elsewhere, makes career change a highly relevant and frequently discussed
topic among management consultants. Only a small minority of management consultants, I would argue, has a long-term career trajectory within the confines of the consulting industry.

On this basis, management consultancies seem to be a good research context for investigating dynamics around career change: how do people frame such a career change, how do they prepare for it, and what expectations, desires and potential anxieties come with the prospect of changing careers? While these questions have certainly been addressed already in studies on career change, based on the findings of my study I would claim that management consultancies are rather peculiar working contexts in the sense that career transitions in this context come with certain dynamics that are not explicitly dealt with in the literature on career change.

Even though it has been acknowledged that choices for career change are influenced by pre-existing career scripts (Chreim et al., 2007) where only a progress in terms of salary, title, hierarchy and prestige is framed as socially desirable (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010), this already poses an interesting challenge to people who want to leave a management consultancy. Based on the discursive framing of management consultancies as elite and highly exclusive working contexts, the questions arises (staying with the metaphor of the springboard) – where can management consultants actually spring to, especially if they are keen to jump forward and not backwards? Many of my interviewees have attested that it is very difficult to find an equally well paid job elsewhere, and even if they do, the expected salary progression which is most transparent and guaranteed to everyone who advances in consulting, cannot be provided in most other working contexts. Others were concerned that the ‘steep learning curve’ which they encountered in the consultancy could not be continued in a different work environment and most people feared that by exiting the consultancy and by taking up a managerial position for example in a large corporate firm they would lose the prestige and notion of exclusivity that is associated with consulting, thereby transforming into ‘just normal’ employees.

It is not surprising then, that interviewees in my study tried to hold on to discourses of elitism around the notions of exclusivity, professionalism and luxurious lifestyle when moving to a new working context. Some even tried to find new markers of elitism and potential superiority when choosing their new work environment. People moving to NGOs for instance justified their career move by highlighting the
moral superiority of their new job compared to their consulting engagement, people moving to academia took pride in the intellectual superiority of the university context, people moving to hedge funds or private equity firms emphasized the better money and those interviewees starting their own business or social enterprise emphasized that their horizon and learning experience had expanded exponentially. Those interviewees, however, who did not find an alternative basis for claiming elitism in the new working context, especially people moving into industry or working as in-house consultants, took comfort instead in having achieved a better life-style and in receiving more recognition in the new job, especially when holding on to and when displaying certain ‘consultant qualities’ in the new work environment. This phenomenon of holding on – sometimes tightly – to a past self-image, while simultaneously trying to adjust to a new working context and its new requirements to various degrees (some interviewees tried a bit harder, while others were more reluctant) also marks the most consistent observation in my overall study.

Based on this observation it becomes more evident why existing theories around career change that frame career related identity transitions as temporal states of uncertainty and re-orientation where people over time construct and stabilize an alternative professional self-image (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010), are maybe not most adequate for depicting the dynamics of career change in the context of management consultancies. By addressing issues of career change along the identity construction of ex-consultants who never seem to be quite ready to leave behind a past image of self entirely, my study has provided first insights into the peculiarities of how career change can be framed, investigated, analyzed and theorized in the context of management consultancies and similar work environments, namely as a complex, conflictual and possibly ongoing process where career related identity transitions may never come to a full completion.

5.1.2.2 Towards an Understanding of Career Change through Discourse and Identity

A second, overall contribution of my study could be the framing of career change through concepts of discourse and identity. This clearly marks a departure from the core literature on career change which mainly focuses on peoples’ attempts of most adequately matching their personality traits, individual skills, values and preferences
with the characteristics and requirements of a certain job or profession (see e.g. Schein, 1978, 1990, 1996). In contrast, my study has highlighted how career change is often driven by a person’s conception of what a ‘good career’ would look like as defined by the discourses that influence how people would like to perceive of themselves as professionals. In that way a new understanding and conceptualization of career change can be introduced where motivations to enter, to exit or to stay within a given working context are not just personal and internally developed choices, but on the contrary, choices that have been constructed socially, in dialogue and exchange with others, often embedded in larger discourses around career progression, professional development, individual achievement and self-actualization.

More concretely, by investigating the dynamics of professional identity construction, complex and shifting organizational identification, and some conflicting desires in the identity transition of ex-consultants as they try to make sense of a past career change, this study has exemplified three possible analyses for how to approach and investigate career change in a different way. By analyzing career change along the dimensions of discourse and identity, notions of power, resistance, agency, multiplicity, ambiguity, contradictions and conflictual dynamics can be addressed, which remain underdeveloped thus far in the more functionalist oriented and linear research outputs on career change. In paying attention however, towards these crucial elements in the process of career change, a more complex and nuanced understanding can be developed on what it means for people to move from one organizational context to another.

5.1.2.3 Bringing the Notion of Career Change to the Attention of Organization and Identity Scholars

Lastly, it would be desirable of course if my study could help to bring the topic of career change to the attention of organization and identity scholars. As depicted earlier, the theme of career change has largely gone unnoticed in the context of organization and management studies. More surprisingly, even identity scholars in the field of organization studies have ignored issues of career change by addressing aspects of identity in a mostly context-limited framework. In contrast, I hope that my study helps to depict the ‘bigger picture’ in which processes of professional identity construction, organizational identification and identity transition in relation to career
change take place. My study has emphasized that people do not freshly construct a
new self-image each time they enter a new working context. On the contrary, identity
dynamics are always influenced as well by ‘where people are coming from’ and
‘where they are headed towards’, and the various discursive resources that can be
drawn upon from past, present and future working contexts.

By looking at issues of identity from a more holistic and long-term perspective,
certain observations that may puzzle identity scholars today could become better
explicable. For example, when looking at a recurring question that former
management consultants asked themselves in this study about the ‘ideal timing’ for
when to exit the management consultancy, trying not to leave too early but also not
too late, this concern can best be understood when considering their choice of exiting
the consultancy within a larger career trajectory that they try to follow. Or, to quote
one of my interviewees on this matter:

That is a difficult question. I had several opportunities to leave the consultancy,
but the thing that always held me back was the question of the second-next-
step. And there I am still not clear, even today in my current position. For the
next step, there are many options. I could call someone tomorrow and have a
new job. But in terms of long-term employability, what would be the second-
next-step? That is not clear and I think about that a lot. The question is not easy
and one can never have total security about that. My thinking goes into the
direction of how I can become more clear on the second next step (Lukas, In-
house Consultant, Interview 4).

This interview quote highlights that identity concerns are not just limited to a current
context and a current position, but are embedded in an attempt to develop a long-term
identity project that is closely entwined with one’s overall career trajectory. Just being
in a good position today that is prestigious to the outside world and that renders the
young career starter in a management consultancy ‘high potential’ (as it is often
framed in HR vocabulary), is not enough to secure a person’s stable sense of self over
time. Therefore, professional identity constructions always remain precarious and
have to be invested in constantly in order to not leave the good and promising career
path that people have started off with in the first place. As management consultancies
mark a starting point that could be framed as some kind of ‘pole position’ that
privileges career starters in this context with the prospect of a successful subsequent
career, the pressure and attempt to defend this privileged position may become an all-encompassing task in the search for an ideal career.

What complicates the matter is that identities are not only shaped by discourses in the sphere of work, but by competing discourses in the private sphere of life around starting a family, leading a healthy life, engaging in sports, having other interests and hobbies, around being a compassionate, ecologically conscious, well-read, well-traveled, and well-rounded citizen, all of which renders identity projects in the contemporary workplace as more complex, more challenging and more conflictual. By indicating some processes of how discourses that shape professional identity constructions and that impose imperatives for organizational identification can be revised, replaced, mixed up with alternative discourses, neutralized by shifting focus, and emotionally balanced, this study hopefully provides some preliminary insights for how people can develop new career trajectories that are not entirely determined and prescribed by existing discourses on what a successful and desirable career path has to look like.

5.1.3 Offering Some Practical Advice?

As stated earlier, most studies which I found on the theme of career change were written in a spirit of career counseling, specifically, for helping career counselors better consult to their clients based on the latest research findings in the field. This, one could argue, represents a very practice oriented and therefore practically relevant research orientation. In contrast, the European field of organization studies, I would argue, seems much more relaxed about practical relevance and about informing practitioners. In fact one can get the impression that the more senior a scholar gets in this field, the less empirical work is even demanded, as entire papers are written, presented and published on a purely theoretical basis. Therefore, most resources are invested for developing and concisely articulating one’s theoretical contribution towards an ongoing debate. Accordingly, most of my papers have also set their focus on identifying and formulating a potential theoretical contribution. Interestingly, when spending a year abroad in the North American context, I was much more confronted with questions of how my work can also inform practice. And of course I have asked myself the question of what I could report back from my study and my various
analyses to my research participants who are first of all interested in what my findings could mean for them personally.

I have also fantasized about what the title could be for a book written for practitioners – one of those airport books that consultants, ex-consultants or just anyone interested in this working context would buy for passing their time on a transatlantic flight; or even a journal article that researches out to practitioners, such as a Harvard Business Review or Businessweek article. Maybe the title could be something like “Once a Consultant, Always a Consultant? 10 Steps Towards a New Professional Identity”, or even more polemically “Love Yourself and It Doesn’t Matter Whom You Work For”. The choice of the title would give a different framing of course for what the book or subsequent article will be about, and would therefore have to be chosen with much care. So what is it then that I could and would possibly like to suggest to a practitioner who is interested in the findings of my study?

Before making some careful attempts here of providing some ‘advice’ on issues of career change in the context of management consultancies, let me go back once more to the existing research on career change and build my suggestions around some more established findings in this field. As a next step, and based on what my own analysis has indicated, I will try to tailor my suggestions specifically towards career changers who leave a management consultancy.

1) **Pursue your Career Change Wholeheartedly**

In the literature on career change it has been noted that holding on to past experiences and thus a past self-image (as I have observed very strongly for ex-consultants) can first of all affect career transitions in a positive way. Professional know-how, managerial competence and interpersonal skills acquired in the (consulting) past might for instance fit the new job requirements, lead to self-confidence as well as external reinforcement. This implies that some pre-entry knowledge of the new working context can facilitate the adjustment process (Black, 1988; Markus and Nurius, 1986). Black (1988) moreover noted that an individual’s desire to actually adjust to the new work environment (rather than trying to hold on to a self-image grounded in the past working context), can be an important personal factor for facilitating the change process.
When tailoring these findings specifically to people who exit a management consultancy, it can first of all be noted that ex-consultants in my study rarely reported to struggle when trying to apply some of their consulting skills in the new working context. Each new context, it seemed, benefited in one way or the other from the career changer’s ‘consultant qualities’ as they were carried into the new environment. Sometimes it seemed, however, that some ex-consultants were not overly willing to adjust themselves to the new working context. Based on my research I would suggest that identity transitions in the course of career change become easier when people do not only try to ‘escape’ from the consultancy blindly, but when they actually engage with and prepare thoroughly for their career move. This would allow them to embrace their new work environment more wholeheartedly, so that they may not only carry their expertise, but also their passions into the new context.

2) Search Actively for New Learning Opportunities

Ibarra (1999; 2005) specifically investigated the mechanisms by which people developed alternative self-concepts in a new work environment. She found career changers to publicly experiment with ‘possible selves’ (Markus & Nurius, 1986), that is future-oriented self-concepts that are not fully elaborated and are open for trials. Possible selves are those images of self that a person hopes and expects to become or that a person wishes to avoid becoming (Ibarra, 2005; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Rossiter, 2009). There are three basic activities through which possible selves are added, refined and adjusted in the course of the transition process: a) the altering and learning of new activities; b) active identification with new social networks and c) the interpretation of life events (Ibarra, 2005). Through altering and learning new activities, people expand their sense of what they can possibly do and accomplish when developing a fuller understanding of the potential new role (Rossiter, 2009). The more people take up these new activities and start to act in a certain way, the more they start to see themselves as a person who acts in a given way (Ibarra, 2005).

In line with this observation, some ex-consultants in my study have particularly highlighted the things they learned in their new working context such as actually ‘implementing’ the changes that management consultants only conceptualize, thereby emphasizing some interesting new challenges and the more holistic view that they learned to take on organizational issues. Also, people who moved into a line position
with managerial responsibilities or who started their own enterprise highlighted the satisfaction they get from being in charge and from actually taking decisions, while in consulting you only make suggestions to the client and have no control over what will be implemented in the end or what will simply be ignored. Seeking out these new opportunities for learning and embracing them accordingly can be another factor that facilitates the transition process.

3) Stop Comparing the Present and the Past and be Open for Surprises

According to Ibarra (2005), *identification with new social networks* is the second way to test new possible selves, where contacts in the new working context become new reference points for identification, social validation and comparison. In many instances, career changers find a role model in the new working context who embodies an ideal of new possibilities and in many accounts acts as mentor and benchmark for one’s own adaptation progress (Rossiter, 2009). The identification with a new social network does not only provide role models and social support, but also helps to substitute and to dilute the strength of old ties, which facilitates the overall transition process and the formulation of alternative identities.

This attempt of identifying with colleagues in the new working context, while at the same time trying to dilute the strong ties which keep people attached to the consulting past, may arguably be the most challenging task for ex-consultants in the course of their career transition. When I asked interviewees about their enduring links to the consulting past in the post-exit arena, they most unanimously replied that they still felt strongly connected to their previous colleagues, those people who shared their pleasures and their pain, who walked the common path with them and who were equally keen on keeping contact. One way to explain this could be the long working hours that people had spent together on projects, which also leaves little time for keeping alive relationships beyond the boundaries of the consultancy. Moreover, past consulting colleagues were often idealized as very interesting people with impressive biographies, extensive international experience, and still very down-to-earth and likable manners.

At the same time, when entering a new working context, many interviewees were dismayed by the ‘weak culture’ and the weak personal ties among their new colleagues. While trying to change that upon entering the new environment by
organizing team retreats, trying to convince colleagues to join for after work drinks, establishing a happy hour culture, and so on, these efforts often faded away after some time as new colleagues were not as responsive as expected. Some interviewees simply accepted that their new colleagues had other (often family) commitments and therefore concentrated on their past colleagues. Others were more patient and found new and other ways of how to relate to their new colleagues. As described by Rossiter (2009), especially the relationship to one’s immediate superior or a significant peer who then functioned in the role of mentor often became an important relationship along which ex-consultants re-orientated their professional self-image in the new working context.

In general there is nothing to say against keeping in touch with former consultant colleagues, especially if they have become important friends. At the same time it might help to not constantly compare new colleagues with old colleagues and to allow the new working context, instead, to unfold its own charm. It is always worth taking a second look.

4) Let the Past Come to a Rest

A third way to develop new possible selves in a different work environment (Ibarra, 2005) is through the recounting of life events that are framed as a trigger for wanting to change career. Trigger events bring into focus an image of past self that one wishes to avoid in favor of other, more desired images of self. Trigger events help to make conscious and sharpen feelings of discontent experienced in the past and they become an organizing scheme for legitimizing and making retrospective sense (Weick, 1995) of the chosen change in career (Ibarra, 2005). These events are then framed as abrupt and dramatic turning points, alarming episodes that show the failure of the past context and often mark an “aha-experience” for people to realize that they want a change in their lives.

Often in my interviews, former management consultants indeed revived some alarming episodes and negative memories of their consulting past, thereby legitimizing once more and supporting their exit decision. This, I believe can be particularly important given that in hindsight often the positive memories prevail, which may lead to a glorification of the consulting past that does not depict the complexity of actual experiences. At the same time, a constant revival of the
consulting past both with its positive and its negative aspects (which may result in an ongoing schizo-identification), can also lock people into the past and not allow them to focus on their present working context. Therefore I would rather suggest to leave the past behind as good as possible and to re-orient oneself along the new working context and its various invitations for developing alternative self-images.

5) Context Matters – Beware of the Consequences of Your Career Choice
Another aspect in the re-orientation towards the new working context could be the magnitude or the radicalness of a career shift, that is the intensity of changes experienced when moving from one role to another, which according to Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010) has an impact as well on the radicalness of the resulting identity transition (see also Louis, 1980a). When changing to a new work environment that is relatively similar to the old working context, then any related identity transition can be expected to be rather minimal. Quite the opposite can be expected during a more significant career shift with higher degrees of change imposed on the professional identity of the career changer.

I have made similar observations among my interviewees who left the consultancy and who moved into one of six different work environments. The more similar a new working context was compared to the consulting past (e.g. when moving from external consulting into in-house consulting), the fewer the identity changes required or even possible in the new context. On the other side of the extreme, interviewees starting their own business often had to entirely re-invent themselves, which allowed them to actively shape their new work identity, while at the same time this also required a greater identity stretch. Being aware that contextual parameters matter, and that the radicalness of the career change will most likely affect the magnitude of transition demands imposed on a person’s professional identity, can help prospective career changers make more conscious choices on how much change they want to invite or not.

6) Change can Occur on Different Ends – Consider various Scenarios
While in the socialization literature the link between career shifts and corresponding identity transitions has often been depicted as a unilateral process where adjustment only occurs on the side of the career changer, in a negotiated adaptation process,
however, not only identities but also the new working roles and sometimes even the new working conditions can be adjusted (Ibarra, 1999). That means that individuals, when changing career, can either adjust by altering their identities to better match the role expectations or they may in fact seek to proactively alter the new role or working conditions to better match their identity (Black, 1988; Nicholson, 1984; Chreim et al., 2007). To depict this variation of possible adaptations, Nicholson (1984) described four different modes of adjustment which he labels replication, determination, absorption and exploration. In the following I will elaborate upon these different modes of adjustment by describing four different scenarios (deriving from my study) of how people adjusted to their new work environment.

7) On Becoming a Life-Style Consultant
The first mode of adjustment, replication, can be observed when a person changes career or even just a job across similar contexts (Nicholson, 1984). This I observed for instance among interviewees who moved from a management consultancy to become an in-house consultant for a large bank. In this mode of adjustment the career changer makes few adjustments not only to the own identity but also the new working role, thus preserving valued skills and the feeling of stability throughout the entire transition period. At the same time this mode of adjustment may bear the danger of making people feel trapped ‘in a rut’ where they experience little scope for change of any kind (Black, 1988; Nicholson, 1984). And indeed, in-house consultants often gave an account of having experienced minimal change between their past and their present working reality. Even though they were overall pleased with a better work-life balance, on the negative side, a slower career advancement and a less progressive salary increase often let ex-consultants in that working context to seriously consider a return to the external consultancy. This career move can mostly be suggested for people who generally enjoy the consulting work itself, but who are primarily concerned with better accommodating their work load with their private life demands. At the same time, when pursuing such a career move, a slower career progression may be the price for a better life-style.
8) On Preserving a Sense of Superiority

Nicholson’s (1984) second mode of adjustment, *determination*, can be observed when the career changer considers the previous working context to be superior to the new working context. While this was observed among ex-consultants more generally, it was especially evident for those interviewees who moved from the consultancy into industry. In that situation, rather than adjusting one’s own identity to the demands of the new role, the person is determined to change the content and structure of the newly assigned role, thereby imprinting her stamp of identity upon the new working context (Black, 1988; Nicholson, 1984). Along similar observations, Sturdy and Wright (2008) framed ex-consultants as being ‘agents of change’ within their new working contexts. This mode of adaptation is often associated with positive feelings deriving from a sense of one’s own capacity for innovation and reform within the new context. At the same time, this mode of adjustment bears the danger of being judged by others in the new context as inadequately destroying valued elements within the existing setup (Nicholson, 1984).

Many ex-consultants who have moved into industry or even into other working contexts, will probably recognize themselves when reading this description of adaptation. I often found that ex-consultants were most aware as well of the positive and the negative effects that come with this mode of adaptation. Especially revealing was the interview question of how their colleagues would describe them in the new work environment. For the positive, ex-consultants often answered that their superiors were very happy with the high standard of their work, their incentives for change and their commitment to the new organization. At the same time they often felt that they were being experienced as a ‘threat’ towards colleagues in the new environment who were less impressed with their (ex-)consultant qualities. Rather than framing this as a negative consequence of their career change and their mode of adaptation, however, some ex-consultants actually took pride in being experienced as a threat, as if this was to confirm their own superiority. So if being integrated and well received among peers is less relevant for the career changer, and the loss of superiority would pose a greater threat to one’s desired self-image, then this is probably the way to go about one’s career move.
9) **On Doing one’s Own Thing**

The third mode of adjustment, *absorption*, can be observed when the new working context is in sharp contrast to the past work environment (Nicholson, 1984). An example would be someone moving from the consultancy into a (business) start-up. In such a situation the burden of adjustment is often exclusively borne by the career changer who has to engage in some significant amount of role learning, while the new working parameters remain rather unmodified. Even though this steep learning process may be experienced as a positive identity development, the person may likewise face a disconfirmation of existing and valued self-images leading to feelings of skill degeneration and anomie (Nicholson, 1984).

As I observed entrepreneurs to be really absorbed by their new working reality, the transitional adjustment was mainly displayed on the side of the career changer indeed. Little was said however about skill degeneration and anomie. In fact, there was hardly anything negative expressed towards this new working context besides the mentioning of some challenges, especially in the very beginning. It might not be surprising then, that entrepreneurs were treated as the real (career change) heroes among ex-consultants, not only by the entrepreneurs themselves, but also by their former colleagues. Many interviewees, when depicting their fantasies for future career developments, announced that sooner or later they too would start ‘their own thing’. Many were held back, however, by their (current) aversion to risk or their lack of a good idea, or they simply found that time had not come for them yet. So for those who feel ready and well equipped to start something up from scratch: good luck!

10) **On Balancing Pleasure and Pain**

In the fourth mode of adjustment, *exploration*, career changers experience an opportunity to both develop their own identity but also to change some of the new working (role) parameters (Nicholson, 1984). This was observed for example among people moving into academia or NGOs. Positive experiences regarding the exploration mode are the pleasures of thoughtful experimentation and a sense of personal as well as organizational growth. On the negative side, people may experience states of confusion and anxiety as both internal and external stability is lost in an incoherent turmoil of change (Nicholson, 1984).
In my study I observed ex-consultants who moved into NGOs or academia to describe their new working context as radically different from the consulting past in some regards, while in other respects depicting the past and the present working contexts as considerably similar. As a consequence, they could apply some of their consultant skills very systematically in the new work environment, which allowed them as well to shape a bit and leave their own mark in the new work environment. At the same time, ex-consultants moving into these new contexts reported on some considerable new learnings in the new environments that forced them to adapt their previous style of thinking and working, thereby opening up space for new developments in their own professional identity. This mode of adjustment, I would argue, can be most rewarding if people find adequate ways for emotionally balancing their pleasure of experimentation in the new working context and the ambiguity (pain) that may be experienced when having to learn and develop new competencies.

Some Concluding Remarks
What can we possibly learn from this study on the discursive identity construction of ex-consultants that would inform our practical understanding of career change dynamics in the context of management consultancies? Will ex-consultants always find ways and loopholes for how to hold on to their past consultant self-image, unless perhaps, they become entrepreneurs? And even if they did so, would that be a bad thing? Should this study in fact encourage ex-consultants to become entrepreneurs who can more easily free themselves from a past self-image, or should it rather provide insights for protecting oneself from strong organizational identifications in the first place? And would it really be helpful to make such suggestions in a ‘one size fits all’ model of career change? I actually don’t think so. On the contrary I would argue that some greater awareness and an active engagement with what people would actually like to do (rather than becoming preoccupied with what would be the most prestigious and externally recognized options) would be a good starting point for making practical suggestions towards career transitions.

Assuming that people (coming from a management consultancy) do not feel entirely free to make career choices that do not fall within certain scripts for career change and career progression, I would like to go back to Collinsons’ (2003) claim that people no longer believe in the notion of dignity as a birthright, and instead try to
earn a sense of self-worth in an ideology of achievement and meritocracy. Therefore, the one thing that I can wish for people in search of a meaningful career development is that they allow themselves to break out of existing dominant discourses and experiment more freely with the different options they have. This may over time lead to new and more varied discourses around career change, and ideally some normative assumptions of what a ‘good career’ would look like will become more and more diluted.

5.1.4 Offering an Invitation for Reflection Rather Than Career Advice

After having reflected some of my research findings along the literature on career change and career change advice in order to see what practical suggestions my study could possibly offer to (prospective) consultants and (prospective) ex-consultants, my intention would rather be to not go out into the world with these suggestions. Even though it was certainly a rewarding exercise to write out these 10 propositions and to also see the practical relevance – for once – that my study could have in terms of informing practitioners, I still have certain reservations about this. First of all, I do not think that my data set is really broad enough, and that the various discourse analyses that I conducted in this study are really adequate for making such suggestions (also reminding me of Antaki et al.’s (2002) warning to refrain from false survey generalizations). Secondly, it would still have to be tested, maybe with a different group of ex-consultants, whether these suggestions would indeed be helpful for career changers or not.

Moreover, I believe that my research report has mostly been written with a critical focus and thus with an emancipatory knowledge-interest that seeks to challenge certain power dynamics in the construction of professional identities and the positioning practices towards certain working contexts. Likewise, my study has been conducted in a spirit of embracing multiplicity, complication, and a slow pace that would prevent me from jumping too quickly to any conclusions, let alone to such a neat and linear catalogue of 10 propositions that at worse could mark another positivist and normative framework for how best to go about one’s career change. So instead of providing concrete advice on issues of career change, I would rather like to invite people to reflect more actively upon issues of identity transition as they make choices about entering, changing or staying within certain job positions and
organizational contexts. For this, I would argue, my study can be very helpful in terms stimulating reflections that are more nuanced, more complex, more power-sensitive and potentially more farsighted than that which lies at the very surface of identity dynamics in and across organizations.
5.2 Theoretical Conclusion

While the thematic conclusion developed some possible overall contributions of this study along the notion of career change, in this theoretical conclusion I will focus once more on the concept of identity and how my study – in its overall composition – can try to advance current conceptualizations of discursive identity construction. For doing so, I will go back once more to my three working papers which have emphasized the continuous, complex and conflictual dynamics in the identity construction of ex-consultants.

5.2.1 Continuity, Complexity and Conflicting Desires in the Identity Construction of Ex-Consultants

In the three different working papers I have focused on different aspects in the discursive identity construction of ex-consultants. In paper I, I particularly highlighted continuity in the professional identity construction of ex-consultants by emphasizing the context-spanning effects that identity-shaping discourses may have on ex-consultants as they perpetuate discourses of elitism into the exit arena. In paper II, I have investigated in the complexity of shifting organizational identifications which became evident in the various positioning practices through which former management consultants expressed their various forms of identification towards their past and their present working context. And lastly in paper III, I paid particular attention to the conflicting desires in the narrative identity construction of ex-consultants, where people tried to simultaneously maintain a sense of coherence and ambiguity through narrative and emotional balancing acts. While each paper had a different discursive focus and also investigated a different aspect of identity construction, that is aspects of professional identity, organizational identification and identity transition, in this theoretical conclusion I particularly want to emphasized how all three papers hang together as well, thereby rendering the dynamics in the identity construction of ex-consultants as likewise being continuous, complex and conflictual.

In fact, it could be argued that the arrangement of the three papers has got its own storyline. Starting off by the observation that management consultancies are strongly identity-shaping work environments that do not allow their employees to easily walk out of this working context and its discursive interpellations, thereby
continuing to affect the identity construction of ex-consultants even in the post-exit arena, the second paper actually challenges a bit this linear narrative around a positive and continued identification among (former) management consultants by claiming that organizational identification in the context of management consultancies is more complex and ambiguous than currently depicted. By investigating six positioning practices that former management consultants engaged in for expressing their different and sometimes conflicting identifications with the past and the present working context, it becomes clear that the identity construction of ex-consultants is also influenced by ongoing dynamics of dis-identification, schizo-identification and even neutral identification, which does not allow for a singular depiction of how identification processes may be described in the context of management consultancies. Rather, this second paper emphasizes notions of multiplicity, ambiguity and complexity that can be observed in the identity projects of ex-consultants.

To reconcile these two seemingly contradictory messages that my first two papers portray by either emphasizing continuity (coherence) in the identity construction of ex-consultants, or else complexity (ambiguity), paper III actually attempts to move away from a conceptualization of identity that privileges either side of the argument. Instead, paper III tries to illustrate how ambiguity and coherence are produced simultaneously in the narrative identity construction of ex-consultants, especially in light of a past career change. This being said, each of the three papers can be said to already mirror a bit this co-existence of continuity and complexity. Paper I for example, with its overall storyline that ex-consultants perpetuate discourses of elitism into the post-exit arena, already takes note of some variations regarding how these discourses are preserved in the new working context, namely by being continued, revised, or replaced altogether. As a result, the paper with its prime focus on continuity is also aware of the conflicting discourses and the competing self-images that may co-exist in the post-exit arena and which render career transitions as an ongoing endeavor that never comes to a full completion.

Likewise, paper II with its focus on complexity, ambiguity and variation also takes note of some continuity, namely when looking at the issue of schizo-identification which is carried from the consulting past into a new work environment, where people make comparative references between the past and the present, thereby engaging in an activity that creates continuity across changing contexts. In summary it
could be argued that each paper in my study represents a variation on the overall theme of my study, thereby highlighting that the discursive identity construction of ex-consultants is marked by continuity, complexity and conflicting desires. If all three papers have a similar message, the question may arise why I needed three papers in the first place, when I could have presented my core argument in just a single paper. In the following I will try to make ‘my case’ for pursing three different discursive analyses that resulted in three different papers.

5.2.2 Suggesting a Multi-Discursive Analysis

In the theoretical introduction of this dissertation, I have extensively discussed the three discursive perspectives that this study has applied for investigating the identity construction of ex-consultants, namely a Foucauldian-inspired understanding, an understanding through positioning theory, and a narrative understanding. Moreover, I have delineated – also in the three working papers – how my study aspires to problematize the (lacking) application of these discursive understandings and some of their underlying assumptions, thereby highlighting the context-spanning effects of discourse, offering a critical-discursive reading of organizational identification and enriching the narrative approach by taking note of underlying emotional desires. Therefore, rather than repeating these individual contributions, in the following I will particularly emphasize the value and aspired contribution of combining three different discursive approaches in the study of identity.

I am aware that choosing three different approaches for studying the identity construction of ex-consultant within one single study may come across as rather unusual and possibly even controversial. More commonly, identity scholars can be associated with one particular approach, which then allows them to fall into a certain category of being a narrative identity scholar, a discursive psychological identity scholar, a critical identity scholar, and so on. In contrast to that, when looking at the multi-discursive approach I have chosen in my study, it could be argued that I have remained rather ambiguous in terms of clearly positioning myself within one particular research camp. This may be considered as problematic, especially by critics who already complain that ‘discourse analysis’ together with the term ‘discourse’ itself lacks a handy definition that clearly delineates its boundaries, also within the

More generally, discourse analysis has been criticized for being a poorly defined, vague, ambiguous and fuzzy concept, encompassing a bewildering array of disparate perspectives, methods and approaches. Different academic departments use the term differently, which may be explained by the way that discourse analysis has over time evolved from an array of distinct disciplinary antecedents (Phillips & Oswick, 2012), including the traditions of sociology, anthropology, psychology, social theory, linguistics, communications and literary-based studies. (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2011; Grant et al., 2004). As discourse may mean a broad range of different things to different people, it has been decried as being an umbrella term that accommodates an enormous diversity of how people talk about and analyze discourse (Grant et al., 2004).

Alvesson and Kärreman (2011a) among other scholars express their discontent with this variation, suggesting that it ‘overpacks’ the concept of discourse, makes it clumsy to use, clouds awareness of different theoretical and analytical options and in that way leads to confusion. As they see it, the only thing that unites much discourse work in the context of organization studies is the (over)use of the discourse label. By not using this signifier in a nuanced way, so they argue, some organizational scholars have applied it rather uncritically to cover up muddled thinking. While other commentators share this critical view which depicts the diverse use of organizational discourse analysis as problematic (e.g. Van Dijk, 1997), others in fact consider this as a healthy sign of pluralism which serves as a source of strength and has the potential of further being exploited for meaningful contributions to the study of organizations (e.g. Grant et al., 2004; Philipps & Oswick, 2012).

Especially scholars, who in a postmodern mode of engagement embrace concepts of multiplicity, plurivocality and paradoxality, prescribe to an understanding that there is never just one (understanding of) discourse that characterizes organizational life, but a multitude of relatively autonomous yet overlapping organizational discourses while each again allows for a variety of possible readings. From this perspective, a given research endeavor only provides a limited appraisal of the multitude of ‘organizational realities’, depending on the academic perspective and the methodological choices that determine the study (Grant et al., 2004). Considering
the organization itself as a fluid and polyphonic entity, postmodern studies in fact try
to avoid definite readings of discourses that would reify the concept ‘organization’
and thereby exclude notions of incoherence and inconsistency, which are key however
for understanding the escalating demands of globalization and an increasing
unpredictability of markets (Grant et al., 2004). As Broadfoot et al. (2004) put it:

“Our argument is not one of methodological promiscuity or theoretical
infidelity. We do not suggest that researchers should have fleeting or fickle
scholarly commitments […] we propose that while diverse discourses and their
instantiations can be separated out and the levels separated for specific analytic
purposes, much is gained by maintaining the same complexity and tensions in
the process of study and report as presumed in naturally occurring organizing
discourse” (p. 194).

In my own research project, when choosing three different discursive approaches in
the study of identity construction, I obviously go along with the advocacy of
multiplicity and hospitality towards discursive approaches that have different
theoretical roots. In my theoretical introduction on the various conceptualizations of
identity I have tried to depict how different scholars draw on different sources of
theoretical inspiration, while some even attempt to combine insights gained from
different perspectives. I do not claim, by any means, that the three discursive
perspectives that I assume in my study are the most relevant approaches for the
discursive investigation of identity. On the contrary, my selection of different
approaches has purely been colored by my personal preferences and theoretical
choices for framing my own particular study, which could well be expanded by
drawing on a number of additional perspectives on identity.

And yet, I could see how this multi-discursive approach, which has allowed me
to familiarize myself with different theoretical perspectives and to also problematize
some of their underlying assumptions, could be considered as the broader contribution
of my study which has allowed me to highlight the continuous, complex, and
conflicntual dimensions of discursive identity constructions. I concur with Kenny et al.
(2011) who note that there is no ‘correct’ way of understanding identity, and therefore
there is no ‘one best’ theory for conceptualizing or studying it. Instead, one could
better think of theory as offering a perspective, a ‘lens’ so to say, for understanding
identity in a particular way where each theory foregrounds different aspects. At the
same time, no single theory or methodological account can provide a full understanding of how identity unfolds in the context of organizations (Broadfoot et al., 2004).

Even combining different approaches to identity might not necessarily provide a complete picture (Kenny et al., 2011), and yet, different ways of understanding identity may offer equally plausible and thus complementary readings of the same material. Therefore I hope that by drawing on different discursive understandings – a Foucauldian-inspired understanding of discourse, an understanding of discourse through positioning theory and a narrative understanding of discourse, from different research orientations (primarily interpretive and critical) for the investigation of identity at different organizational levels (professional identity construction, organizational identification and identity transition in response to career change) I can provide a dense and multi-faceted reading of the discursive identity construction of former management consultants. Related to this I hope that the composition of all three discursive analyses of my study, when taken together, can provide some greater insights into the continuous, complex and conflictual dynamics of identity construction than (the sum of) each individual paper could have delivered.

5.2.3 On Methodological Variety and Conceptual Clarity

In line with this concern regarding different approaches to discourse analysis, a debate has been launched around conceptual clarity and methodological rigor which has divided the community of discourse scholars into proponents of more standardization and consistency on the one side and advocates of open, trans-disciplinary and multi-methodological analysis on the other. In this section I want to briefly address this debate as it may also become a point of discussion when applying and suggesting a multi-discursive approach in the study of identity. The debate around methodological variety and conceptual clarity is nicely exemplified in a point-counterpoint exchange between Leitch and Palmer (2010) on the one hand and Chouliaraki and Fairclough (2010) on the other. Leitch and Palmer have looked skeptically upon the loose application of concepts and methods of discourse, particularly in the area of critical discourse analysis (CDA), but relevant as well to the broader field of discourse studies, arguing that there should at least be some area of commonality underpinning a certain theoretical and/ or methodological approach.
They fear that researchers may draw on CDA (or discourse analysis more generally) as a rhetorical sleight of hand, thereby substituting a detailed description of the methods that were used in the analysis of discourse. Not only could that limit the inherent potential of discourse work, but in that way researchers may actually be mixing up paradigmatic assumptions. Hence, Leitch and Palmer (2010) make the case for more definitional clarity as well as for greater consistency and rigor in the methodological application of discourse analysis. More concretely, they suggest nine methodological protocols for assisting researchers in systematically addressing three areas of methodological decision making, namely the definition of concepts, the selection of data as well as the analysis of data.

In contrast to that view, Chouliarki and Fairclough (2010) have clear reservations towards universal methodological protocols and rigid rules as guarantees for consistency and regularity. They find such a form of regulation based on tight definitions and single protocols as undesirable, putting strictures on CDA as a methodology and thereby limiting the dialectical relations between discourse and other elements of ‘the social’. Instead they argue for leaving analysis deliberately more flexible and even porous in order to remain versatile and contingent with the specific research questions at hand. In that way, new space can be created for an alternative conception of discourse. Novel research designs in the field may then become trans-disciplinary and integrationist, privileging a spectrum of desirable methodological variation over rigor (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2011; Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 2010).

I concur with the Editors (2010) of this point-counterpoint debate who note that both Leitch and Palmer (2010) as well as Chouliaraki and Fairclough (2010) raise a valid point. While the former are concerned with the dependability of discursive research, the latter are worried that an overemphasis of strict methods may undermine the flexible use of discourse work in its theoretical as well as critical outset. Thus, in my own study I tried to reach a good balance again between the two positions. Instead of a strict adherence to predefined research protocols, I used a methodological variety that allowed me to flexibly apply the particular methodological approach which seemed most appropriately suited for investigating the question at hand in each of my papers. At the same time I tried to be explicit and detailed in my papers when describing the methodological set-up, the unit of discursive analysis as well as the
various steps taken during the analysis process. In this way my study combines a
variety of different analytical approaches while at the same time remaining transparent
and hopefully unambiguous regarding the methodological choices I have made. It is
exactly this combination of multiplicity on the one hand, and definitional clarity on
the other that has hopefully allowed me to illustrate a multifaceted and yet not
confusing engagement with the discursive identity construction of former
management consultants.

5.2.4 Limitations of this Study
I assume there are a number of limitations that could be listed for my study on the
discursive identity construction of ex-consultants. This could start indeed with my
selection and variety of discursive approaches as mentioned before, where some
critics could find that my delineation of different discursive concepts, despite all
efforts for clarity, are still somewhat blurred. Moreover the limited number of
interviews in this study, which may be justifiable as a basis for discourse analysis,
could be criticized still for not allowing me to make any generalizations of my
findings. With regards to a career change perspective it could be criticized that I only
analyzed the career change from the consultancy to a new work environment, not
taking into consideration the transition (from university or a different context) into the
consultancy. Another limitation would be the exclusion of some interesting and
emerging topics including issues of gender or performativity, as well as my exclusive
focus on the identity construction of ex-consultants without taking note of what
implications the depicted identity dynamics could have for management consultancies
or the new working contexts of ex-consultants.

Likewise, I could point out some limitations with regards to language choices
in my study, particularly the fact that the majority of my interviews were conducted in
German or Swiss German (N=27), while only three interviews were in English. This
means that I translated most interview passages included in this research report from
German to English. Not only does that hide some contextual peculiarities of my study,
but it also implies that in the translation process I have transformed the interview data
as it was originally uttered in the interview situation into my own language. This
comes with some serious power implications that would need to be reflected upon
more thoroughly and that, according to Steyaert and Janssens (2013), would call for a
scandalization, scrutinization and a more visible engagement with the language multiplicity that is currently concealed in my research report.

While there are certainly many more limitations that could be mentioned for this research project, I would in the following like to draw attention to one problem in particular which my study shares with other discursive approaches in the field of organization and identity studies. This is the critique that with the widespread adhesion to a social constructionist epistemology, some discourse scholars – and myself included – have possibly overvalued the significance of language at the expense of not paying sufficient attention to other facets of organizational life (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2011). Within such a discourse-driven mindset, so the argument goes, organizational complexity has been converted into text, no questions asked (Iedema, 2011). When most activity in social life is considered to be discursive in nature (Grant et al., 2004), there is little evident need to study anything outside of discourse. As a result, however, the value of discourse analysis is said to have greatly diminished, as it lacks an adequate sensitivity for non-linguistic aspects of organizing (Mumby, 2011).

In line with this argument, Chia (2000), despite his passion for the social constructionist ontology, acknowledged that there are areas of experience that are not so easily captured in discursive endeavors (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2011). Critics of discourse have particularly flagged the topic of affect as being beyond the reach of textual analysis, calling for different modes of engagement (Potter, 2012). Assuming that affect is continuous, pre-personal and pre-conscious, it focuses the researcher’s attention to movement, change and ephemeral action, while discourse on the contrary is limited to deal with the discontinuous, the locatable and the ownable. Addressing affect in a non-discursive way would make it possible, though, to study the not-yet-said, thereby engaging with phenomena that would else be disdained as matters of intuition, suspicion, or magic. When simply ignored however, these dimensions of embodied affect may undermine rather than enrich the project of discourse studies and eventually render it ‘immaterial’ to the contemporary study of social life (Iedema, 2011). Scholars with an interest in a ‘post-linguistic turn perspective’ (Mumby, 2011) would hence be interested to find better ways for attending the material, the physical, the affective as well as the aesthetic qualities of everyday experiences (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2011).
Rather than making a case for affect and materiality in replacement of discourse, my suggestion for a (hypothetical) future development of this research project would be to bring the interface between the discursive and the non-discursive into a meaningful balance (see also Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011a, 2011b). When looking into the future, discourse analysis (if explored to its full extent) might at some point indeed reach its limits in terms of contributing new understandings. Hence it might be farsighted to already explore some potentially fruitful methodological pairings that would combine discursive approaches with non-discursive ones, thereby shifting from a singular focus on linguistic methods to the inclusion of methods that invite complementary understandings of social processes (Phillips & Oswick, 2012).

Combining discourse with the material, the nonverbal and the interpersonal (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2011) could help this project to move beyond (the danger of) discursive isolationism, and instead embrace multi-methodological approaches where discourse is informed by affective as well as aesthetic dynamics, or where discourse and the analysis of discourse itself is not limited to text, but instead is considered as a form of social intervention. In the following then I will give a little ‘taste’ for what this social intervention could look like by briefly sketching out a little pilot of a follow-up study that I have conducted over the past few weeks.

5.2.5 What a Follow-up Study could Look Like

Before I go into the details of the little follow-up study that I conducted, I want to point out another limitation of my current study, namely, that it investigates the theme of identity transitions in response to career change by only looking at the discursive identity construction of ex-consultants at one particular point in time. Even though the life stories of ex-consultants contained various reflections on past career changes, thereby enabling the different analyses that were conducted in this study, it could be argued that my research project falls short of observing and tracking the identity transitions of interviewees over a certain period of time. Expectedly, by following up on how people position and re-position themselves towards a past or present working context over the course of several years, one could make more nuanced claims about the continuous, complex and conflicted identity positionings of interviewees. This being said, my current research design could easily be developed into an interesting
longitudinal study which follows up on the evolving identity projects of ex-consultants.

Without aspiring to develop a full research proposal for delineating such a longitudinal study, I would yet like to present some first ideas for what a follow-up investigation could look like by briefly describing a little pilot study that I conducted with 6 of my 30 interviewees, coming from 5 different working contexts. Table 6 provides a first overview of these follow-up interviews.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Pseudo Name</th>
<th>First Interview</th>
<th>Second Interview</th>
<th>Working context</th>
<th>Change in organization</th>
<th>Change in position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1/31</td>
<td>Markus</td>
<td>21.02.10</td>
<td>05.12.2013</td>
<td>Fin. Services</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/32</td>
<td>John</td>
<td>25.02.10</td>
<td>06.12.2013</td>
<td>In-house con. → Fin. Services</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6/33</td>
<td>Jens, PhD</td>
<td>04.03.10</td>
<td>07.12.2013</td>
<td>In-house con. → Fin. Services</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8/34</td>
<td>Karl</td>
<td>08.03.10</td>
<td>28.12.2013</td>
<td>Entrepreneur</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/35</td>
<td>Amelie</td>
<td>21.03.10</td>
<td>09.01.2013</td>
<td>Industry</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29/36</td>
<td>Petra</td>
<td>18.06.10</td>
<td>04.12.2013</td>
<td>Academia</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 6 Overview of Follow-up Interviews*

Similar to my initial interviewing experience, all 6 interviewees agreed immediately to participate again in this follow-up study. With most of them I had been keeping in touch anyways in an informal manner so that I roughly knew what had been happening in their lives since I had conducted the first interviews in 2010. While four interviewees were still working for the same organization that they were working for at the time of the first interview, one person had changed the organization (from one bank to another), and another person – the entrepreneur – had started to work in a second organization, that is another own start-up, in parallel. Additionally, from those four people who stayed in the same organization, three had changed their position twice within the organization, thereby also encountering some form of career change. For those two interviewees, who were working as in-house consultants in a large Swiss bank at the time of the first interview, the ‘working context’ had moreover changed in the sense that both interviewees were still working for a bank, but since both had changed positions at least twice, they were no longer working in the role of
in-house consultants. In my categorization of working contexts, I would now place them within the sector of financial services.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Pseudo Name</th>
<th>Interview date</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Yrs in cons.</th>
<th>Yrs out of cons.</th>
<th>New working context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Markus</td>
<td>21.02.10</td>
<td>My home</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Fin. Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>John</td>
<td>25.02.10</td>
<td>His office</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>In-house cons.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Jens, PhD</td>
<td>04.03.10</td>
<td>My home</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>In-house cons.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Karl</td>
<td>08.03.10</td>
<td>My office</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>&lt;1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Entrepreneur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Amelie</td>
<td>21.03.10</td>
<td>My home</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Industry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Petra</td>
<td>18.06.10</td>
<td>My home</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Academia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 7* Details of Original Interviews

When going back to some parameters of the first interviews (Table 7), it can be seen that this selection of interviewees had been working in consulting from less than 1 year to 5 years, with an average of less than 2.5 years, and at the time of the first interview, interviewees had been out of the consultancy since approximately a year (with the exception of one interviewee who had left the consultancy two years ago). So now, that another 3.5 and in some cases almost 4 years had passed between the first and the second interview, I did indeed expect some changes in identity positionings. And without aspiring to conduct another full analysis here, let alone discourse analysis, I would still like to share some first interesting observations at this point that could possibly help to develop this pilot study into a more elaborate research design.

First I would like to mention that this follow-up study was driven by an interest in whether or not, and if so, to what extent the identity positionings of ex-consultants towards their past and their present working contexts had changed between the two interviews. Secondly, I was simply interested to hear what had ‘happened next’ since the first interview, to see how the life story evolved since then, and to possibly expand it by another chapter. And thirdly I was interested to hear – very explicitly – whether or not people thought differently about their consulting time with more distance to their exit decision, so again I asked the ‘Gretchenfrage’ (the one million dollar
question) of whether people could imagine to return to the consultancy and to work again for their previous employer.

Interestingly, before starting with the actual follow-up interviews, four interviewees immediately said that it would be good first of all to go back to their initial interview recordings and to hear what they had said some years ago. When announcing to them, that this was exactly what I had in mind, I could sense some nervous excitement in the room. The excitement got even bigger when I said that I had prepared a little 15-20 minutes medley of interview extracts from their first interview which we would listen to together, while the entire interview session of the follow-up interview would this time be filmed and not only audio-recorded. This new methodological parameter of filming interviewees, especially as they encountered and reflected upon some passages of their original life story, may be considered a first step towards combining different methodological approaches that may allow for a more than discursive analysis of the data which also captures the affective dynamics of the interview situation.

After this initial round of excitement, the mood and character of the interview changed into a more reflective mode of attentively following the extracts from the first interview, sometimes with giggling, sometimes with commenting, but for most of the time interviewees were just listening in a concentrated way. This slightly more passive beginning stood much in contrast of course to the dynamic beginnings of the first interviews, where I had invited people to freely narrate their life stories from the time they entered university to the current date, which elicited some engaged storytelling and provided more room for self-staging.

In the follow-up interviews I asked people to first of all reflect upon this experience of listening to extracts from their previous interviews and the reactions were already mixed. Some interviewees were immediately caught again in their past suffering, when it was revived in the interview:

When I heard these things again, how I was suffering in the consultancy, I realized how my heart rate was increasing again and I was put right back into the situation. And I realized that this is something I don’t want any more, this way of working, this work environment (Petra, Academia, Interview 36).
Others pointed out the emotional distance they experienced towards how they depicted the consulting past in the first interview:

When hearing that conversation again I realized how emotionally involved I still was [with the consulting past] back then. Feeling stressed and things like that. Back then I could still feel the stress. Today that wouldn’t move me anymore. I have become much more relaxed. There’d have to be much bigger issues for my blood pressure to increase (Markus, Financial Services, Interview 31).

Most interviewees reported that the concrete memory of the consulting past, which they encountered when listening to their previous interview, had faded by now and that this would have an effect of course on how they would narrate the story today, particularly with fewer details, especially on some encounters of suffering.

I think the key message would still be the same today, but the level of detail would of course decrease. Certain episodes would not be so present anymore, which may also be the psychological effect that in hindsight things become romanticized in the sense that you remember the positive things, while the negative memories fade away (John, Financial Services, Interview 32).

With regards to their new working context, some interviewees explicitly revised their depictions of how they experienced their new work environment in the first interviews, especially if these had been negative depictions in comparison to the consulting past. Revisions were based on the experience for example that also in the new working context people would work a lot, even though in less visible ways:

Back then I didn’t have much insight into how the academic apparatus actually functions. I realized that there are many things going on, which I simply underestimated. I think it is important to understand that in academia things are less transparent. That means that you cannot tell, how many things a person is actually involved in simultaneously (Petra, Academia, Interview 36).

Someone else pointed out that he had learned to prioritize work and that this helped him to approach things in a more relaxed way compared to how he would approach things in consulting:
Over the time I have learned to better calibrate what is important and what is not so important. Back in consulting, everything that came in was important. It had to be attended immediately and there was no way around that. Today I am much more relaxed about certain things and I can also put things on the side (Markus, Financial Services, Interview 31).

Others reported that they had seen more things now and got to understand the bigger picture and that in some contexts, such as the bank, working days had even become more intense:

My earlier statement that the working day is similarly intense in the consultancy and the bank – that has changed fundamentally. It already changed a year after the interview. Because in consulting I hardly had any meetings. I had a lot of work, but only few meetings. Now I have meetings all day and I cannot do anything else. So when I want to get some work done, I have to do it in the evening. That makes my day much more intense than what it used to be (Jens, Financial Services, Interview 33).

The interviewee, who had just launched his second start-up emphasized in particular how much he had still grown into his ‘identity’ of being an entrepreneur and how this allowed him to look at the consultancy with different eyes:

In the meantime I have developed a totally different identity of course. I feel very much as entrepreneur and I feel very good about that. I also realized that things have shifted over time, not only for me personally, but also in the outside world, where being an entrepreneur is sexy now. That also helped me to let go of my consultant identity. Because suddenly I could say with confidence that I am an entrepreneur, and in terms of the ranking logic of consultancies, this is perceived to stand above consulting now. […] Classical consulting is not my thing. Today I think of it as a waste of talent (Karl, Entrepreneur, Interview 34).

Overall, the relationship to previous consultant colleagues had slowly faded as well, even though in some cases they were still reported to be stronger than the relationships to new colleagues. One interviewee, who in the first interview reported to be strongly involved with her past colleagues still, stated that now this was no longer the case. At the same time she admitted that not ‘having to be friends’ with her new colleagues was good for her in terms of being able to better protect her boundaries:
I only have a few close colleagues, but I also live in another city and most colleagues live there [close to the company]. There are several groups of people, but I try not to get involved in such groups quite deliberately. Maybe that is also grounded in my previous experience. I prefer to keep work and friendship separate. Because than you can speak with your friends about other topics than just work (Amelie, Industry, Interview 35).

Two interviewees said that they were still thinking about returning to the consultancy and one person stated that he could imagine actually doing so in the future:

There are many things that I still miss and I don’t think that I’m romanticizing things. I can very well remember some of the suffering [laughing], but there are still many things for which I would go back into consulting. The team culture, the spirit of the people, very dynamic, the young and the wild, very smart and extremely reliable, working on great topics, steep learning curve – for all that I would go back into consulting (John, Financial Services, Interview 32).

Both these interviewees (who were working as in-house consultants at the time of the first interview, and now in a different position at a bank) also think in hindsight, that they should have stayed longer in the consultancy. Interestingly, one of them had said in the first interview (a passage which was not played in the follow-up sessions) that he should have left the consultancy earlier because he had already been so frustrated at the time of exit. On the issue exit, four other interviewees said that the consultancy was a good learning experience, but that they would not imagine a return to the consultancy.

I would say it was a once in a lifetime experience in the sense that it is good that I made this experience, but I don’t need to have it another time. I already have it as an asset (Petra, Academia, Interview 36).

In the end, some interviewees suggested themselves that they would be happy to be interviewed again in another 3-4 years, stating that it was also a good opportunity for them in terms of reflecting upon the course of their evolving careers.

Without wanting to provide interpretations before actually conducting a comprehensive analysis of the interview material generated in this little follow-up study, the one impression that I got and that I would like to indicate here already is that people over the years seemed to have ‘contextually matured’ in the sense that different and new experiences along changing contexts allowed them to re-evaluate
certain statements of the past. While many interview passages reflected a confirmation, elaboration and development of what had been said in the first interview, thereby confirming the continuity hypothesis of my study, new experiences, especially related to changing positions or organizations again in the period between the two interviews, allowed interviewees to reflect upon the variety of things which they had seen – including their consulting past – in a different way. This observation stands in line with Markus and Nurius’ (1986) claim that career changers, who can draw on diverse transition experiences in their working biography, have also developed a greater variety of past images of self. Going forward, and in light of further career transitions in the future, people with more diverse experiences may be more likely as well to envision and construct alternative images of self within a new working context as they have developed a certain level of expertise in terms of adjusting to various types of new situations. Based on this, one could assume that by engaging in opportunities for career change, career development and career adjustment periodically, certain capacities can be developed that facilitate the transition process in times of career change.

5.2.6 Outlook and Implications for Further Research

With the briefly described pilot for a follow-up study I have already indicated some ideas for how my research project could be continued in the future, highlighting the value of studying identity as an ongoing project that can better be captured through a longitudinal set-up where dynamics of change can best be captured over time. This also relates back to the earlier made claim that research on identity in the organizational context would hugely benefit from taking into consideration notions of career development and career trajectories, as this would help to better capture the continuous and context-spanning dimensions of identity. My study has also indicated that contextual variables matter in the investigation of identity, as identity related career transitions may look different for people who exit a strongly-identity shaping work environment such as management consultancies. As a consequence one cannot assume that one career change model will cover the peculiarities of different scenarios, also with regards to the variations observed along new working contexts.

Moreover my findings suggest, that studies on identity would benefit from not only focusing on aspects of continuity and complexity, but that identity projects are
better understood as the simultaneous effort of maintaining continuity and complexity, which is then expressed in the attempt of balancing conflicting desires. By embracing this co-existence of continuity and complexity, a more holistic rather than one-sided understanding of identity can be developed. Along those lines of developing a more holistic understanding of identity, my study has further suggested a multi-discursive research engagement where the combination of different perspectives and different analyses can prevent the researcher – in the course of multiplying, complicating, and slowing herself down – from drawing too hasty conclusions.

When fantasizing about a more reflexive approach in the study of identity I could imagine, when developing this study further, to be more inclusive in the actual research design and allow interview participants to actively shape how the study is continued methodologically. Already in the pilot study I sensed that interviewees had their own ideas about what would be a good way for setting up this follow-up by going back to the original interviews first, etc. Others took initiative in saying that this study should be continued even in the future. I could moreover imagine including my research participants in questions of: When would be a good time for another follow-up? What would be a good format for this follow-up? What questions would be relevant to discuss? How should the follow-up be recorded and documented? I could also imagine to include my participants more, if they are interested, in the actual process of analysis where emerging themes are developed in a more relational and participative manner.

Another idea emerged, especially as I was including some interview vignettes in this research report, concerning a more aesthetic engagement with my interview data. Rather than treating interview material as data that is of little value (as it is currently framed in discourse analytical approaches) unless it is analyzed along questions that are informed by conceptual frameworks, I would like to think of these interview texts as also having their own performative force. Rather than treating interview data as meaningless text that calls for analysis, I could also see myself in the role of bricoleuse (and maybe provocateur?), who arranges interview fragments in a way that they become a ‘piece of art’ which has its own affective dynamics and effects on the reader who can then make sense of this without being limited (so extensively) by my interpretations as researcher.
5.3 Personal Conclusion

„Nicht was er mit seiner Arbeit erwirbt, ist der eigentliche Lohn des Menschen, sondern was er durch sie wird“.

John Ruskin (1819-1900)

The above mentioned quote, which is actually a translation from the English original “The highest reward for a man’s toil is not what he gets for it but what he becomes by it”, represents the opening line that I used in the farewell email to my previous colleagues when I left the management consultancy in March 2009. When I think of it in hindsight, I wish I had saved this email somewhere but unfortunately I didn’t. This being said, over the past few years I have saved many, many such farewell emails from past colleagues who left the consultancy after me and who still included me on the mailing list of their goodbyes. The character of these goodbye emails is rather noteworthy. It is often a lengthy statement of gratitude and acknowledgements (sometimes mixed with a subtle or humorous critique of unsustainable practices) directed towards the “consulting family” in a rather personal, yes almost intimate tone. This is quite peculiar I would argue, as the audience for such an email is usually the entire crew of employees from all Swiss and German offices which at the time of my exit already comprised more than 500 people. Thus, while giving the notion of a personal goodbye-note it is at the same time an almost public statement about oneself.

So when I look again at this quote through which I opened my farewell email almost five years ago, a big smile comes on my face. “The highest reward for a [wo]man’s toil is not what [s]he gets for it but what [s]he becomes by it”. This could very well have been the opening line for my entire PhD project, where I take an interest indeed – within an ontology of becoming – in how management consultancies and other workplaces shape the identities of organizational members in an ongoing fashion. This gives me a warm feeling that in my PhD project I investigated a topic that I was really curious about, even before I had opened any book or picked up an organization or management journal. In that sense it was more than just a ‘research’ interest that compelled me to dwell for so long on this question of identity in the contemporary workplace. Hence I take some contentment just from the fact that I
could indulge for so long in a study that touched upon a question which I find so central in my personal quest for meaning-making.

And now, after having investigated questions around professional identity construction, organizational identification and identity transition in times of career change so fervently, can I make some confident statements about identity in the contemporary workplace? Have I become, after all, an expert on discursive identity construction in the context of management consulting? Have I come closer to solving the puzzle of identity, which in the beginning of this thesis I still depicted as an infinite puzzle? Do I still hold on to the claim that our answers to the question of ‘who we are’ can never be final? Even though my supervisor encouraged me to be self-assured and firm when stating the overall impact and contribution of my study – something which I tried to enact to some extent in my thematic and theoretical conclusion – the one thing I have learned for myself in my investigation of identity is that any story, no matter how plausible, well researched, well argued, and well received it may be, is only one version of how it could be narrated. Even though I already tried to give a more varied and complete picture by telling three different stories about the identity construction of ex-consultants, I could still imagine many other versions of the story that would highlight different aspects and possibly even provide competing accounts.

This is not to diminish the value of almost 5 years of research and the three versions of my PhD story which I unfolded along the three working papers, but it is a conscious choice to remain humble and self-critical when reflecting upon the ‘findings’ which my research project has ‘generated’. This is my own way of taking serious the potential danger of making truth claims that can gain normative power over how people think about themselves and their identity in relation to their work and organization. On this note I remember the first ever teaching session (to refrain from the word ‘lecture’) that I was invited to give at the University of St. Gallen in a Bachelor course on different forms of organizational consulting. It was a four-hour session where I was asked to present some findings from my research and to engage the students in related exercises or activities.

Besides the nerves that I had in preparing the session, and the thrill and fun in ‘executing’ it, I particularly remember one student who came to me at the end of the session, a little bit puzzled almost, asking me whether – based on what I had studied
about management consultancies and their potential influence on the identity construction of (ex-) consultants – would actually discourage him from applying to a consultancy. Of course! How could I not have anticipated this question at a business school where students work so incredibly hard to later on meet the entering criteria for a position in consulting or investment banking? I can only repeat here, what I already replied to the student back then. My research endeavors do not put me in a position where I can make judgements about management consultancies as either being a ‘good’ or a ‘bad’ place to work for, and I do not intend to make such a statement either. On the contrary, by zooming in on some identity dynamics that I observed as ex-consultants reported upon their past career change, away from the consultancy towards a new working context, I tried to make more explicit the parameters that may enable or limit identity transitions when exiting a consulting firm. And again I need to point out that my ‘findings’ were shaped by the choices I made in terms of the literature I drew upon, the research questions I formulated, the conceptual frameworks I applied, the methodological choices I made and the analytical steps that I pursued. Therefore, rather than providing answers in my study on the identity construction of ex-consultants, I want to invite people to reflect more actively upon issues of identity when considering to enter or exit strongly identity-shaping work environments such as management consultancies.

To illustrate once more, that this invitation for reflection is not only directed towards others, I will in this personal conclusion align myself another time with the interviewees of my study by giving my own account of how I make sense of my past career move, several years after leaving the consultancy. In the personal introduction I already described my own transition from the consultancy to a new working context: the university. In describing this transition I also tried to portray what I ‘had become’ in my only 18 months in a management consultancy. I tried to depict, for instance, how my past working context had had an influence on how I conducted myself in the new work environment, how I approached certain tasks, how I appreciated the new working climate, and so on. At the same time I didn’t conceal as well how I tried to nostalgically hold on to past relationships, and possibly even to a self-image that was primarily grounded in my previous consulting experience. Several years have passed since then and it would be a good time, I believe, to pause once more and to ask
myself the question of ‘what I have become’ now after spending several years in the academic context. Where do I stand today?

One thing that I can say for sure is that I have become much quieter during my years in academia. Going back to the theme of the party that I raised in the introduction – all starting with a ski-weekend where I had to cover up my lacking skills in any kind of winter sports with some outstanding après-ski performance – the first thing I can note is that I finally learned how to ski. Even though I am far from looking elegant while skiing, at least there is no need anymore to (over-)compensate my lacking skiing skills with my party genes. I have certainly become more patient as well, and in hindsight I can even smile generously upon myself and my conviction – when entering the university – that the PhD would not take me longer than two years. I still cherish my consulting friends, even though I no longer consider them as that. Over the years our common consulting experience has moved into the background and there is a wealth of new experiences that we share, which give our friendship a different quality. At the same time I have developed new friendships in the academic world and I have learned how important it is to not only build these relationships on the basis of shared projects, but to look at people beyond their working personas.

I moreover learned to be more economical and to be contented with what I have, especially since I learned that a frugal lifestyle is not necessarily a sign of shortage and deficiency, but can also be a conscious choice of how to relate to the material world and the environment. I would still like to think of myself as being ambitious and career-conscious, but I also learned to be more generous with myself and to not squeeze everything out at the expense of my health and my happiness. This is just a short version of where I stand today, and again, there could be many more and possibly competing stories of how I narrate myself. But this version, I thought, would fit nicely into this personal conclusion for rounding of my PhD project. The question, that will emerge soon, is the question of ‘what’s next’. And yes, I have also caught myself pondering about the ‘second-next step’. But I have also learned to appreciate a bit the freedom and the excitement that comes with not knowing what the future holds and to still embrace it with curiosity and confidence.

Before I move on to the next step, and thus the next chapter in my life, it will soon be time to first of all close the chapter of my PhD. And yet, how do I bid farewell to this project that has grown so much on me, that has become an integral
part of how I define myself as a researcher and doctoral candidate who never intended to lose the status of being a (life-long) student? What could be an adequate opening line for a farewell email that would help me to ‘master’ the transition? This time, I think, I would take refuge to a poem which my husband and I received from the registrar at our civil wedding, and which has already helped us across various (difficult) transitions in the past. It is a German poem by Herman Hesse and it speaks about the magic of new beginnings, a magic which protects us and which helps us live.

„Wie jede Blüte welkt und jede Jugend
Dem Alter weicht, blüht jede Lebensstufe,
Blüht jede Weisheit auch und jede Tugend
Zu ihrer Zeit und darf nicht ewig dauern.
Es muss das Herz bei jedem Lebensruf
Bereit zum Abschied sein und Neubeginne,
Um sich in Tapferkeit und ohne Trauern
In andre, neue Bindungen zu geben.
Und jedem Anfang wohnt ein Zauber inne,
Der uns beschützt und der uns hilft, zu leben.“

Hermann Hesse, Stufen, 1941
6 List of References


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Organizational Life’, *Western Journal of Communication* 63(2): 140-167.


7 APPENDIX I: Initial Interview Guide (in German with English translation)

1. Stellen Sie sich vor, Sie würden in ein paar Jahren auf die Idee kommen, ein Buch über Ihr Leben zu schreiben
   Imagine, in a few years’ time you would have the idea of writing up your life story in a book
   a. Wie lange haben Sie in der externen Unternehmensberatung gearbeitet?
      How long did you work in an external management consultancy?
   b. Waren Sie vor Ihrer Zeit bei der Unternehmensberatung bereits irgendwo festangestellt?
      Did you have a different job prior to entering the management consultancy?
      i. Wenn ja, in welchem Bereich und für wie lange?
         If so, in what area did you work and for how long?
   c. Seit wann arbeiten Sie nicht mehr in der Unternehmensberatung?
      For how long have you been out of the consultancy?
   d. Was machen Sie beruflich, seitdem sie nicht mehr in der Unternehmensberatung tätig sind?
      What is your new job/ position since you left the consultancy?

2. Motive, um in die Beratung zu gehen
   Motivation for working in a management consultancy
   a. Wenn Sie zurückschauen auf die Zeit vor Ihrer Beratungstätigkeit, was denken Sie, waren Ihre Hauptmotive, um in die Unternehmensberatung einzusteigen?
      Looking back to your time in consulting, what was your main motivation for joining a consultancy?
   b. Inwiefern wurden diese Motive/ positiven Erwartungen während Ihrer Tätigkeit als BeraterIn erfüllt?
      In how far was this motivation/ your positive expectation towards consulting fulfilled?
   c. Gab es auch Bedenken, ob Sie in die Unternehmensberatung gehen sollten?
      Did you have any concerns/ reservations prior to joining the consultancy?
      i. Wenn ja, wie sahen diese aus?
         If so, what were these concerns/ reservations?
ii. Was waren die ausschlaggebenden Punkte, weshalb Sie trotzdem in die Unternehmensberatung gegangen sind?  
*Why did you join the consultancy regardless of these concerns?*

iii. Inwiefern wurden diese Bedenken/ Befürchtungen während Ihrer Tätigkeit als BeraterIn erfüllt?  
*In how far were these concerns/ reservations confirmed during your time in consulting?*

d. Würden Sie im Rückblick den gleichen Weg noch einmal wählen?  
*In hindsight, would you choose the same path again?*

i. Wenn ja/nein, mit welcher Begründung?  
*If so, why?*

3. Eigenes Rollen- und Identitätsverständnis in Retrospektive  
*Retrospective sense-making of one’s own role and identity*

a. Was waren Ihre Hauptaufgaben als BeraterIn?  
*What were your main tasks as consultant?*

b. In wiefern waren diese Aufgaben selbst gewählt/ zugeteilt?  
*To what extend were these tasks chosen or predetermined?*

c. Wie sinnvoll waren diese Aufgaben in Ihren Augen…  
*From your perspective, were these meaningful tasks…*

i. …in Hinblick darauf, wie Ressourcen genutzt wurden?  
*…with regards to the allocation of resources?*

ii. …in Hinblick darauf, was der Kunde brauchte?  
*…with regards to what the client needed?*

d. Wie würden Sie die Interaktion mit Kunden beschreiben?  
*How would you describe your interaction with the client?*

e. Was waren in Ihren Augen die Ähnlichkeiten/ Hauptunterschiede zwischen den Beratern und den Mitarbeitern auf Kundenseite?  
*From your perspective, what were the main similarities/ differences between consultants and clients?*

f. Wie denken Sie, wurden Sie in der Rolle als externe/r BeraterIn vom Kunden wahrgenommen?  
*What do you think how clients perceived you in the role of being a consultant?*

g. Inwiefern glich/ unterschied sich diese Wahrnehmung des Kunden von Ihrer eigenen Wahrnehmung zu der damaligen Zeit?  
*In how far did this perception of clients correspond or differ from your own perception?*

h. Inwiefern unterschied sich diese Wahrnehmung des Kunden von der Wahrnehmung ihrer früheren Beraterkollegen/ Vorgesetzten zu der Zeit?
In how far did this perception of clients correspond or differ from your colleagues’ or supervisors’ perception?

i. Wie denken Sie, wurden Sie als externe/r BeraterIn von Ihrer Familie/ ihrem Freundeskreis ausserhalb der Beratung wahrgenommen?
   What do you think how your family and friends who were not in consulting perceived you in the role of management consultant?

j. Inwiefern decken/ unterscheiden sich diese Wahrnehmung von dem ,typischen‘ Beraterimage?
   In how far did these perceptions differ from the ‘typical’ consultant image?

4. Motive, um die Beratung zu verlassen
   Motivation for leaving the consultancy

   a. Wie lange hatten Sie ursprünglich (vor Beginn ihrer Tätigkeit) geplant in der Unternehmensberatung zu bleiben?
      Prior to joining the management consultancy, how long were you initially planning to stay in consulting?

   b. Haben sich diese Pläne nach Eintritt in der Unternehmensberatung geändert?
      Did these plans change after joining the consultancy?
      i. Wenn ja, wie und wieso?
         If so, how and why did they change?

   c. Was waren die ausschlaggebenden Beweggründe, die Unternehmensberatung zu verlassen?
      What were your main reasons for leaving the consultancy?

   d. Wie lange vor ihrem eigentlichen Austritt wussten Sie, dass sie die Unternehmensberatung verlassen würden?
      How long, before actually leaving the consultancy, did you know that you would be leaving?

   e. Halten Sie ihren Austrittszeitpunkt im Rückblick für angemessen?
      In hindsight, do you think you have chosen I good timing for leaving the consultancy?
      i. Wenn nein, welcher Austrittszeitpunkt wäre hypothetisch gesehen besser gewesen?
         If not, what would have been a (hypothetically) better time for leaving the consultancy?

5. Neue Situation/ Neues Rollenverständnis
   New situation/ New role

   a. Was sind aus Ihrer Sicht die grössten Veränderungen, die sich mit dem Berufswechsel ergeben haben?
From your perspective, what are the biggest changes that came with your career transition?

b. Was hat sich seit ihrem Austritt aus der Unternehmensberatung in ihrem Arbeitsalltag verändert?
   What has changed in your daily working life since you left the consultancy?

c. Welche Aspekte des ’Beraterlebens‘ vermissen Sie in Ihrem neuen Umfeld?
   Which aspects of your ‘consulting experience’ do you miss most in your new work environment?

d. Welche Aspekte des ’Beraterlebens‘ lassen Sie gern hinter sich?
   Which aspects of your ‘consulting experience’ do you leave behind happily?

e. Wenn Sie einen Aspekt aus der Beratungspraxis, den Sie in Ihrem neuen Umfeld vermissen, übertragen könnten, welcher wäre das?
   If you could carry one aspect from the consulting practice into the new work environment, what would that be?

f. Welche Erfahrungen aus Ihrer Beraterzeit konnten Sie Ihrer Meinung nach mit in das neue Arbeitsumfeld bringen?
   What experiences from your consulting past were you able to carry into the new work environment?
   i. Welche ’Beraterqualitäten‘ haben Sie mitgebracht?
      Which ‘consultant qualities’ did you bring along?
   ii. Welche „Beratermarotten“ haben Sie mitgebracht?
      Which bad consultant habits did you bring along?

g. Inwiefern, denken Sie, werden Sie in Ihrem neuen Arbeitsumfeld mit Ihrer vorherigen Beratungstätigkeit in Verbindung gebracht?
   To what extent, do you think, are you still associated with your consulting past, even in your new work environment?

6. Sonstiges
   Other

   a. Gibt es sonst etwas, was Sie zu diesem Thema noch erwähnenswert fänden?
      Is there anything else you would like to mention around this topic?
APPENDIX II: Refined Interview Guide (in German with English translation)

1. Erzählgenerierende Einstiegsfrage
   Narrative generating starting question
   a. Wenn wir uns mal den Zeitraum von Beginn deines Studiums an bis zu dem heutigen Tag anschauen würden, auf welche einzelnen Kapitel würden wir da stossen und was wäre der Inhalt? Was würdest du mir über diese Zeit deines Lebens und ihre Bedeutung erzählen?
   When we look at the time span from the beginning of your university studies to the current day, what chapters would we encounter and with what content? What would you tell me about this time in your life and its meaning?

2. Potentielle Fragen (Beispiele), wenn die Erzählung stockt, nicht ins Detail geht, oder Aspekte von organisationalen Prozessen oder Fragen der Identität gänzlich ausblendet bleiben
   Possible questions for when the narration gets stuck or does not go into detail, or when aspects of organizational processes or questions of identity are excluded altogether
   a. Kapitel Pre-Beratung
      Chapter pre-consulting
      i. Wie hast du dich während des Studiums mit der späteren Berufswahl auseinander gesetzt und welche Einflussfaktoren gab es bei der Berufswahl?
      During your studies, how did you engage with the topic of career choice and what were the key factors for choosing a future career?
      ii. Bevor du die Beratungstätigkeit aufgenommen hast, was waren da deine konkreten Erwartungen und in wieweit wurden diese bestätigt oder auch nicht?
      Before joining the consultancy, what were your concrete expectations and to what extent were they met or not?

   b. Kapitel Beratung
      Chapter consulting
      i. Beschreib doch mal ein bisschen den Beratungsalltag, wie muss sich das jemand vorstellen, der zum ersten Mal von einer Unternehmensberatung hört?
Please describe a bit your everyday consulting experience for someone who has never heared about a management consultancy before?

ii. Was zeichnet deiner Meinung nach die Beratung/ einen Berater aus?
*From your perspective, what characterizes a consultancy/ a consultant?*

iii. Was waren für dich ein paar der markantesten Ereignisse während deiner Beratungszeit?
*What were some of the most remarkable experiences during your time in consulting?*

c. Kapitel: Post-Beratung

Chapter post-consulting

i. Beschreib doch bitte mal deine neue Tätigkeit und inwiefern diese sich (oder auch nicht) konkret von der Beratungstätigkeit unterscheidet.
*Please describe your new job and in far it differs (or not) from your consulting job.*

ii. Wenn ich nun deine neuen Arbeitskollegen bitten würde, dich in ein paar Worten zu beschreiben, was würden diese mir über dich erzählen?
*If I would ask your new colleagues to describe you with only a few words, what would they tell me about you?*

iii. Hast du Kontakt zu deinem früheren Arbeitgeber/ deinen früheren Kollegen? Auf welcher Basis findet da noch ein Austausch statt? Was passiert, wenn es zu einem Treffen kommt?
*Are you still in touch with your previous employer/ your previous colleagues? On what basis do you still interact? What happens if there is a meeting?*

iv. Würdest du im Rückblick auf die verschiedenen beschriebenen Kapitel genau den gleichen Weg noch einmal wählen und mit welcher Begründung?
*When you look back upon the various chapters which you have just described, would you choose the same route another time? Please explain your answer.*

d. Sonstiges

*Other*

i. Gibt es sonst etwas, aus diesem Zeitraum (ein Ereignis und eine besondere Lernerfahrung) die du noch erwähnenswert fändest?
Is there anything else, from this time span (any event or special learning experience) that you would find worth mentioning?

9 APPENDIX III: Open Codes Organized into Axial Codes

a) Negative positioning towards the consulting past:

Unpleasant working conditions
   1 (Bad memories of) stressful times
   11 Bad working/ team atmosphere
   40 Manipulative culture
   21 Disappointed expectations
   35 Lack of freedom

Limited impact of one's work
   53 No decision making
   56 No value add
   42 Meaningless work
   44 Missing a purpose

Negative work-life balance
   47 Negative lifestyle impact

High performance pressure
   51 No appreciation of one's work
   4 Alarming episodes
   10 Arrogance/ torture of previous colleagues

Negative self-image
   48 Negative self-image
   8 Arrogance

Bad memories of the past reinforcing the exit decision
   23 Easy exit decision
   66 Strengthening the exit decision
   57 Not considering a return

b) Positive positioning towards the consulting past:

Steep learning
   39 Learning/ Professional Development
Meritocratic career path
   43 Meritocracy
   54 No politics
   60 Positive career impact

High work ethic
   26 Good working/ team atmosphere
   27 High performance culture
   28 High professionalism

Keeping strong ties with ex-colleagues
   7 Appreciation of previous colleagues
   34 Keeping contact
   67 Strong culture
   73 Working with ex-colleagues

Praising convenient lifestyle
   38 Lavish/ convenient lifestyle

Reproducing consultant image
   15 Consultant self-image
   71 Transferring consulting tools/ behavior
   16 Continued identification
   25 Glorification of the past

Due to superiority of the consulting context challenging the exit
   18 Deterioration compared to consulting context
   68 Superiority of consulting context
   20 Difficult exit decision
   64 Regretting the exit (timing)
   13 Considering consulting career again

c) Positive positioning towards the new working context:

Meaningful work
   41 Meaningful work
   17 Decision making
   29 Implementation
   22 Diversity
   24 Freedom
   72 Value add

Developing new skills
   19 Developing new skills/ competences
Acknowledgement for one’s work
   6 Appreciation of one’s work

Positive identification with new colleagues/ context
   5 Appreciation of new colleagues
   52 No arrogance
   61 Positive self-image
   2 Active identification
   31 Individual/ different self-image

Balanced lifestyle
   12 Balanced lifestyle

Improvement towards the consulting past
   69 Superiority of new context
   30 Improvement to consulting past
   32 Inferiority of consulting context

Considering to stay in the new context
   14 Considering to stay in the new context

d) Negative positioning towards the new working context:

Slow, less professional work environment
   65 Slow working culture
   37 Lack of professionalism
   45 Missing diversity

Limited career opportunities
   46a Negative career impact
   70 Too political
   36 Lack of learning/ professional development

Limited bonding/ identification with new context
   58 Not keeping contact
   55 No strong culture
   9 Arrogance/ torture of new colleagues
   3 Active identity protection

Less exciting life-style
   46b Negative lifestyle impact

Inferiority of the new context, planning the next exit
   33 Inferiority of new colleagues/ context
   59 Planning the next exit
CURRICULUM VITAE

Personal Details

Date of Birth 18 June 1983
Place of Birth Dortmund, Germany
Family Status Married

Education

09/ 2009 – 07/ 2014 University of St. Gallen, Switzerland
Doctorate in Organizational Studies and Cultural Theory (DOK)

10/ 2006 - 09/ 2007 London School of Economics and Political Science, UK
MSc in Organisational and Social Psychology

BA in Psychology and International Business (double degree)

08/ 1993 - 06/ 2002 Freiherr-vom-Stein Gymnasium, Hamm Westfalen, Germany
Certificate: Abitur/ A-Levels

Scholarships & Awards

10/ 2012 - 09/2013 Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF)
Funding for a one-year Visiting Scholarship at NYU Stern School of Business

07/ 2012 Organization/ Sage Publications
Award/ Bursary for Best Student Abstract

Merit-based Scholarship, Best Student Award
### Practical Experience

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<th>Position/Role Description</th>
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<td>04/ 2009 – 09/2014</td>
<td>University of St. Gallen, Switzerland</td>
<td>Research Assistant at the Research Institute for Organizational Psychology</td>
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<tr>
<td>04/ 2009 – 09/2012</td>
<td>University of St. Gallen, Switzerland</td>
<td>Psychological Counselor at the Counseling Services of the University</td>
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<tr>
<td>10/ 2007 - 03/ 2009</td>
<td>Bain &amp; Company, Zurich, Switzerland</td>
<td>Associate Consultant in the area of Strategic Management Consulting</td>
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<tr>
<td>04/ 2006 - 08/ 2006</td>
<td>AXA Service AG, Cologne, Germany</td>
<td>Internship in the area of Organizational Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>07/ 2005 - 08/ 2005</td>
<td>Royal Bank of Scotland, Ratingen, Germany</td>
<td>Internship in the area of Product Management</td>
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<td>06/ 2004 - 08/ 2004</td>
<td>Krauthammer International, Cologne, Germany</td>
<td>Internship in the area of Consulting, Training und Coaching</td>
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### Additional Trainings

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<tr>
<td>01/ 2010 - 01/2012</td>
<td>Helm Stierlin Institut, Heidelberg, Germany</td>
<td>Training in Systemic Therapy, Counseling and Family Therapy</td>
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