



LUNDS
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School of Economics and Management

‘Be my Own Boss?’

An Interpretative Examination of Identity Work from Employment to Self-employment

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Managing People, Knowledge and Change

BUSN49 Master Thesis

May 21th, 2012

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Abstract

This interpretive study examines identity work in a transition period which was triggered by a downsizing event. The purpose of this thesis is to gain further understanding of how identity work is done in the transition from employment to becoming self-employed. A hermeneutical approach was adopted and data-gathering was carried out using semi-structured interviews which allowed us to gain insights into processes of identity (re)construction. From the empirical material, we derived four ideal types which represent our participants' underlying perceptions of the identity concept. These, in turn, influence identity work which is carried out to obtain a coherent and distinctive self. We find that neither organisational identity nor societal and organisational discourses necessarily dominate identity work as people consider new occupations after a downsizing event. In our study, individuals are able to personalise the dominant societal entrepreneurial discourse in order to reconstruct themselves as modified versions of entrepreneurs through self-employment.

Keywords: Identity Work, Discourse, Downsizing, Knowledge Workers.

Acknowledgements:

We would like to thank our supervisors Stephan and Kate for their guidance, insightful advice and support throughout the process of this study.

We would also like to take the opportunity to thank our participants who kindly took the time to share their stories with us.

/Elnaz and Sarah

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Introduction

In recent years, a number of globally recognised companies have generated media attention in Scandinavia due to their local downsizing. One such downsizing, which resulted in the closure of the R&D site of a multinational life science company, attracted our attention due to a strong media focus on the subsequent career choices of the former employees. The company in question, denoted LifeScience Inc, undertook a major change program in their global research strategy, which included the closure of several research and development sites, and the relocation of some of the workforce to other sites. After the closure of one such site, some of the former employees chose self-employment. Our thesis focuses on the identity work of these individuals in the transition from employment to becoming self-employed. We view identity work as an on-going process in which individuals strive for “a sense of coherence and distinctiveness” (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p. 1165). We refrain from objectifying identities as observable (Ybema, *et al.*, 2009), therefore our interpretation is the key to illuminate the identity work of our participants. We are not aiming to reveal the ‘correct’ representation of identity work as we do not believe that language mirrors ‘reality’ nor that the empirical reality will stay the same (Healey, 2009), but rather aim to produce interesting knowledge to add to our understanding of the phenomenon.

Having identity work at the centre of this thesis reflects an ‘identity frame’ which has been claimed in contemporary studies within the organisational field (Alvesson, Ashcraft and Thomas, 2008). The dynamics of identity are suggested to be crucial in contemporary society as we move from societies with relatively stable identities ascribed from birth, to modern meritocratic societies where identity is not a given, but must be constantly worked on through achievement (Collinson, 2003), leading to possible difficulties for individuals in creating coherent life narratives (Sennett, 1998). Thus, it is suggested that a sense of identity acts as a rudder to navigate the complexities of modern life (Albert, Ashforth & Dutton, 2000).

The literature on identity can be loosely categorised into two groups: the functionalistic perspective of identity which views it as static and stable (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), and a postmodern perspective which sees it as fluid and in a constant state of flux (Slattery, 2001). In

our thesis, we adopt a position somewhere between these two extremes, and we take a social constructionist view of identity, which acknowledges that people intersubjectively generate meaning and an understanding of themselves. Rather than identity being an individual construction, we see individuals as being engaged in a constant process of identity formation, negotiating their identities in interaction with others and with meaning influenced by discourses.

While many studies in the field of organisation are concerned with issues of identity, the most common focus is on looking at people's identity work within organisations (Alvesson *et al.*, 2008). However, there appears to be little in the empirical literature that overtly links downsizing and identity work. As a downsizing event was the trigger for the identity work at the centre of this study, we aim to understand how individuals do identity work in this specific context. Downsizing, or the intentional reduction of the size of one's organisation (Perreault, 1997), is a relatively recent phenomenon which has become a frequent practice. To demonstrate, 85 per cent of the *Fortune 500* companies adopted a downsizing strategy during the 1990's (Day, Armenakis, Field & Norris, 2012). Some scholars suggest that the downsizing trend is likely to continue, arguing that "downsizing is taken for granted as legitimate business practice" (Lamertz & Baum, 1998, p. 93). As globalisation, downsizing and restructuring are claimed to be altering the institutionalised patterns in both society and at work (Sparrow, 2001), we believe that studying identity work in a transition triggered by a downsizing decision can be a contribution to the identity work literature.

Identity work is closely connected to identity regulation, which is the control of organisational members through norms and culture rather than through structures (Alvesson & Wilmott, 2002), and it is considered to be of particular importance for the management of knowledge workers. Due to their characteristics and the nature of their work when they were employees, we consider our participants as belonging to this category, therefore part of our study involves how being knowledge workers impacts on their identity work as they move out of the organisation and become self-employed. The purpose of our study is to provide a novel angle on the phenomenon, by contributing insights and understanding about the processes of identity work in this particular transition,. Thus, the research question we pose is:

How do knowledge workers (re)construct their identities in the transition from employment to self-employment?

Based on our interpretations of the empirical material, we abstracted our findings of our participants' identity work during the transition period into four ideal types. Accordingly, three of the four ideal types represent resources for identity work which have been implemented, in order to achieve a coherent and distinct sense of self, thus hopefully providing cues to the questions 'Who am I?' and 'How should I act?' These are the *Essentialistic Self*, the *Other in Oneself*, and the *Work-and-Other-Selves*. The *Essentialistic Self* is based on people perceiving themselves as having a core identity, even if this core can change. The *Other in Oneself* is a perception of having several selves: either these selves can enable people to adapt to changing environments, or alternatively, the selves may be perceived as irreconcilable, potentially leading to identity struggle. The *Work-and-Other-Selves* involves making a clear distinction between the work self and other non-work selves, which may act as a buffer against work-related upheavals in turbulent times. A fourth type, the *Liminal Self*, represents identity work which does not facilitate a sense of a coherent and distinct self, but rather represents a process of not knowing who one is, hence being between a former and an unknown future identity construct.

As stated, the social and discursive context of identity work is important (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Our findings show that as our participants moved from employment to self-employment, their identity work was influenced by a number of discourses. However, we do not find that the individuals in our study are passively shaped by these discourses: instead they are shown to be active subjects who influence the adaptation of the discourses to suit their identity constructions. That is, although acknowledging the performative influence of discourse, one should avoid assuming "considerable constitutive powers of discourses" (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000, p. 1144). An interesting finding was that our participants did not consider self-employment at an early stage in the transition, as they did not associate themselves with the societal discourses around the entrepreneurial character. However, gradually, through the meaning and line of reasoning provided by the entrepreneurial discourse, they reconstructed their identities in line with the characteristics we have defined within the knowledge worker concept: that is, having operative autonomy and engaging in creative 'thought work' without the influences of (managerial) identity regulation.

Our thesis begins with an overview of the relevant literature, discussing the key concepts for our research question. Next we outline our methodology, which is based on an interpretivist

epistemology and a social constructionist ontology: our thesis is anchored in the belief that there is no reality 'out there' but rather we create our social realities. Following the methodology section, we present the organisation which represents the background to our participants' identity work and we outline the three discourses which we have identified as influential in our study context. After our analysis of the empirical material, we discuss our findings, our limitations and we outline our contribution: the four ideal types. We conclude our thesis with a recapture of the main points of this thesis and our recommendations for future research.

Literature Review

In the following section an overview of theories and concepts related to identity work in relation to organisations is presented. It is not our intention to provide a full account of the prevailing literature as it is beyond the scope and ambitions of this thesis. Rather the focus is on presenting and discussing the literature that is in line with the theoretical framework of this paper. Our research question: ‘how do knowledge workers (re)construct their identities in the transition from employment to self-employment?’ will act as a guide throughout this stage. In our thesis, the downsizing announcement is defined as an event against which the participants position their identities. As the downsizing event *per se* is outside our scope, the literature with respect to that will not be covered.

Alvesson *et al.*'s (2008) overview of the identity literature leads them to the conclusion that the three key theoretical perspectives within the identity field are: social identity theory; identity work and identity regulation. They also identify three key issues in the field: 1) identity as it is understood by individuals trying to ask questions about ‘who I am’ and ‘how I should act’; 2) the durability of identity; and 3) to what extent identity is integrated or fragmented. These will be covered in the following sections.

Identity Theory and Identity Work

In the context of organisation studies, as well as in other fields of social science, the “identity frame” (Alvesson *et al.*, 2008, p. 7) has become increasingly common in order to investigate and understand a wide range of social phenomena. It is suggested as “a vital key to understanding the complex, unfolding and dynamic relationship between self, work and organization” (ibid, p. 8-9), as well as being a central aspect for humans for issues such as decision-making, motivation, commitment, stability and change, leadership and group relations (see e.g. Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003).

In the field of organisational studies, Social Identity Theory (denoted SIT henceforth), originally formulated by Henry Tajfel and John Turner, has been very influential in studies of identity to understand a vast number of phenomena in the business context (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Alvesson *et al.*, 2008). According to SIT, identity is based on one's perception of membership in a relevant social group, but is also defined by those groups one perceives oneself as not belonging to: that is, social categorisation by designating oneself and others in in- and out-groups. Social identification may be with organisations but also with other groups within the organisation such as the department, age group or union. Because of the identification of self with the organisation, Ashforth and Mael claim that "leaving the organization necessarily involves some psychic loss" (1989, p. 23).

Recent developments within the field have led to raised doubts about and challenges to the functionalistic assumption underpinning these theories. SIT is criticised for adopting a fairly static view of identity, as it is suggested that identification is determined by the degree to which one identifies with the attributes of an in-group (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). The criticism is directed to studies on organisations arguing that the level of identification with an organisation is correlated with outcomes such as loyalty, commitment and motivation, which are suggested to be critical for functioning organisation (see for example Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Elsbach, 1999).

Thus, there is a shift "away from monolithic to multiple identities, and from fixed or essentialistic views on identity to discursive and constructed approaches" (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p. 1164). The durability of identity is questioned and suggested to be "somewhat illusory" (Gioia, Schultz & Corley, 2000, p. 64). The emphasis is on identity processes and becoming rather than being, therefore identity is not an individual and private construction but rather a discursive phenomenon that is co-constructed in a social context (see for example Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Beech, 2008). Poststructuralist scholars discard any notion of the durability of identity, suggesting instead that identity is unstable and in a constant state of flux, implying that individuals are constantly constructing and reconstructing themselves (Slattery, 2001; Haywood Rolling Jr., 2004).

Within the literature, there is a tendency to group identity theories into these two distinct categories. However, Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) suggest that there does not need to be exclusively one approach or the other. They critique the overemphasis on the fluidity and malleability of identity constructions that many studies propose. For instance, it has been

suggested that contemporary societies are characterised by meritocratic values, thus, it is suggested that the concept of career becomes important for individual identity work: it “offers a vehicle for the self to ‘become’” by linking the past with the present and the future (Grey, 1994, p.481). Sennett (1998) proposes that the nature of modern work, the emphasis on the short-term and on flexible, networked organizations makes it difficult for individuals to create a coherent narrative of identity. Therefore life history and job insecurity has been proposed to affect peoples’ self-identities and subjectivities (Collinson, 2003). However, Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) maintain that fragmented work does not necessarily have to result in fragmented identities, as people can do successful identity work which works as ‘a buffer’ (p. 1187) against a threatening external world.

In Sveningsson and Alvesson’s (2003) view, neither of these two stances captures the dynamic processes of identity work. They see individuals in organisations as being engaged in constructing their identities through on-going identity work. The concept of identity work is defined by the notion that individuals construct, repair and revise their identities, in order to provide them with ‘a sense of coherence and distinctiveness’ (p. 1165). It is suggested that certain events, confronts, interaction, or as in our case, transitions, can lead to a heightened state of awareness of identity work. In these periods, the productivity of one’s identity positioning in providing a sense of coherence and distinctiveness is questioned. Regarding *conscious* identity work, Alvesson and Wilmott (2002) suggest that it is characterised by a minimum level of ontological insecurity and worry. In sum, it is proposed as being more fruitful to see identity as a *process*: neither fixed and stable nor fluid and “radically decentred” (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p. 1167).

To some extent, individuals may construct contradictory identity positions. In Sveningsson and Alvesson’s study, their subject “manager H” was engaged in identity work to make sense of the identities involved in her role as manager, but she also mobilised more stable and personal, non-organisational identity in her work situation, which Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) refer to as a “narrative self-identity” (p. 1166). The authors identify this narrative self-identity as an important input to identity work, possibly less influenced by organisational processes and therefore a possible source of stability and even resistance in the face of frequent change in their organisational contexts. Watson (2008) elaborates the identity work concept of Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) by incorporating “a clear and analytical distinction between personal ‘self-identities’ and external discursive ‘social identities’” (p. 121). Sveningsson and

Alvesson (2003) do not discard the idea of a distinction, however, they argue that it is necessary to empirically study the personal-social dichotomy carefully in order to avoid any arbitrary division. Based on this argument, no distinction has been adopted in this study.

Furthermore, to our knowledge there appears to be a lack of interpretative studies representing workers' experiences in a transitional phase from one socially defined context to another (see for example Bean & Hamilton, 2006). As the 'identity frame' is an interesting field, there are a number of studies looking at multitude of aspects. Amongst others, Ybema *et al.* (2009) find that positioning oneself in relation to others is a critical ingredient in identity formation. Essers and Benschop (2009) examined how Muslim women manage to construct their identity within the entrepreneurial context. To overcome identity struggle, these women find creative ways to find a sense of coherence within the discourses of being a female Muslim and an entrepreneur, which supports the concept of Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) of managing to hold contradictory identity positioning. Thus, we wish to contribute to the literature by producing knowledge about identity work in transition triggered by a downsizing event.

The Concept of Discourse

Alvesson *et al.* (2008) suggest that identity work is crafted out of a variety of resources and materials, of which discourses are one. Thus, as identity work is discursively constructed, it is important to define what we mean and how it influences identity positioning. We will not attempt to make a detailed or a correct account of what discourse is, rather our aim is to explain to our audience how discourse is tightly linked to identity work and influences it.

'Discourse' has become an increasingly popular term as a result of insights into the importance of language and its performative influences. The concept of discourse is used in a variety of ways and according to Alvesson and Kärreman (2000b), there are two dominant uses of discourse in organisational studies: 1) the 'talked' nature of interaction (discourse viewed as local with no analytical links to other levels of social realities); and 2) discursively constructed social realities (discourses as a general system which influence meaning in a particular social context). This paper has adopted the latter approach to discourses, which is in line with the concept of identity work. Based on this view, the view of language has radically changed from

the functionalistic strand which perceives language as primarily a tool mirroring (objective) reality. An increasing number of scholars suggest it to be performative and to construct a particular version of social reality (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). Thus, “proper understanding of societies, social institutions, identities, and even cultures may be viewed as discursively constructed ensembles of texts” (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000, p. 137)

In our thesis, we have applied Sveningsson and Alvesson’s (2003) account of discourse, defined as “a way of reasoning (form of logic), with certain truth effects through its impact on practice, anchored in a particular vocabulary that constitutes a particular version of the social world” (pp.1171-1172). Hence, dominant discourses influence people’s identity work: thus by studying them, researchers can obtain insights into how identities are constructed and reconstructed and how discourses “encourage or marginalise the adoption of certain meanings” (Ybema *et al.*, 2009, p. 304). Discourse does not merely create a certain perception of social reality but is also entrenched in social structures, which results in the reproduction of the discourse as ‘truth’ (Knights & Morgan, 1991).

The influencing power of discourse is asserted from the notion that “language is not an expression of subjectivity but constitutes subjectivity” (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009, p. 194). In other words, language does not mirror an objective reality, rather the mere use of language evokes thoughts, feelings and actions and thus, performs influence. Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2009) suggest that the manner in which an individual is addressed, for instance as mother, manager, accountant or immigrant, will induce different ‘subjectivity.’ Depending on the situational context in which this discourse is applied, this label will encourage different meanings which commonly tend to hold contradictory connotations of how the social reality should be understood (see e.g. Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Watson, 2008; Clarke, *et al.*, 2009). The labels have no inherent meaning: although the labels can stay the same for a longer period, the meaning changes (Gioia, Schultz & Corley, 2000).

Based on the following view of discourse, Alvesson and Kärreman (2000b) suggest an analytical discourse positioned by 1) the degree to which discourse provides meaning to understand the social world; and 2) the level at which it should be discussed (locally or globally). Following the discussion in the previous section regarding the malleability of identity, a similar idea is applied with respect to the influencing power of discourses on individuals’ identity constructions. Although no answer is proposed on the ‘ultimate’

positioning, Alvesson and Kärreman (2000) advocate a “research pragmatism” approach: that is, a “more discourse-near but not discourse-exclusive approach to organisational research” (p. 136). The argument stems from the notion that there is tendency to adopt too “muscular” an approach to discourses in shaping the identity construct of individuals (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000b).

Furthermore, the agency of individuals has been brought to attention in the literature: whilst discourses influence meaning, individuals also influence the discourses (Collinson, 2003; Watson, 2008). This non-passivity of people is demonstrated through the prevalence of tension and identity struggles. Watson (2008) suggests that individuals have the scope to make inputs and modify the ‘role’ given by the discourse, in contrast to studies that suggest that people adopt discourses to different degrees. In his study, he proposes a three-step model that explicitly shows how identity work is connected to wider discourses: within grand discourses there are a “multiplicity of socially available social identities” (ibid. p. 128) which the individual can adopt. Through a dialectic relation between the social identities and self identity the individual has the influence to personalise the discourse. This supports the notion that identity is not an achievement but rather an on-going project. Although not as explicitly performed as Watson, Alvesson and Wilmott (2002) argue, with respect to discourses within an organisation, that “employees are not passive receptacles or carriers of discourse but, instead, more or less actively and critically interpret and enact them” (p. 628).

Knowledge Workers and Identity Work

Within the organisational literature, an established concept exists of knowledge-intensive firms (hereafter referred to as KIFs) and knowledge workers. Alvesson (2004) defines KIFs as: firms which are “broadly recognized as creating value through the use of advanced knowledge” (p. 29). Newell, Robertson, Scarbrough and Swan (2009) define knowledge workers as “professionals and others with discipline-based knowledge or more esoteric experience and skills whose major work tasks involve creating new knowledge or applying existing knowledge in new ways” (p. 25). In line with these definitions, we see that due to the nature of their work whilst they were employees of the global life science company, our participants can be described as knowledge workers who were working in a KIF.

Both the concept of KIFs and the related concept of knowledge workers, have become taken-for-granted terms in academia. However, they are not unproblematic as the concepts are socially constructed with certain connotations of prestige and status assigned to their use, which scholars must acknowledge when applying them (Alvesson, 2004; Newell *et al.*, 2009). Taking a critical stance, Knights, Murray and Wilmott (1993) argue that categorising knowledge-work as different to other types of work is a “truth claim” (p. 977), which reinforces traditional divisions of labour privileging certain groups of workers, whilst ignoring that all forms of human activity involve knowledge. Whilst acknowledging the possible limitations of the usage of these concepts, we believe that this constructed categorisation will allow us to analytically examine the workers in an occupational context which is characterised by high ambiguity. This is in line with Alvesson (2004) who advocates that it can still be used as a definition for certain types of work: it has “sufficient heuristic value” (p. 28) to be useful.

Knowledge workers are typically identified as having distinctive characteristics, including high levels of education and specialist skills. Newell *et al.* (2009) suggest that knowledge workers can be distinguished from other kinds of workers because they ‘own’ their organisation’s “primary means of production” (p. 32), in other words knowledge is the input, way of achieving as well as the output of the work (Newell *et al.*, 2009). Due to knowledge work being characterised by creativity and advanced problem-solving abilities (Alvesson, 2004; Newell *et al.*, 2009) it is suggested that knowledge workers generally require a high level of operative autonomy, thus requiring managers who provide an ‘enabling’ context for their work, rather than directly monitoring their work processes (Newell *et al.* 2009). However, there might be experiences of a mismatch between the work which knowledge workers find interesting, because they associate it with key identities such as being an independent research scientist, and the work which is identified by management as commercially worthwhile (Alvesson, 2004, p. 146). Some authors also claim that knowledge workers’ autonomy and employability have been greatly exaggerated in the academic literature, as they increasingly experience vulnerability to unemployment (see for example Brown, Hesketh, & Williams, 2002).

Identity Regulation

Identity regulation is a concept that is closely related to identity work, and it is particularly relevant to the identity work of knowledge workers. It is suggested that the intangible, ambiguous nature of knowledge work results in difficulties in measuring outputs and employee performance. Intuitively, a close monitoring seems the solution, however, as stated previously, knowledge work tends to be characterised by high levels of autonomy which restrict the amount of direct management control that is accepted. Thus, identity regulation, that is, control through norms and organisational culture, has been proposed instead of control through structures and hierarchy (Robertson & Swan, 2003). Hence identity regulation becomes an important influence on individuals' identity work within organisations. In our thesis, Alvesson and Wilmott's (2002) definition of identity regulation is adopted, being "the more or less intentional effects of social practices upon processes of identity construction and reconstruction" (p. 625).

Assumptions often found in SIT, that individuals identify themselves with particular groups, are challenged by the concept of identity regulation. Alvesson and Wilmott (2002) suggest identity regulation is increasingly exercised via managerial discourses, leading to self-positioning by employees who become "managed identity worker[s]" (Alvesson, *et al.*, 2008, p.19). However, Alvesson and Wilmott (2002) share the view that discourses are not the only influences on identity work but rather are balanced by other influences from an individual's life narrative. It is not either the case that identity regulation goes unresisted.

A number of studies have highlighted how identity regulation is achieved through normative control, with employees self-positioning themselves within particular organisational discourses. A frequently cited study of identity regulation is Kunda's (1992) ethnographic study which shows how the workers were subjected to normative control in the engineering division of a high-tech firm. Grey's (1998) study of accountants shows how company-specific discourses around the concept of "being a professional" (p.570) lead to identity constructions based less on the accountancy competence but rather on appropriate forms of conduct, that is, behaving in the 'right' way for the job.

Studies examining the identity regulation of knowledge workers seem to focus predominately on professional service firms (PSFs), in particularly management consultancies. The literature

identifies work in PSFs as being characterised by rather high levels of ambiguity: they are “image-sensitive” and “substance-weak” and rely heavily on client firms for identity (re)sources (Alvesson, 2004, p. 195). In this occupational context, identity regulation is seen to provide knowledge workers with ontological security, as shown in Alvesson and Robertson’s (2006) study of elite consultants. Robertson and Swan’s (2003) study of a scientific consultancy focuses on how ambiguity and autonomy, identified earlier as key characteristics of knowledge work, are used within the corporate culture in order to regulate the identities of the consultants. They switch between their two identities, ‘scientific expert’ and ‘consultant identities’ to manage the ambiguity in their working situation.

Research on identity regulation in life science firms frequently focuses on manager identities, another group seen as having high levels of ambiguity in their work. Alvesson and Sveningsson’s (2003) study of managers in a life science company illustrates how their identities are regulated through organisational leadership discourses. The clash between the work identities which they aspire to and the actual tasks they perform results in fragmented identity constructions.

Some studies suggest that although normative control plays a significant part in the identity regulation of knowledge workers, bureaucratic forms of control are still being used in the management of many KIFs. In the IT/management consultancy studied by Kärreman and Alvesson (2004), knowledge workers’ identities were regulated through a combination of direct behavioural, “technocratic” control exercised through organisational structures such HRM practices and the “socio-ideological” (p. 152) control of company values and beliefs. The interplay between the two forms of control results in the employees finding themselves in “an iron cage of subjectivity” (p. 151), which restricts their identities in line with organisational requirements.

As our study focuses on identity work in the transition from employment to self-employment, their identities whilst they were employees are seen as potentially exerting an influence on our participants’ on-going identity constructions and their choices to become self-employed. The organisational literature shows that identity regulation is closely interlinked with identity work in organisational contexts, particularly those in knowledge-intensive organisations such as the one at which our participants worked, therefore we see identity regulation as an important concept in our focus on identity work.

Methodology

This section is concerned with providing a comprehensive explanation of the research approach that we have implemented. Our thesis is based on a hermeneutic approach, as we believe that this is the most appropriate method for answering our research question. Using semi-structured interviews enables us to gain some insights into the identity work of our participants.

The epistemological positioning of this paper is interpretivist. The logic of research of an interpretivist epistemology is that the subject matter of study in social science, including organisational theory, differs fundamentally from that of the natural sciences in being socially constructed. Thus, the social world cannot be researched in the same way as the natural world, that is, by assuming there is an objective reality ‘out there’ to be discovered. Whereas positivist research seeks to explain phenomena, the emphasis in interpretivist research is on understanding rather than explaining the social world. This is carried out through an interpretative analysis of the actors’ actions within that social world, as it is understood by them (Bryman & Bell, 2007). This form of research constitutes a double hermeneutic approach. Hence, an interpretative lens founded on these premises allows for an analysis to understand how meanings are influenced in understanding one’s social reality and how one positions oneself in relation to one’s perception of that social ‘reality’. This positioning of oneself can be understood as an individual’s identity (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003).

Regarding the ontological position, this paper has underpinnings in social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Social constructionism contends that human beings create their taken-for-granted social ‘reality’ through the institutionalisation of “truth claims” (Ybema *et al.*, 2009, p. 306). This institutionalisation is then reified, so that the constructed world is paradoxically experienced as being an objective, independent entity. In the common-sense worlds that people understand themselves to inhabit, they intersubjectively generate meaning and an understanding of themselves (Giddens, 1991), hence we recognise individuals’ agency in this process.

Hermeneutic Methods

To examine how individuals (re)construct their identities as they go from employment to self-employment, a methodology is required that enables the researcher to understand how these individuals experience and understand their social worlds, therefore a hermeneutic approach has been adopted. In contrast to a positivistic position, an interpretative approach emphasises the “understanding of underlying meaning, not the explanation of causal connections” (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009, p. 91) between external forces and human reaction.

According to Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2009), there are two main approaches within hermeneutics: objective hermeneutics and alethic hermeneutics, which initially may appear incompatible. However, it is possible to combine them when conducting research, which is what we have aimed to do. Therefore, here we will briefly explain the focus of both forms of hermeneutics, and then explain how they can be combined in one methodology.

Objective hermeneutics suggests a circular relationship between the part and the whole. Accordingly, the text or the author behind the work needs to be placed in its social context in order for it to be understood. This corresponds to Max Weber’s concept of *Verstehen* which is underpinned by anti-positivism, as it focuses on processes where meanings are formed, negotiated and altered within a particular social context. The notion of language mirroring an objective reality is negated as it is claimed that it performs influence by evoking thoughts, feelings and actions (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009), as well as the meanings associated with language depending on the social and historical context (Schwandt, 1994). Thus, the actions of actors should be understood from their subjective point of view. Alethic hermeneutics suggests a circular relationship between pre-understanding and understanding, thus arguing that a researcher’s frame of reference is always historically and contextually bound. Consequently, the main difference between these approaches is that objective hermeneutics distinguishes between the interpreting subject and the interpreted object whereas alethic hermeneutics acknowledges the frame of reference in which the interpreter is bound.

Intuitively these approaches seem to be incompatible; however by revising the hermeneutic circle, an alternative interpretative circle is generated as shown in *Figure 1*.

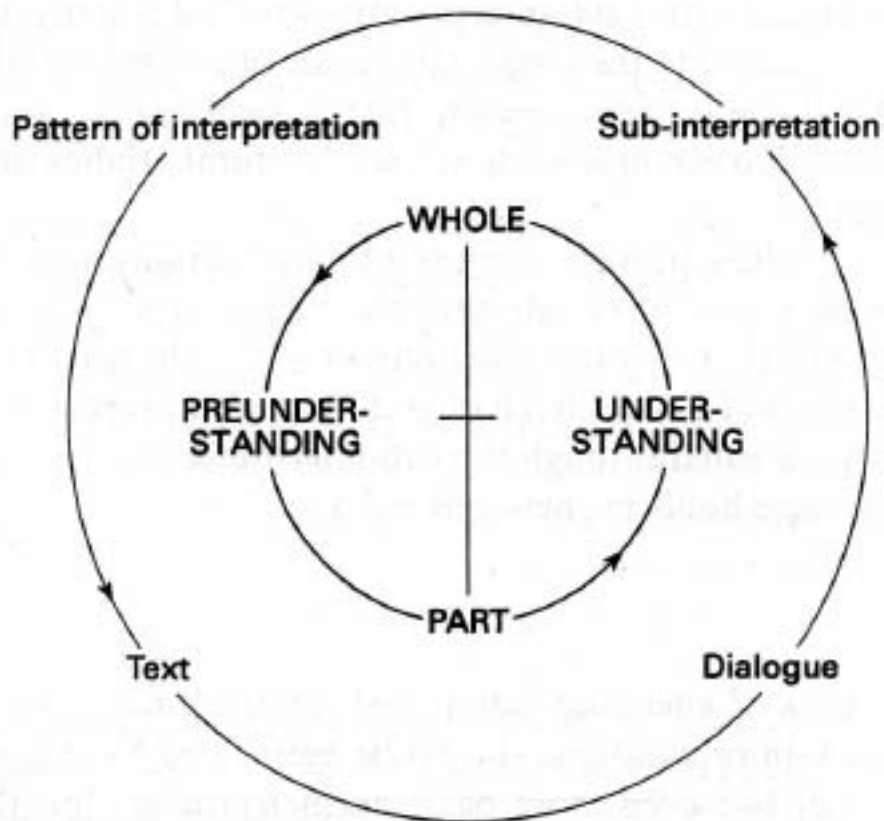


Figure 1 The Hermeneutic Circle (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009, p. 104)

The central notion is that an alternation between the *part – whole* and *pre-understanding – understanding* will facilitate a deeper and richer understanding of both, and if possible, enable the researcher to understand the participant in a greater manner than the participants understand themselves (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). However this does not give the researcher any ultimate authority for having the ‘correct’ interpretation: researchers’ interpretation is only one of many. This leads us to the notion of reflexivity.

Although reflexivity is an in-built function in hermeneutics, it is still important to discuss the concept. Many scholars address and adopt reflexivity in their studies and the term has a number of meanings. Perhaps one of the most commonly used ones is the emphasis on the researcher as a part of the social world that is being studied, thus this needs to be acknowledged, critically reflected upon and the relationship between the researcher and the subject needs to be scrutinised (Alvesson, 2011). Being reflexive means that the researcher needs to be mindful of the relationship between knowledge production processes, their context and the researcher’s

own position as knowledge producer, with the aim of producing ‘better’ research (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009).

Because a hermeneutic methodology involves interpretation, being reflexive is important for us as researchers in order to stay open to the empirical material and avoid ‘escaping’ to standard categories such as gender, ethnicity and age when explaining social phenomenon (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). The ideal is to continuously reflect over the alternative interpretations available in order to avoid highlighting or repressing potential explanations that are equally valid due to our predisposed position, values, and/or interests. This means we have to be aware of our own “hermeneutic horizons” (Prasad & Mir, 2002, p. 96), that is, we are embedded in our own historical and cultural context meaning that we will always be arguing only a certain interpretation of the empirical material. Hence, we foreground certain interpretations while suppressing others. For example, one of us has her own experiences of working in organisations where downsizing had particular effects on the working context: these form part of that author’s pre-understanding and influence interpretation in particular ways.

Having acknowledged that multiple interpretations exist, Alvesson (2003) recommends that the researcher take a pragmatic approach to interpretation, balancing “endless reflexivity” with “a sense of direction and accomplishment” (p. 14) making it practically possible to produce an interpretation which is not necessarily a ‘correct’ (or exhausted) representation of the social reality in study, but which, in our case, may help us to gain insights into how people understand their identity work.

Sample and Recruitment

The aim of this study is to understand the identity work of individuals who have gone from working in an organisation to becoming self-employed. Having read about the downsizing process of LifeScience Inc in the media and feeling intrigued by the topic, we decided to study the identity work of individuals who had worked there. In order to obtain contact with potential participants, a snowballing approach (Alvesson, 2011) was adopted, starting with a personal contact who had worked at the same organisation. Our contact assisted us by posting a description of our study as well as our contact details in an online forum created and used by former LifeScience Inc employees who have become self-employed. In addition, he (our

contact) also provided us with a list of suggested contacts who matched our criteria. We then booked interviews via telephone. As most of the interviewees were still in the early stages of becoming self-employed and did not have their own premises, the majority of the interviews took place within university facilities, although three interviews took place at the working premises of the interviewees. Prior to the interviews, we sent out emails to our participants where we described the rough layout of our interview process, in order to allow them the time to think through their experiences of going from employment to self-employment before the interview session.

With regards to the research question, the criteria for the sample was people who were former employees of LifeScience Inc and who had 1) been involved in knowledge-intensive tasks as part of their work at the organisation, and 2) were either already self-employed or were in the process of setting up their own business at the time of the interview. The initial sample consisted of 14 participants who had worked at LifeScience Inc between six and a half and 26 years. After some consideration, we chose not to use three of our interviewees for our analysis, due to them not entirely fitting the criteria for our study: one did not fit the educational criteria and two did not fit the self-employed criteria. However their transcriptions were used to help us obtain a richer understanding of the context for the study. In addition, for better understanding of the downsizing context, we also interviewed one former employee who was not self-employed but who had worked with Internal Communications during the downsizing period and was able to provide a rich context for our interpretations.

This left us with a sample of eleven people: five women and six men of whom three had worked less than ten years; four had worked between 10 and 20 years, and two had worked over 20 years. They had a minimum of three years university education in Engineering, Business and Natural Science and four of them had PhDs. They all worked with R&D related tasks at LifeScience Inc, and their work included scientific research, project leadership and managerial roles at various levels of seniority.

Interviews

According to Alvesson (2011), the research paradigm of the researcher and the research purpose of the study determine the degree of structure in preparing and executing the

interviews. For this paper, semi-structured interviewees were adopted in order to help elicit the participants' stories. A lower degree of structure allows for the participants to go off topic and talk about the aspects that they perceive as relevant and important (Bryman & Bell, 2009). In addition, it allows the researcher to take part in the insights and rich descriptions of the subject as well as digging deeper by following up the direction the interview is heading by adjusting the questions to the flow of the conversation. A certain degree of structure in the interview enables the researcher to redirect the interviewee back to the topic if necessary (Alvesson, 2011). However, there is an inherent trade-off between allowing for leeway and the value of the content of the data to our research area.

A general interview guide was conducted and used during the interview sessions, offering participants a chance to tell about their experiences beyond the initial knowledge and expectations of the researchers. The interviews were anchored in four primary categories: 1) Tell us about your experience at LifeScience Inc; 2) Tell us about your experience of the downsizing process; 3) Walk us through the process that lead you to decide to become self-employed; and 4) Tell us about your experiences as self-employed (see *Appendix* for interview guide). The interview sessions were opened with these prompts which assisted us in our attempts to obtain a flowing conversation.

All of the interviews were conducted with one interviewee, with both of us present. The interviews were scheduled for approximately 60 minutes but they lasted for between 45 minutes and 90 minutes. The interviews were recorded with the interviewees' permission. In each interview, one of us functioned as the main interviewer while the other one took notes and entered the interview where necessary to clarify points or ask supplementary questions. Between one and three interviews were scheduled per day, over a five-week period. We deliberately avoided more than three per day because of the demands placed on the interviewer by extended, focused listening. As all but two of the interviewees had Swedish as their native language, and the other two speak it fluently, the interviews were conducted in Swedish to allow for a more fluent and idiomatic accounts from the interviewees. Afterwards the interviews were transcribed in their entirety.

Within a constructionist framework, interviews can be seen as an active interpretive process in which the interviewer and interviewee co-construct meaning (Cassell, 2005). Interviewers are not "simple conduits for answers but rather are deeply implicated in the production of answers"

(Schneider, 2000): for instance, our questions started with their time at LifeScience Inc rather than starting with their present situation, which may have influenced their presentation of how they understand their social reality (Alvesson, 2011).

As our empirical data consist of other people's life experiences, certain ethical considerations had to be taken into account. We asked our participants for their consent to be transcribed and guaranteed that our recordings and transcripts would be confidential and we have also used a pseudonym for the organisation which they worked at, in order to preserve their anonymity to the extent that we can without changing the social context which is important for understanding the material. In addition, we have aimed to avoid consciously misrepresenting our participants by presenting quotes out of context.

Data Analysis Procedures

After having transcribed the interviews, we went through the transcripts separately trying to identify possible themes related to our research question, using the techniques suggested by Ryan and Bernard (2003), such as identifying repetitions, to assist us. We then compared themes and compiled a joint list of potentially relevant ones. Using a hermeneutical approach we then moved between the whole and the part, looking at the themes, rereading the whole transcripts and regrouping or subdividing the themes. The aim was to be open to different ways of categorising the material, bearing in mind that “[i]dentities and categories are themselves problematic: they fix and they exclude” (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009, p. 215). In other words, some interpretations can become more salient to the researcher, leading to other potentially more interesting ones being neglected. To demonstrate, in our initial attempts to analyse the transcripts, we focused too narrowly on identity work after the downsizing announcement. However, as we moved in the hermeneutic circle from these parts of the transcriptions to interpreting the interviews holistically, we found that our interviewees understanding of their working lives at LifeScience Inc was a significant part of their on-going identity work. Therefore, in order to answer our research question, we needed to understand their experiences as LifeScience Inc employees. We returned to the theory as we developed our analysis, to help us develop a deeper understanding of the empirical material, thus alternating between pre-understanding and understanding.

Quality Evaluation

In traditional science approaches, the value of a study is partly determined by criteria such as validity and reliability. Some approaches to qualitative research suggest that these methods can also be used in qualitative research, however, there is a growing consensus that these are problematic concepts for qualitative research that is based on constructivist premises, due to their ontological assumptions of an objective 'reality' (see e.g. Bryman & Bell, 2007).

Guba and Lincoln (1994) propose that qualitative research should be evaluated according to the principle criteria of trustworthiness and authenticity. In turn, trustworthiness comprises four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Credibility concerns the extent to which a particular interpretation can be judged as feasible, in light of the fact that multiple interpretations are possible, whilst transferability concerns to what extent the study findings are relevant to another context. Dependability, somewhat equivalent to reliability in quantitative research, concerns the ways in which the study was conducted and the results arrived at. Lastly, confirmability concerns the extent to which the study is overtly affected by the subjective stance of the researcher.

We have aimed for credibility by attempting to keep our interpretation within the theoretical framework which we have chosen for our study, whilst acknowledging that a different theoretical perspective might produce different interpretations (Costas & Fleming, 2009). As our study has a very specific and possibly rather narrow focus, it is problematic to argue for its transferability. However, we have aimed to provide a "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) of the context of the study, in order to help our readers judge its relevance for similar contexts. We can account for the way our research was conducted, its dependability, as we have kept documentation of all the stages of the research process, including a research log and full transcripts and recordings of our interviews.

Confirmability is a potentially problematic criterion to fulfil as part of the hermeneutic approach concerns bringing our pre-understanding when interpreting the empirical material. As our earlier discussion on reflexivity, as researchers we co-construct the empirical material with our interviewees, within our 'hermeneutic horizons' (Prasad & Mir, 2002, p.96). The manner in which we approached this issue was to document the conscious preconceptions we brought to the study as we began, in order to be reflexive whilst making our interpretations. However, the

hermeneutic approach presupposes that we will be bringing our subjective stances to our interpretations. The second principle criterion for evaluating qualitative research, according to Guba and Lincoln (1994), concerns authenticity or the fairness of the study. We have attempted to satisfy this criterion by voicing the different stories of our participants. In combination with presenting a thick description, such as the contextual background and discourses, as well as being reflexive regarding our preconceptions, our goals have been to produce sound interpretations to deepen our understand of identity work and to learn more about this particular social phenomenon.

Methodological Limitations

Due to the time limit for this thesis and the circumstances in which the participants were working at the time we met (they were mostly at the start-up phase of their businesses), our empirical material is based solely on interviews. As a result, we need to acknowledge some of the limitations of our research design. It is important as researchers that we do not take interviews at face value, that is that we assume they are “‘realistic’ expressions of how people define themselves and experience subjective worlds” (Alvesson, *et al.*, 2008, p. 21). Because the interviews are co-constructions between interviewer and interviewee, the interview itself is a form of identity work. Alvesson (2003) also cautions researchers against oversimplifying the interview situation as being about communicating ‘truths’, as they can also be used as vehicles for impression management or political action, for example.

Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) suggest that due to the complexity of identity work, with its lack of “substance and discreteness” (p. 1165), single interviews may not provide enough empirical material for a deep understanding of the processes of identity work. This is another limitation of our study: people rarely talk overtly about their identity and trying to understand a process is probably facilitated by being able to follow the process, that is, using a more longitudinal study with a smaller number of participants (see for example Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Watson, 2008). This means that trying to understand and draw patterns of identity work through the transition process based on eleven single interviews has been very challenging, demanding a lot of us in terms of interpretative skills. However, as the study is based around a specific social phenomenon, that is the downsizing event that triggered the

identity work, and we had to work within a limited time period, this was an inbuilt weakness that could not be avoided, but which we account for.

As our interviewees were conducted in Swedish but our study is written in English, it is necessary to say something about issues of translation in research, related to the authority of the researcher. There is no one-to-one correlation between languages, due to the complex interrelation of language and the historical, socio-cultural context in which they are used. As researchers, we have a responsibility for the way we represent our participants in our study and this involves how we translate their accounts (Temple & Young, 2004). In our study, as we are fluent in both English and Swedish, we think we have managed to present to the reader an accurate account of what was said to us, but it needs to be acknowledged that the translation in itself is another act of interpretation. This becomes particularly noticeable with idiomatic expressions and in Swedish, with the use of 'man' which is used both as a general pronoun equivalent to 'one' in English, but also as a substitute for 'I'. As studying identity work involves looking at what people say about themselves, quotes using 'man' have to be translated with extra care.

Background to the Data Analysis

Background: Organisational Context

Our participants are all former employees from the same R&D site of a global life science company, LifeScience Inc. The organisation is a result of a merger in 1999 between an Anglo-American company and a Scandinavian company. The Scandinavian company was founded approximately 100 years ago and by the 1980s was a world-leader in certain products. Prior to merger, it was organised into a number of largely autonomous subsidiaries, all of them strategically located near universities in order to encourage R&D collaboration. The site in focus was historically very successful and it expanded greatly in the early 1990s, but since then it had encountered problems in developing new products. At the time of merger approximately 900 people were employed there. After the merger, the company was organised along a matrix system with employees involved in international projects with corresponding sites in other countries.

It has been a trend within this particular life science industry to downsize, in spite of generally high profits. In 2010, after some speculation in the media, it was announced to our participants that as part of a global R&D restructuring strategy, their site was being closed down and parts of certain projects moved to another R&D site approximately 300 kilometres away. About 520 of the 900 employees were offered employment at the relocation site. The other employees were not offered relocation.

The relocation, which involved moving project documentation and equipment to the relocation site, was scheduled for completion approximately one and a half years after the announcement. Consequently, many of the employees were asked to stay and help with the move. The majority of employees finished working about a year after the announcement, with others finishing at various intervals until the final move. The employees received redundancy packages related to length of employment and age. Of the 900 employees, approximately 200 relocated and 300 found new employment in other companies. There were between 60 and 70 who chose self-employment instead, and it is this group who we focus on here.

Of our eleven participants, nine were given the opportunity to relocate, so in a factual sense, it could be said that they were not made redundant: they were not personally downsized. However, as their whole site was being closed down and most of them had worked there for more than ten years, the upheaval was experienced and understood by them as being downsized. This is how one participant, who was offered relocation, described his feelings:

My job is disappearing. My job is an important part of my daily life, it's the financial possibility to earn my living [...] and it's a bitter feeling that someone is deciding my fate [...] I mean [...] someone comes and says 'you're not allowed to keep your job anymore – that's not fun!

It can be seen from this quote, that it is the sense of not being in choice, not having control over the decision, which contributes to the feeling of being downsized and which triggered the identity work at the centre of this thesis.

Background: Discourses

Based on our theoretical framework of the performative influences of discourse on identity, we have identified that in a time when individuals go from being employees to becoming self-employed, a number of different resources are implemented in order to keep “a sense of coherence and distinctiveness” (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p. 1165). We have identified three discourses in our empirical material, within which our participants embed their understandings of their experienced realities: downsizing, bureaucracy and entrepreneurial discourses. We acknowledge that these discourses do not exhaust the representation of the social context which we are examining. Nevertheless, based on the empirical material, we recognise that they are significant for the identity constructions of our participants.

The downsizing and bureaucracy discourses manifest themselves in structural, tangible practices and processes which impacted on our participants' everyday lives as employees, whilst the entrepreneurial character discourse represents something to strive for. The bureaucracy discourse is a workplace-specific discourse constructed by employees based on

their lived experiences within the company, whilst the downsizing and entrepreneurial discourses are more widespread, societal discourses.

Bureaucracy Discourse

The bureaucracy discourse seems to have emerged from the organisational/managerial discourse emphasising increased efficiency and productivity, which manifested itself in a variety of standardised practices and procedures. The rationale for this was the globalisation of LifeScience Inc's R&D operations. The strategy was to standardise procedures globally to reduce dependency on the performance of individual researchers: to a certain extent, the work was to be inherent in the processes, rather than in the people.

The negative impacts of this increasing standardisation became an employee discourse of an increasingly restrictive bureaucratisation of the workplace. This discourse presents the workplace as being more and more centrally steered:

[...] the way the organisation is managed, the processes became more and more regulated and a handful of policies were introduced which were to control everything from how one should dress, which job titles should be used, how salaries should be decided, policies about most things that happen in a company [...].

As the site where our employees worked at was predominately involved in R&D, a part of the employee bureaucracy discourse involves the negative impact of this standardization on research. There is less room for individual creativity and improvisation, resulting in a working environment which was not seen as conducive to producing quality research. This comment from a PhD research scientist is typical for this discourse:

The focus has been on becoming more global, and all the processes and structures are supposed to be coordinated and be identical everywhere and I think those things restrict creativity: there are too many accountants controlling research and too few researchers.

The discourse presents the company as a closed world, cut off from reality.

Downsizing Discourse

As the context we are examining in our thesis involves a downsizing and relocation event, it is possible to identify a downsizing discourse in the empirical material. Within this discourse, the volatility of the life-science industry means that downsizing is a possible risk. Employees are presented as disposable and likely to be made redundant if necessary for the sake of increased profitability, with a lack of control over one's livelihood as a related element.

The downsizing discourse is generally associated with a dejected tone. In particular, there is an emphasis on perceiving (or categorising) those affected or involved in a downsizing project as survivors and victims. The former refers to those who remain in the organisation and the latter to those who have to leave. This is due to an underlying assumption that work is a central element of people's lives in our contemporary society. Within this discourse, working for corporations is presented as largely beneficial for individuals and as something desirable: being an employee is preferential to not having employment. When downsizing does occur, it is preferable to be the employees who remain with a company rather than be the ones who are made redundant.

Elements of this discourse are visible in this quote from one of our participants, describing the expectations of visitors to LifeScience Inc after the downsizing announcement:

[...] a lot of the exhibitors who came to the job fairs, especially in January, they said (she sighs deeply) "Oh, what's this going to be like. They've all lost their jobs and they're sad and depressed" and then everyone came and was prepared, had read up, were positive and [the exhibitors said] 'Wow, what's going on here?'

It is possible to see here how the exhibitors reproduce the downsizing discourse, positioning the employees as downsizing victims before they come into contact with them.

Entrepreneurial Discourse

In the process of becoming self-employed, our participants were influenced by a societal discourse of the entrepreneurial character. In part, this discourse is created by the use of predominant images of famous entrepreneurs in the media, who act as the symbol of the successful entrepreneur. The entrepreneurial character is presented as an ideal figure with

certain traits, which not everyone has: thus, there is a certain exclusivity to the entrepreneurial character. Therefore, not everyone who aspires to become an entrepreneur can manage it.

This discourse presents certain benefits and negative aspects to being an entrepreneur. The benefits are associated with autonomy and control, hence the entrepreneur is in charge of his/her own destiny. The negative aspects associated with the entrepreneur are the high risk stakes involved and the time sacrifices demanded, with very long working hours often required. In sum, being an entrepreneur demands a lot in terms of time and resources, which coupled with the traits needed, means that the entrepreneurial character is a rather special figure. The discourse also associates a certain amount of glamour with the entrepreneurial character: if successful, the entrepreneur is able to reap substantial rewards in terms of wealth and status.

Data Analysis

In this section, we will present the findings derived from the empirical material against the backdrop of the organisational background and discourses. As we are examining identity work in transition throughout different social contexts, that is organised work in a company, the downsizing process and working as self-employed, we will present our empirical material in chronological themes, which we acknowledge is at times somewhat atomistic in our approach to identity work. However, this has been necessary in order to allow us to make our analysis explicit.

Leaving the Velvet Cage

A number of our participants express that prior to the downsizing decision, they experienced mixed emotions regarding working in the organisation. They acknowledge feeling increasingly dissatisfied with their work situation due to the increase in institutionalised structures and identity regulation. On the other hand, they also found working there comfortable, for a number of different reasons, which lowered their motivation to leave.

One participant explains his experience of working at LifeScience Inc:

We were extremely privileged, [...], and we had a good salary and benefits. I think we lived in the lap of luxury compared to working at other places.

Yet he contrasts that with:

I think, em, the oxygen got restricted. Structures have got tougher and tougher, there's been more formalisation so now I would like to continue doing the same thing but within another structure that is more generous. There were so many processes that you felt 'oh please, let me breathe' [...] Everything doesn't have

to be a table or an Excel-schedule, it works anyway. There were too many structures around me as a person.

The above quotes illustrate the ambivalent feelings associated with working in the organisation. This feeling of having too much structure around oneself is linked with a bureaucracy discourse that many of our participants have brought up in our dialogues.

The increasing sense of being restricted by bureaucratic processes meant that the majority of our participants, somewhat unexpectedly in view of their long tenures with the company, described the downsizing announcement as a welcome prompt to try something new. Having worked at LifeScience Inc since after graduating from university, one participant gives the following account about his experience of leaving LifeScience Inc:

[...] considering that I started this job and said five years, fine, so after 26 years I think that I haven't managed to leave. It was too comfortable to stay... I could have stayed until retirement and probably enjoyed it less and less every year, I can imagine, so absolutely a kick in the bum, it was a definite mixture of sadness in one way but also 'oh, I wonder what can happen now?' This can still be something cool' so it was really mixed feelings [...].

The quote clearly demonstrates the participants' experience of conflicting emotions with regards to the downsizing decision. The organisation had many benefits and perks for its employees (velvet) yet at the same time it had become increasingly bureaucratic with processes-intensive procedures (cage). However, the relief he expresses can also be due to previous identity struggles against the tightening velvet cage, which had gradually reduced his understanding of himself as an autonomous knowledge worker. Furthermore, the adoption of this perception might be linked to the degree of identification with the former employer. As this quote shows, this participant did not feel a strong identification with the company, in spite of his many years there:

You need to preserve a core... it's maybe not the same core but somehow you have to... you can't just identify yourself with a job. And even less with a big corporation 'I am AZ' – that doesn't work...It [the core] isn't just family and so on, it's everything that isn't work, you have to be able to switch off [...]

Otherwise I would have collapsed on the [date of the downsizing announcement] if that had been the core.

A clear distinction is done between private self and work self. This even suggests a strong perception of 'who am I'. In the social context of downsizing, an identity construct like this seems to assist him in maintaining a sense of identity coherence.

Another participant also expressed similar experiences:

[...]I tried to find a role that I was happy with and it was really hard because I was put in a box [...] and that was really difficult to get out of so I fought with that but I want to progress and I can do something else and it was really, really difficult [...] I tried to move, I looked for a job and I was nearly on my way for a while but I didn't get it, luckily, they went bankrupt half a year later [inaudible] and as I said I was in the middle of everything, I had small children and that stuff at home and like I said it's just easier to go there.

Therefore, her reaction to the downsizing announcement was:

[...] my spontaneous and pure egoistic feelings were 'God how nice' [...] now I have to leave. [...] it was a relief.

For her, leaving implied that she was given the opportunity to find an alternative where she could engage in work tasks that were in line with how she perceived who she was and the work identity that she wanted. Here we can see that she resists the identity regulation from the organisation, which suggests other resources for her identity positioning, rather than having the organisation as the main source of identification (see e.g. Grey, 1994)

Many of our participants appeared to have enjoyed working at the organisation and even have worked there quite a long time, without the identity of a LifeScience Inc employee becoming a significant element of their identity construct. This participant started working in the organisation while doing his post-doctoral research and then continued to work there until the downsizing. When asked if he had thought about looking for alternative jobs while at LifeScience Inc, he responded:

The thought struck me but when I looked around there wasn't anything better nearby [...]. Well, it was really great to work for LifeScience Inc. It was relatively safe, we thought, there were good working conditions and a lot of freedom and nice colleagues and so on. So I have a hard time imagining that I could get a better job elsewhere [...] and the thought of starting my own business, that wasn't really there before...it was a safe existence.

However, although he enjoyed working at LifeScience Inc, he did not identify himself with the company:

Identify myself with? (pause) Well...specifically LifeScience Inc or more... I feel more like a researcher.

Seemingly, his occupational identity is a strong and a salient resource for identity construct. The implication is that he has a strong sense of who he is but also adopts an idea of holding one identity that represents one's essences. This again contradicts the idea of the organisation being the main source of identification. He follows this by saying:

When I'm at home I research something else. I research a new recipe or something. It can be difficult to switch off the researcher mentality but thinking about the project and all that, I switch that off, so it's something specific.

His identity work seems to centre on constructing himself as a scientist, which provides him with a sense of coherence to his identity, regardless of his working situation.

Furthermore, it is possible to see how the participants are doing identity work in relation to the downsizing and the bureaucracy discourses. Whilst acknowledging the sad sides of downsizing, they do not construct themselves as victims but rather as them escaping from the increasing processes and structure which regulated their identity as employees. Their relief seems to be due to them no longer needing to struggle with the increased restrictions placed on them through the LifeScience Inc bureaucracy discourse and its accompanying practices.

In contrast to their descriptions of an increasingly rigid ‘velvet cage of employment, our participants place a strong emphasis on the freedom and autonomy they now experience as self-employed as the main difference with their previous employed selves, as these two quotes show:

The biggest difference is that I can decide everything myself (laughs). Everything I do comes from my own head (laughs), no long decision channels because that was a bit difficult... now it’s actually me who decides absolutely everything, how I want things to be and then I get help from advisors when my head is in the clouds to get back on track. But it’s extremely motivating and stimulating [...].

The biggest difference? Freedom, freedom, absolutely. I don’t need to ask for permission. Even if we have a lot of discussions together, you can do it a lot easier and it’s a lot easier to get your voice heard.

As demonstrated in this section, the participants experienced leaving their former employer with ambivalent feelings. For most, these feelings were not linked to them having the organisation as the main source of identity and experiencing a loss, rather they were more linked with the comfort it offered and the increasing bureaucratic processes. This finding suggests alternative resources of identification outside of the organisation. In addition, different ideas of identity concepts seem to provide them with resources to keep a coherent sense despite the disruptive effects of the downsizing announcement.

Experiencing a Sense of Purpose during the Downsizing

The downsizing period lasted for approximately 21 months from the official announcement. Most of our interviewees worked throughout the downsizing process as the relocation was complex. Some research projects needed to be wound down while others needed to be moved to the relocation site, as well as accompanying equipment and documentation. Although roller-coaster feelings such as sadness, anger and hope were acknowledged throughout the experience, which are usually described in the downsizing literature as ‘typical’ reactions (see e.g. Kets de Vries & Balazs, 1996), at the same time, a feeling of purpose and meaningfulness

was also recollected with regards to their work during this process. This reflected conscious work on achieving coherence in this rather turbulent stage of transition.

One participant, who was working as a research scientist, had been a union representative for several years and became increasingly involved in union work during the downsizing process:

Something I couldn't foresee that I really enjoyed was the union role... I had worked as an information officer, especially during the downsizing period I'd organised meetings with members [...] I thought that interaction was really nice.

This responsibility took on greater significance, which is shown when we asked if she perceives that her identity shifted from being an employee to a union representative during the downsizing processes:

Yes exactly, it was like that. Even if I still worked with my other assigned tasks, it was quite a lot of everything, but I prioritised the union work tasks and you can do that.

After the downsizing decision was announced, the identity work of many of our participants intensified due to the nature of the event. We can safely assume that with an institutionalised pattern in society where money is vital for shelter and food, an announcement as such can be understood as unsettling and would probably trigger intensified identity work. The role of union representative provides a sense of purpose during the downsizing process, which can be contrasted to the downsizing discourse portraying them as victims (and those who stay as survivors). It can be interpreted that this alternative role she adopts allows her to 'own' the process rather than be victimised. Regarding identity work, this can be understood as her underlying understanding of what identity is. That understanding does not discourage her from having several 'selves' in order to keep a coherent and distinctive sense of self during an unsettled period.

Another participant, who had experienced identity struggles during the time at LifeScience Inc, said that:

[...] I was asked if I wanted to work there and help with the communication [internal communication for employees] ...really I should have finished earlier but I got a three-month extension to do this [...]. It sounds weird but it was actually positive to work with the downsizing.

This participant described feelings of frustration and anonymity when working at LifeScience Inc as she experienced that she was restricted and forced into a work role based on how others portrayed her. As the quote demonstrates, being given a new job role working with the internal communication to employees during the downsizing process enabled her to resolve these identity struggles. Ironically, it was during this period that she was finally given a job that she experienced as matching her own perception of herself and she was able to obtain a 'coherent self'. This is in contrast to the confusion and uncertainty that a downsizing event is usually proposed to cause for one's identity.

A sense of purpose and meaning was also obtained by perceiving the relationship to their former employer as instrumental.

And then I got a new task... and that really wasn't me, I'm really not an IT person, I'm a relations person...It wasn't fun but that's what I did, but then I knew we were closing down so there was nothing to do but get on with it and make sure I got out as much as I could, so to speak, and then leave the company.

It seems as if this participant initially had a strong organisational identification but after the downsizing announcement, his relationship to the company shifted to being more instrumental. However, perhaps it could also be interpreted that as the organisation had provided him with a strong, coherent sense of self, his relationship to the company had always been instrumental: he was loyal in exchange for identity support.

Some gained a sense of purpose by viewing the downsizing process as a time for preparing for the life outside of the walls of LifeScience Inc, when they are leaving one world in order to enter another one.

For me personally, because I got the opportunity to organise these start-your-own-business days and I got a really good network of contacts and so I worked I

had U, my site boss, as my nearest boss so that gave me a completely different contact than when I sat there totally forgotten in the clinical organisation, so for me the last half year was positive.

Here two phenomena are illuminated: firstly, the instrumental identity positioning to the organisation and secondly, a feeling of distinctiveness as she gets acknowledgement that she is actually noticed.

These quotes demonstrate that they did not perceive themselves as victims of a large corporation's decision but rather as agents with control over themselves and their work life. It can be interpreted that they took active decisions not to be categorised as helpless. It seems that by (re)constructing themselves as valuable for the company, for fellow employees, or as preparation for future work outside of the organisation, they obtained a sense of who they were, what they were doing and how to behave.

Gradually Becoming

At an earlier stage of their career life, our participants did not consider the idea of becoming self-employed. Even after the downsizing decision was announced, most of our participants did not immediately think of this as an option. Thus, from the empirical data, we can conclude that the notion of self-employment was not considered in their identity construction at an initial phase. When we asked them if they had thought about self-employment before the downsizing was announced, most responded with emphatic 'no's' or expressions of incredulity:

“No, absolutely not, of course not”

“Starting my own, no”

These quotes demonstrate that initially our participants did not aspire to self-employment but rather becoming employed was an outcome of a process of their identity work. Throughout the data analysis it became evident that the societal discourse of who this entrepreneurial person is and what personality traits and skills (s)he possesses, initially restricted them from seeing themselves as self-employed.

We ask this participant if she had any thought of starting her own business:

Absolutely not. I hadn't even considered that you could start your own business and live off it: you think of entrepreneurs, you think of Christopher Caesar. No that's not me and I don't know how I could think so wrong, because it's clear that I am but I'd never thought of it.

The identity work is clearly demonstrated by the avoidance of association with the entrepreneur discourse. Christopher Caesar is a well-known Scandinavian entrepreneur who is suggested as an example of someone embodying the characteristics in the dominant entrepreneur discourse. From this quote, it also seems that the identity construct of being an entrepreneur was adopted in the process of performing entrepreneurial activities. However, even if she does not at first associate herself with an entrepreneurial identity construct, her scientist identity provides her with a sense of coherence irrespective of whether she is working as a scientist or doing something else:

For me everything I do is in a scientific way, I think, I think that ceramics is science as well, it's chemistry and different metals and clay is old algae and dinosaurs and whatever, that's science as well.

Similarly, another participant also distanced herself from the entrepreneur discourse:

“Absolutely not. I am not that person, that ‘personality’”

The identity work from being an employee to becoming self-employed is shown in the following quote, which is a response to our question of why she decided to become self-employed:

To be able to make the best use of my competence, both the old and the new. It was really tempting because if I'd become a researcher in some big company in Denmark then I would ONLY have been a researcher, only been in that role, but I think I can do both and that's a bit fun.

The two quotations together illustrate how after a gradual process, she was able to perceive herself as becoming self-employed. However, in contrast to the participant presented before, she achieves a coherent self by allowing for two different parts of herself: the researcher and the entrepreneur.

Moreover, these quotes illuminate the notion of people perceiving and understanding themselves as having an essence. Hence they strive towards maintaining that, as they believe that they have a core or specific traits that makes them 'who they are'. However, the following participant, a PhD research scientist, had difficulties to take on the entrepreneurial role. When we asked if she identifies herself with her new role as an artist, the response was:

No not really, I can't, maybe I will someday but I still feel like a scientist, I don't feel like an artist so it's something I need to work on.

When we asked if she sees what she is doing linked to her having two selves or two sides of her, she responded:

That's a difficult question it's a part... it partly overlaps because I have that principle everywhere in life that there's a problem and I have to solve it and then what's relevant is the method I use as a researcher, have my cells died, what's the problem? Yes, I have that here as well so it's the same but on the other hand they are so far away from each other [...] yes it's difficult... they're partly overlapping and I think partly they're a long way from one another.

One can interpret that she has a strong perception of having to choose "what to be," resulting in identity work at a high level of consciousness. The struggle might be caused by how she used to or still does perceive herself. Here she is talking about how her work options after downsizing were affected by family factors:

[...] I was the one who had a career and I was the one who was going to focus on this and he [her husband] was going to stay at home and renovate and it ended up the exact opposite (laughs) so he got a job straight away which both opened up possibilities for me to start this, but also was a disadvantage because I was restricted in what I could do because we can't both commute to Denmark

[...] and so I had to think because I'd had the pottery workshop as a hobby-related business since 2009.

The possibility of being an entrepreneur was not perceived as merely positive, rather she also experienced an opportunity cost which was the reduced prospect of continue working within research.

These following quotes illustrate how the process of becoming self-employed was initiated. Like many, this participant did not initially plan to become self-employed:

I sat down and updated my CV like I'd done once a year. Then I started to look round for companies [...] and I didn't get any direct response, so there was another company which contacted me and asked for help [...]. Great that there's a demand for what I can do and that enquiry was the start to what I'm doing now.

This participant explains his 'mental' checklist of options in looking for work:

It started very early after the downsizing project that the thought about doing this was there. And I knew that I didn't want to move to Denmark and start commuting there so it was like yeah, this is a way of staying and having a job in Sweden. I knew also that I didn't want to start something new at a big corporation with all of the downsides that existed so I wanted to start on something smaller and I really wanted to stay geographically in the X-area.

These quotes reveal here that identification with the entrepreneur character was not obtained at this state, rather they are becoming entrepreneurs by doing. Our participants gradually (at an individual speed) adopted the identity construct of a self-employee based on a process of eliminating other employment options. The bureaucracy discourse is shown to be an important influence in providing meaning in what their next career move should be: starting their own business becomes the most viable option in order to avoid future restrictions on their work identities, which we define as knowledge workers.

Some begin to construct themselves as self-employed through talking to colleagues and external contacts:

So the reason why I made that decision was because I felt that it was something that would work and when I contacted several business advisors then nobody has been negative towards my idea, rather everyone has been very, very positive which has done that I have felt 'wow' this can probably work (laughter).

This participant experienced identity struggle during the downsizing because LifeScience Inc was a dominant source for identity positioning, which made him at first unsure of how to understand himself outside that work context. His identity struggle had lasted for some time:

I guess I was pretty insecure about where I stood and so a few different things popped up [...] I felt quite confused for a period as I then didn't really know, it hadn't really sunk in or fallen into place within me [...] And I don't react the same way, now I work much more focused on being self-employed because I didn't have that identity during the autumn, it has come during the Christmas break really.

He explained that he felt a loss of identity when he was made redundant:

What I experienced was that I didn't know who I was suddenly [...] I could always say that I worked at LifeScience Inc and it gave me a kind of label in the observer's eyes [...] And suddenly I didn't have anything, everything was gone. I knew that I couldn't use the business cards anymore, they were of no use, so I threw them in the paper bin and it was a process I wasn't really prepared for [...] if you ask me who I am today so I am... I have my own business in business consulting [...] But during the autumn I didn't know who I was, it was a readjustment which one goes through, I went through the whole crisis response curve that everyone talks about and describes.

This participant's process of gradually becoming self-employed seems to have involved more identity struggle than some of the others, due to a closer sense of identity with his former

employer. He makes reference here as well to the downsizing discourse, referring to the crisis which it is expected that ‘victims’ of downsizing will experience.

Through the processes of going from employment to self-employment, there seems to be some element of having adopted the entrepreneurial identity half way. Some of the participants explained that they admired people who could start a company on their own, but acknowledged that they were not enough of that entrepreneur identity as it is portrayed in the dominant discourse, as these two quotes show:

“I am really good as number two but not as number one.”

I would probably see myself starting a business with some colleagues, I do not think I would like to do it by myself, there are many bits I don’t master.

This participant’s reply refers to the image in the discourse of entrepreneurial work as being extremely time-consuming:

[...] I thought of running a successful and well-managed business, em..on that basis that I can survive both as a person and have a company. Somewhere it is the same thing I said about 26 years ago that I will go into this job with a part of me and the other part of me wants to be free.

Entrepreneurs or self-employed individuals are perceived as holding that something special that makes them suitable for the tasks and responsibilities that are required to be successful. Seemingly, they had compared themselves to available discourses about entrepreneurs and rejected them as a possible part of their identity constructions. These quotes demonstrate clearly the frame of reference or the invisible ‘the other’ (Ybema *et al.*, 2009) to whom they compare themselves.

Discussion

The empirical material presented in the previous section provides us with a good account of identity work in a transitional period. Previous research on identity work has predominantly focused on the phenomena within a particular organisational context and not in the transition from one socially defined context to another. For this section, our aim is to go beyond the themes by abstracting and conceptualising the patterns derived from the empirical data in order to further extrapolate our participants' identity work. Although we need to present our conclusions in a somewhat static manner to be able to make analytical interpretations, we acknowledge that the processes of identity work are more complicated, dynamic and intertwined than we are able to account for.

The themes derived from the empirical material demonstrate an overarching story about how our participants have constructed their identities, through the process of going from being socially defined as an employee to becoming self-employed in a downsizing context. On the surface, their identity work reveals an attempt to return to identities recognisable as knowledge workers. However, within this process, it is possible to see deeper, underlying identity work in order to maintain their longer-term narrative self-identities, which allow the participants more or less successfully to reconstruct their identities after the downsizing announcement.

The Four Ideal Types

From the empirical material we have identified and extrapolated four 'ideal types': the *Essentialistic Self*, *The Other in Oneself*, *Work-and-Other-Selves*, and the *Liminal Self*. The ideal type is a concept proposed by Max Weber, based on the notion that one cannot fully do justice to the complexity of the constructed social world (Swedberg, 2005) and therefore our ideal types are not meant to provide an exact representation of the social reality which we are studying. Rather, the aim is to extract certain elements that were found across the context. However, the purpose is not to present a statistical average but instead to accentuate a typical course of conduct. Thus, the principle idea is to illuminate the central element in a phenomenon

in order to help us to order the chaotic social world, thus producing knowledge (Swedberg, 2005).

We have examined the empirical material in a chronological manner as we aim to understand identity work in the progression from employment to self-employment. As identity work is ongoing, this approach has allowed us to understand identity work without ‘fixing’ it or presenting it as more static than necessary. The following four ideal types are abstractions of our participants’ identity work which overarched the transition period that we have studied. They are not mutually exclusive and we do not place any restrictions on how these ideal types are combined in the social world.

Essentialistic Self

We have identified that our participants’ underlying view of the identity concept with which they construct themselves is based on a rather functionalistic perspective. Although this notion was found in more or less all of our participants, the degree to which it dominates their identity construction varies greatly. For some, this notion dominates their identity construct heavily, which results in their perceiving themselves, as well as others, as possessing a core identity, an essence or even a stable “me”. On the other end of the spectrum, the ‘core’ is seen by these individuals as malleable and can be subjected to changes throughout life without necessarily leading to identity struggles. We interpret this essentialistic stance as a means of stabilising ongoing identity work when (re)constructing oneself, in line with the constructionist notion of identity constantly being negotiated. Thus, individuals that construct themselves in line with this type can obtain a sense of self (or identity) throughout changing contexts by preserving their core, which potentially can reduce the probability of identity struggles.

Other studies have also reached the same conclusion regarding individuals’ propensity to adopt an essentialistic stance with respect to their identity positioning. Ybema *et al.* (2009) suggest that the trend of resorting to an essentialistic identity construct can be interpreted as “stabilising moments in an on-going process of identity formation and reformation” (p. 305). The social importance of the essentialist stance is the legitimising effect on behaviour and the “truth claim” (ibid., p. 306) it constructs in one’s social reality. For instance, Essers and Benschop’s (2009) study of Muslim women’s identity work positioning themselves within entrepreneurial identities, found that the women adopt an essentialistic self around the constructed truth claim

of being ‘good Muslims’, which however did not exclude the entrepreneurial discourse as a part of their core. Although the individuals give themselves a label, the meaning of that label may change. Thus, the fixed labelling gives a sense of a stable identity to both the individual but also to people around the individual. (Gioia *et al.*, 2000).

The Other in Oneself

Fragmentation of identity is a known concept in organisational studies (see for example Sennett, 1998; Collinson, 2003). It is most often postulated as a negative event for the individual, associated with identity struggle and ontological insecurity. However, whereas those studies tend to focus on how individuals position themselves in relation to dominant managerial discourses (in other words, how they experience organisational identity regulation), our focus as well as contribution relates to the process of identity work in transition against a backdrop of a downsizing event.

The *Other in Oneself* is about people perceiving themselves as having several selves instead of one durable and static self, like the *Essentialistic Self*. We have identified that there are two different nuances of this type. The first one we have named *Different Selves*. This refers to people who construct their identity in line with having or being more than one self, hence, they have room for adaptation when it is needed in the social environment. The key idea is that one is not ‘restricted’ within a category or by possessing only certain traits, but rather one is allowed to change and adapt to the social environment. Robertson and Swan (2003) describe scientific consultants who construct themselves in this way, alternating between their ‘expert’ and their ‘consultant’ identities in order to cope with changing work tasks. The *Other in Me* is the second nuance which is also about having several selves but not concurrently, thus these selves are not perceived as reconcilable. This results in the positioning of oneself within one or the other. With the *Other in Me*, there is a higher likelihood of experiencing identity struggle.

Work-and-Other-Selves

Whereas the two above-mentioned ideal types are less contextually tied, this ideal type is more linked to occupational contexts. The emphasis is on individuals making a clear distinction between work and non-work identities. In other words, individuals are aware of not being ‘consumed’ or ‘eaten up’ by their work identity. This implies that the individual has an idea of having multiple selves but the key is to divide one’s work role from the rest of oneself (or the

private self). This could be a result of the meritocratic society that has been suggested as providing a base for constructing one's identity. Hence, the sense of self or identity is given meaning based on one's occupation, organisation or work role (Grey, 1994; Collinson, 2003). The *Work-and-Other-Selves* allows the individual to have a strong sense of self that can be used as a buffer to protect against work-related upheavals and which provides for ontological security.

Collinson (2003) found that employees engaged in a survival strategy in order to resist organisational identity regulation by distancing themselves from their work. This was carried out by dividing themselves and assigning more importance to the private or non-work self, which was named Conformist Selves. Collinson's (2003) findings are supported by our ideal type, despite the differing context. Furthermore, this ideal type does not necessarily resist work identities, therefore this type of identity work is not the same as dis-identification with one's work-self which is the case in Costas and Fleming's (2009) study.

Liminality

The term originates in the anthropological studies of van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1969/1997). Stemming from the Latin term for *threshold*, liminality was used by van Gennep (1960) to describe the second stage in rites of passage accompanying an individual's life crises, linking separation from a previous way of life with incorporation into a new life or group. Turner (1969/1997) expanded on the concept: "liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (p. 95). To our knowledge, there are few previous studies linking the concept of liminality to identity work (Beech, 2011).

From our empirical material we have identified that in constructing one's identity work, some individuals might have difficulties in providing meaning to answer the questions of 'Who am I?' and 'How should I act?' Being in this state tends to give a feeling of loss or of not being able to go back: rather one has to find a new self. We define this state as liminal. Two other studies in the literature also show this liminal state as a form of identity struggle. Beech's study (2011) shows how organisational changes lead individuals to experience themselves as liminal, as they experience a sense of ambiguity around their work identities, which leaves them feeling disconnected from their social context. The focus of his study however is experiences of

liminality within organisational contexts. Whilst Ibarra's (2005) study differs from ours in that she focuses on liminal states in the context of *voluntary* career changes, her findings that individuals experience periods of identity struggle in the transition between present, organisational identities and future-oriented possible identities resemble our ideal type. In her study, the multiple definitions of self are experienced as problematic, which triggers choices about whether to make career changes or not.

In sum, identity work seems to be carried out based on the premises that each individual has an idea of identity as a concept, which is more or less rigid but nonetheless provide boundaries and limitations on how to achieve a coherent sense of self. These 'truth claims' or 'theories' are resources (or premises) that have restrictions embedded in them which provide people with cues for how one should construct one's identity. Identity work is then carried out intertwined with these restrictions, which can be claimed as grand narratives or discourses.

Exploration of the Findings

In our context of study, identity work was triggered by the company announcement of the downsizing decision. The above discussion regarding the ideal types provides us with a less context-bound understanding of how identity work was carried out in our context of study. However, looking at the empirical data more contextually, it becomes clear after the downsizing that our participants were seeking to engage (or re-engage) in work that in academia is often defined as knowledge work, such as having autonomy and working creatively. This prospect was enabled by the downsizing event, which seems to have caused an abrogation of responsibility, as many of our participants were given the opportunity to escape organisational identity regulation without themselves having to take the decision of giving up on the perks which their employer provided.

Through their accounts of working at LifeScience Inc., it is possible to identify a managerial discourse emphasising increased efficiency and productivity through the bureaucratisation of many parts of the R&D work. This manifested itself in a variety of standardized practices and procedures, and a substantial amount of managerial surveillance. In turn, this led to reduced work enjoyment for at least some of them. The bureaucracy discourse in our study seems very

similar to those influencing the selective bureaucratisation described in the Kärreman *et al.* (2002) study of a pharmaceutical company in the process of strategic change. In their study, the organisation was moving towards a modern form of research, thus removing the focus from the creativity of the individual knowledge worker to the management of the processes, which some employees were worried might lead to a reduction in challenging work tasks. In our study, this trend is also visible, with consequent effects on the identity work of our participants, as they gradually found themselves in a working environment which was not conducive to the operative autonomy and lacked the managerial support through enabling contexts which is required by knowledge work. These practices can be seen as part of identity regulation (Alvesson & Wilmott, 2002) which in some cases resulted in identity struggle for employees, with subsequent impacts on their later identity work after downsizing.

The bureaucracy discourse made some feel less like individuals and more like interchangeable clones: employees who had to ask for permission and who had to follow procedures rather than being allowed to use their skills. The identity struggles they had within the organisational discourse appear to contradict the arguments in the literature that knowledge workers have considerable bargaining power vis à vis their employers. Whilst acknowledging that they had good working conditions, our participants did not appear to have understood themselves as gold-collar workers, but rather as somewhat insignificant employees in a very large company.

Bearing in mind that the identity work was triggered by a downsizing event, the downsizing discourse became a central influence in providing meaning for our participants. In the data analysis, we interpreted their positive reactions as opposing the dominant downsizing discourse, which tends to portray individuals in their situation in a rather gloomy light. With respect to identity work, in the downsizing literature it is suggested that downsizing is not about issues of losing a job title, but rather it describes a loss of identity: “the separation of individuals from the identity that provides the framework within which they make their living and relate to one another” (Miller, 2001, p. 148). This statement suggests that one’s work role is vital in constructing oneself. Thus it reinforces the predominant discourses of downsizing, both in the organisational literature and in society more widely, which seem to construct employees affected by downsizing using the dominant metaphors of ‘victims’ or ‘casualties,’ thereby contrasting them negatively with ‘survivors’. A typical example of this is the language used by Datta, Guthrie, Basuil and Pandey, (2010) in their review of the literature on the causes and effects of employee downsizing: both the authors and many of the studies they review

make use of these metaphors. They appear to have become taken-for-granted terms, constructing a ‘reality’ that assumes that those who retain their jobs in the organisation are the ones who have survived, thus potentially suggesting that people would rather stay within an organisation, or that it is more advantageous to do so, even if it is at some personal cost.

Perceiving the alternative organisations in the geographic area as bureaucratic, as they did their former employer, in combination with them opposing the downsizing discourse which constructed them as victims in this situation, our participants became aware that ‘typical’ knowledge work may only be possible within the form of self-employment. Few of our interviewees had decided on self-employment as the first choice of occupation after being downsized, because they could not identify themselves with the dominant construction of the entrepreneur. They associated it with unattainable personality traits, but gradually they begin to see themselves in this role and appear to construct themselves within the discourse as being free and risk-taking.

What is interesting is the manner in which they overcome this perceived mismatch. First they are impeded from becoming self-employed by the entrepreneurial discourse because they did not see themselves as having those traits, but gradually through the downsizing period and in interaction with others, they realised that self-employment might allow them to reconstruct their knowledge worker identities. This notion was also found in Down and Reveley’s (2009) study where they argue that interaction was important when formal organisational discourses did not provide resources for identity construction. The dominant discourse of the entrepreneur, present both in academic and in the wider (Western) society and reinforced through media representations, constructs the entrepreneur as a heroic individual, generally male (Ogbor, 2000) and as a genius who works alone (van de Ven, 1993). The construction of the entrepreneur tends to take a trait approach, creating the entrepreneur as someone who *possesses* ‘characteristics, such as bravery, ambition, success, autonomy and self-sufficiency’ (Down & Warren, 2008) and emphasizing uniqueness, so that a well-known figure such as Richard Branson becomes the entrepreneurial norm. Most of our participants overcame this identity struggle by adapting and revising the entrepreneurial discourse to suit them.

Regarding identity work and its close link to discourse, the empirical data used in this thesis supports that notion. We still emphasise the importance of discourse in providing and influencing meaning, however it is important to discuss the extent of the dominance of the

discourse over the malleable individual. Assuming that identity is socially constructed (Berger & Luckman, 1966), then identity is always provisional and negotiated. As discussed earlier in the literature review, many scholars have contested the durability of identity. Collinson (2003) argues that human self-consciousness enables us to separate ourselves from the social world around us and reflectively observe ourselves, others around us and “envisage alternative realities” (p. 529), leading to the potential of (re)constructing our social world. Thus, “[t]his creative potential enables us to reflect upon and exercise some discretion and control over our actions” (Collinson, 2003, p. 529). This is in line with Alvesson and Kärreman (2000), who suggest avoiding the adoption of too “muscular” an approach regarding the influence of discourses on breaking down and rebuilding identities. Thus, they say that there is “a tendency to ascribe too much power to discourse, over for example fragile subjects and a discourse driven social reality” (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000b, p. 1145). This non-passivity of subjects is demonstrated through the prevalence of tension and identity struggles. With regards to individual agency, Watson (2008) suggests that individuals have the scope to make inputs and modify the ‘role’ given by the discourse; in contrast to those studies that suggest that it is adopted to a degree (Watson, 2008). This supports the notion that identity is not an achievement but rather an on-going project.

Linking the discussion on discourse back to the findings, there is support for the notion of ‘personalising’ the discourse. With regards to becoming self-employed, the participants used the reasoning provided by the entrepreneurial discourse. In the data analysis, we have had the chance to follow how most of our participants went from not considering the idea of becoming an entrepreneur, due to a lack of association with the characteristics linked with it to, through interaction with others, gradually perceiving themselves as one. However, the interesting finding is that although most of them seemingly have accepted and embraced themselves as self-employed, at least for the time being, they have not just adopted the ‘standard’ meaning provided by the discourse. Rather, an altered or personalised version of the discourse has been adopted, which we call the ‘entrepreneur-light’. This interpretation is derived from the notion that a majority of our participants became self-employed in the company of others, where together they collectively embodied the entrepreneurial characters defined within the entrepreneurial discourse.

Limitations of the Findings

Although a very interesting field to spend time researching, identity work is a phenomena that cannot effortlessly be illuminated. It is not in our standard frame of reference to talk about our identity work. Therefore if we ask people to talk about their identities, they are likely to use essentialistic language, often talking about themselves in terms of traits, which oversimplifies the processes of identity work (Ybema *et al.*, 2009). This might have influenced our ideal type findings, in particular the *Essentialistic Self*. The issue of using interviews to research identity work has previously been raised with respect to our methodological limitations.

Our position in this thesis has been that identity is not something fixed, but rather a process in which identity is constantly under construction. However, any attempt to study individuals' identity entails fixing their identities, at least periodically, like butterflies under a magnifying glass. Thus, there is a risk in identity research that the findings misrepresent the dynamism of identity work, making identity appear to be more static than it is. In a similar vein, while our ideal types enable us to communicate our findings clearly, all categorisations of the social world represent an oversimplification of a complex, dynamic and intersubjectively created social reality.

Furthermore, having eleven participants is both a strength and a weakness in our study. Although we have had the possibility to work with a relatively large sample size, which has provided us with multiple voices, we have not had the opportunity to engage to the extent that we believe would have given us even greater insight about identity work. In particular, in studies that focus on identity work in transition from one socially defined context to another, a case-based approach would allow for a deeper examination. The complexity and the dynamics of identity work require profound understanding of the greater historical and cultural picture. Our sample size served an analytical purpose of listening to multiple voices, yet it must be acknowledged that our analysis is a simplification of the phenomena. Having said that, the reoccurrence of themes in the accounts from the different participants reassures us that we have provided a fair account of their social realities.

Conclusion

To conclude, we will reflect on the findings presented by revisiting the research question. The aim of this study is to produce more knowledge about how knowledge workers (re)construct their identities in the transition from employment to self-employment. Based on the constructionist ontological positioning of this thesis, the assumption is that identity work is discursively performed in interaction with others (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). While engaging with the empirical material, three discourses were identified as having a central influence on how identity work was positioned in the study context. Although acknowledging that many other discourses have influencing power, due to the time constraints of this study, a more narrow view was adopted which is tightly linked to our research question. The discourses which we identified were related to identity regulation based on increasing bureaucratisation; the gloom of a downsizing event and perceiving self-employment as a viable option.

We defined our participants based on the concept of knowledge workers established by the characteristics of the work they carry out and their demands for a sense of operative autonomy and stimulating work (Alvesson, 2004). Within the organisational literature, being defined as a knowledge worker has some implications related to their identity work. For instance, in our study the bureaucracy discourse has had a dominant impact on influencing meaning when constructing identity work. The increased monitoring of R&D outcomes and structured work processes at the organisation were experienced by our participants as reducing their operative freedom and their creativity. They also felt more disposable, as the work processes were aiming to reduce dependence on specific workers. With regard to the regulatory influences on identity (Alvesson & Wilmott, 2002), it can be interpreted that self-employment was perceived as a viable occupational alternative to get away from regulations.

Furthermore, the downsizing event was perceived as rather positive and meaningful, which we found contradicted the common consensus in the literature and the downsizing discourse (van de Ven, 1993). Constructing their identities against the entrepreneurial discourse, we found that gradually our participants started to perceive themselves as people who could have their own

business. Seemingly, the influence of the people in their surroundings played a crucial part in their identity constructs, supporting the notion that “identity work occurs in social and discursive contexts” (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p. 1167). As we have seen in this thesis, most of the participants adopted an ‘entrepreneurial-light’ construct.

From our empirical material, four contributions were derived, tied to our interpretation of how people do identity work at a heightened level of awareness triggered by an event in the social environment. The *Essentialistic Self* ideal type portrays the general tendency we found across most of our participants, that is, in order to obtain a coherent and distinctive self, they adopted an essentialistic approach of how to construct themselves. The second type, *The Other in Oneself* is related to their perception of having several ‘selves’ within them, which enables them to perceive that they are adapting to new conditions in the social environment, without facing identity struggles. Within this type we distinguished two groups: those who perceived that the different sides could be reconciled and those who did not. Thus, there is a greater likelihood for the latter to experience identity struggles. *Work-and-Other-Selves*, our third contribution, suggests that perceiving the work-related self as separate from the non-work self will keep the sense of ‘me’ more durable. Whereas these three types presented so far show identity work when it is successful, the fourth which is labelled *Liminality* shows when there is more struggle to obtain a coherent self. We define people as being liminal when they are in between identity constructs in the sense of not knowing who they are. At this stage it can be interpreted that identity work is at the highest level of consciousness as the individual is trying to work out who (s)he is.

Many studies in organisational studies as well as in psychology and sociology, assume that identities are constructed based on one’s perception of belonging to different social groups, in other words, social categorisation. In an organisational context, the question would then be to what extent one identifies with the organisation. Thus, in a downsizing process, it is then presumably not about the issues of losing a job title but rather about a loss of identity (Miller, 2001). In our case we have found that identity constructs are not necessarily as fragmented or fragile as they are portrayed in the literature, rather in line with Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003), there are other aspects in one’s life that can enable one to obtain a more coherent and distinctive sense of oneself. The ideal types which demonstrate how identity work is carried out are linked to the durability of identities. Although it has not been in the scope of this thesis to identify which alternative sources can provide a coherent sense of self, it was nevertheless

evident that the organisation *per se* was not a dominant source of identification. However, this is not saying that one does not identify with a social group such as the organisation, rather it is more open and complex than that.

The findings of this study are not only limited to people or occupational tasks that are associated with the concepts of knowledge workers and KIFs. This did not aim to be a normative study, hence we acknowledge that every social reality is contextually and historically bound. However, from the findings there are implications that can be drawn. By conceptualising, thus zooming out from the very specific research context, we have extrapolated four ideal types, which we aim and hope will contribute to people's understanding of their own identity work. Moreover, as identity work is carried out in a social and discursive context, we think it is interesting to see how discourses, for example the entrepreneurial discourse, have influences on hindering or encouraging people to become self-employed. However, taking it to a more abstract level, conscious knowledge of this process of identity work and the influence of discourses in providing meaning can be applied by managers in organisations, or by individuals, in order to actively and consciously revise the meanings which the discourses can provide. This thesis supports the notion that discourses are not overly 'muscular', but rather that individuals have agency in personalising the meanings influenced by them.

Furthermore, as mentioned earlier there seems to be very little research on the processes of identity work during a downsizing process. There is a societal interest in what happens to knowledge workers and their competences. As with our participants, groups of people starting up companies can change the business landscape in the region and they might themselves become employers. In addition, as interaction with others seems to have been an influence in positioning our participants within the entrepreneurial discourse, supporting organisations for potential start-up companies can make use of these findings to promote a flourishing business region.

For subsequent research within identity work, we would recommend longitudinal studies in order to get a greater understanding of the processes of identity work. For studies similar to ours, that is, identity work in transition, we suggest that the research subjects are studied throughout the transition period, using methods such as a combination of interviews and observations or perhaps optimally, ethnographic studies. Furthermore, it is very important to

study identity work more carefully, trying to avoid going into the research with preconceptions based on standard identity categorisations such as the distinction between self- and social-identity or arbitrarily assuming that identity is constructed with respect to certain social groups. Based on our study (and similar to Watson, 2008), we see that people appropriate particular discourses and personalise them in the processes of their identity work, creating new and meaningful identities. Therefore, we also recommend that more research is done on studying these processes by which people revise and appropriate discourses in doing identity work.

Within organisational studies, it is often taken for granted that the organisation is a primary source of identification that gives individuals a sense of a coherent and distinctive self. However, as it is likely that downsizing trends will continue or perhaps even intensify, we recommend that more research be carried out on identity work in transitional periods as people leave or move between organisations involuntarily. It would be helpful to understand what other resources individuals draw on in their identity constructions in downsizing contexts. Our study focused on the identity work of knowledge workers. Other occupational groups, such as so-called blue-collar workers, could also be studied in a similar downsizing context, to see how they do their identity work and for example if there are other dominant discourses in their identity reconstructions.

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Appendix: Interview Guide

Background Questions

How long did you work at LifeScience Inc?

What position did you hold there? / What was your job title?

How old are you?

How long did you study in higher education?

Interview Questions

1. Being a LifeScience Inc Employee

Tell us about your experiences as a LifeScience Inc employee:

When you think back to working there, what did you appreciate?

Is there such a thing as a typical LifeScience Inc employee?

Did you identify with the company/with any particular group?

Were there any connections between your work life and your private life?

Were you proud of working there?

Did you ever consider changing job or starting your own company during your time as an employee?

2. The Downsizing Process

Tell us about your experience of the downsizing process:

What happened when you got the downsizing news?

Tell us about the time between the announcement and you finally leaving. What was your motivation to keep working?

Why did you decide not to relocate? /Would you have relocated if you'd been asked?

3. Deciding to Become Self-Employed

Lead us through the process to becoming self-employed.

Was self-employment an immediate choice?

Did you look for other work?

Why did you decide to become self-employed?

How long did it take to make the decision?

What factors influenced your decision to become self-employed?

4. Experiences of Self-Employment so far.

Tell us what it's like to be self-employed

What's the difference between being an employee and being self-employed?

Where do you see yourself in five years' time?

Who are you now and who were you when you worked at LifeScience Inc?