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Master's Thesis:

Rethinking Professional Identity in Changing Organizations

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Abstract

Title: Rethinking Professional Identity in Changing Organizations

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Purpose: The purpose of our research is to broaden the context in which the concept of professional identity has historically been studied and better understand how employees redefine their professional identity in a changing organizational environment.

Methodology: We based our research on a qualitative abductive research design, in which hermeneutics and reflexivity were important to make interpretations.

Theoretical Background: As a theoretical background for our study, we provided an overview of the existing literature on (professional) identity in organizational change.

Empirical Foundation: The empirical material for this thesis was generated by ten semi-structured interviews with (managerial) employees from a regional office in Sweden of a large multinational automotive company.

Main Findings: We found that professional identity can be both threatened and strengthened during an organizational change. Threats to autonomous selves are often countered by resistance which may lead employees to reinforce their autonomous view of self. Other employees choose to distance themselves in times of change, in order to continue to perform in their professional roles. On the other hand, change can provide opportunities for employees to redefine their professional identity, through changes in their role and social categories in the workplace.

Keywords: Organizational Change, Professional Identity, Functional Distancing, Resistance, Autonomy, Social Categories

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1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Problem

In today's competitive business environment, organizational change is commonly argued to be inevitable for organizations to remain profitable (Grama & Todericiu, 2016). This thesis investigates an automotive company, pseudonymized as CarCo, which currently implements two changes: one which aims to utilize operational synergies between international markets and the other to enhance customer focus by separating business units. Such changes, however, may generate high levels of uncertainty (Schumacher et al., 2016) and discomfort (Bareil, Savoie & Meunier, 2007) for its employees. It can be said that the complexities and ambiguities of contemporary organizations and social life make the struggle for securing a sense of "self" a more problematic activity (Alvesson, 2001; Casey, 1995). One can argue that this reflects back at organizations, as destabilized identities can affect organizational behavior and change outcomes (McInnes et al., 2006; Reissner, 2010). Whereas contemporary management is increasingly concerned with managing employees' identities (through hopes, fears and aspirations) rather than their behavior (Deetz, 1995, cited in Alvesson & Willmott, 2002), identity is an important theme to organizational scholars and is studied on a multitude of levels (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) among which professional identity.

This thesis explores the concept of "professional identity" instead of "occupational identity", where the latter is often conceptualized as identity derived from an occupation or occupational group (Phelan & Kinsella, 2009). The concept of professional identity suits this study, as our empirical material showed clear signs of professionalization of work roles, based on granted autonomy, creativity and personal development to workers. Most of the workers studied do not necessarily derive their identity from a respective occupational group, as the term "occupational identity" indicates. Instead, we adopted the term "professional identity" which can be conceptualized as a "relatively stable and enduring constellation of attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences in terms of which people define themselves in a professional role" (Schein, 1978 cited in Ibarra, 1999, p.765). In the past few years, scholars studied the influence of organizational changes on individual's professional identities, for instance, within higher education (Ylijoki & Ursin, 2013), consultancy and banking (Ibarra,

1999) and most frequently within the healthcare sector (Callan et al., 2007; McInnes et al., 2006; Kyratsis et al., 2017). These sectors have in common that the majority of workers belong to a profession, rely significantly on knowledge application and conduct their work in knowledge-intensive firms.

This study, however, detaches the concept from its traditional context and studies professional identity from a perspective in which the formal definition is relaxed (Caza & Creary, 2016) and the division between knowledge-intensive and non-knowledge-intensive firms is nuanced. As the empirical material is collected from an organization operating in the automotive industry, it does not lend itself to be classified to either of these specific categories. Nonetheless, this research is particularly relevant for academia and practitioners (e.g. change managers) as it studies the concept of professional identities detached from a formal profession and outside an absolute knowledge-intensive firm which might result in new insight about the phenomenon.

In addition, this study is relevant because there is continuous need to better understand the process by which professional identities evolve during organizational change. In the literature, there is a consensus regarding the discursive and constructed approaches to identity (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Professional identities are argued to be “constantly rebuilt, reshaped and renegotiated in social interaction” (Ylijoki & Ursin, 2013, p.1147) and socially constructed processes (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006). In that sense, identities may evolve with social circumstances, such as organizational change, which is in line with e.g. Ibarra, who argues that a change in work roles is often accompanied by changes in professional identities (1999). However, the fluidity of identities has been debated for a long time (Brown, 2015) as it can also be said that identities maintain a certain degree of stability during organizational change (Reissner, 2010). Nevertheless, the process by which professional identities evolve during organizational change remains largely underexplored (Ibarra, 1999). This is alike Albert, Ashforth and Dutton (2000) who argue that identity is problematic still yet crucial for the dynamics of it to be better understood. Even though these views are relatively dated, it can be said that organizational change is a social event that may impact one’s professional identity. This process can be further explored.

1.2 Research Purpose, Aim and Question

Despite the existing research on professional identity in changing organizations (Callan et al., 2007; Kyratsis et al., 2017; Ylijoki & Ursin, 2013), we argue that still little is known about the dynamics of these concepts, outside of its traditional profession-centered and knowledge-intensive context. The purpose of our research is to challenge and apply the concept of professional identity outside of this established and formal context. Moreover, as the process by which professional identities evolve can be better understood (Ibarra, 1999; Ashforth & Dutton, 2000) we want to contribute to existing literature and further explore the process of the redefinition of professional identity during a change. Therefore, the aim of this research is to explore and understand how employees redefine their professional identity during an organizational change. To achieve this, we focus on the following question:

“How do employees redefine their professional identity in a changing semi-knowledge-intensive firm?”

We recognize that this study might be relevant for scholars of organization studies, our sponsor organization and change practitioners. First, to scholars of organization studies who are interested in further understanding the concept of professional identity outside its established context in changing organizations. Moreover, we hope to provide practical advice to our sponsor company and provide other change practitioners with useful insights on the dynamics of professional identity in a changing organization.

1.3 Thesis Outline

The remaining structure of this thesis takes the form of five subsequent chapters: the theoretical background, methodology, research findings, discussion and conclusions. Whereas this chapter introduced our study, chapter two begins by laying out the theoretical dimensions of this study and discusses the research traditions and existing literature on professional identity in connection to changing organizations. In the literature review, we shed light on professional identity theory and further elaborate on the relevance of this study in relation to preceding research on identity in changing environments. The third chapter is concerned with the methods used to conduct this study and will provide reflection on the execution of our

methods. Also, this section elaborates on the reasoning behind choosing a qualitative, abductive approach whereby hermeneutical influences are used to make reflexive interpretations. Chapter four analyses the results of the semi-structured interviews conducted during this study. This section serves to describe our most important findings and provides the reader with our initial comments and interpretations. The findings are further analyzed and connected to existing theory in chapter five, in which we aim to move towards answering our main research question. This thesis continues by concluding on the results of this study and explains the implications for the field of study. Finally, we discuss critical considerations and limitations to our research and give suggestions for further research.

2. Theoretical Background

This chapter serves to frame our research and examines the meaning of the concepts of identity and change. We start by introducing and discussing the concept of identity. We continue by specifying identity as professional identity and discuss how professional identities are adjusted in social interactions but can maintain some degree of stability. In addition, we argue for a nuanced application of the terms “professional identity” and “knowledge-intensiveness” in which professionals are classified based on granted autonomy, skills and education. The last paragraphs review the existing dynamics of professional identities in changing organizational environments. Finally, we elaborate on how our study ties into this and adds to the current literature.

2.1 Introducing Identity

Identity is among the most popular concepts in organization studies (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003), especially as contemporary social life contributes to a destabilization of a coherent view of self (Alvesson, 2001) and adds to an individual's struggle (Giddens, 1991). There is emerging consensus in the literature (Brown, 2015) in which identity is conceptualized as a reflexively and subjectively created sense of the self. According to Casey (1995), identity is constructed by both conscious and unconscious events, giving the socially acquired and recognized self a sense of security and continuity over time. Giddens further underlines this idea by arguing that identity is the self as reflexively understood by the person producing a degree of existential continuity and security (1991). Answering the question of “Who am I” (Alvesson, 2004) contributes to this individual's self-referential description (Ashforth, Harrison & Corley, 2008). It is not uncommon that identity and self-view, just like identity being a synonym for role (Alvesson, 2004), overlap when studying identity (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003).

2.2 Professional Identity

When further specifying identity, it becomes clear that scholars have explored a multitude of levels (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003), such as organizational (Gioia, Schultz & Corley, 2000), social (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), personal (Reissner, 2010) and professional (Ibarra, 1999). The latter is relevant for this study, as we aim to understand the process of how one's professional

view of self may be adapted to organizational changes. According to Schein, professional identity is a “relatively stable and enduring constellation of attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences in terms of which people define themselves in a professional role” (1978 cited in Ibarra, 1999, p.765). This relative stability of identities is also present within the functionalist research paradigm (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) and among other social psychologists (Brown, 2015; Giddens, 1991) where identity is considered relatively static and can maintain some stability during disruptive circumstances such as organizational change (Reissner, 2010). However, in the past few years, the literature shifted away from essentialistic and monolithic views on identity to more discursive and constructed approaches to identity (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) where professional identities are “constantly rebuilt, reshaped and renegotiated in social interaction” (Ylijoki & Ursin, 2013, p.1147) and socially constructed process (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006).

In line with that, Brown argues that the stability and fluidity of identities as well as the coherence and fragmentation has been debated for a long time (2015). Our study does not aim to find out which approach towards the stability, fluidity, coherence or fragmentation must be adopted, but is interested in understanding how professional identities evolve with organizational changes. However, as contemporary business and social environment are commonly argued as increasingly “...unstable, ambiguous, and sometimes contradictory” (Alvesson, 2010, p.194) we understand how this may impact the construction of a coherent self (Giddens, 1991). All in all, we acknowledge that identities can evolve through socially constructed process but can maintain some stability because of one’s educational background and professional experience.

Especially disruptive situations, such as organizational change (Reissner, 2010), may require individuals to rebuild, reshape and renegotiate (Ylijoki & Ursin, 2013) their identity. For example, through identity work. Identity work can be conceptualized as: “forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive for a sense of coherence and distinctiveness” (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p. 1165). Professional identities are formed and evolve based on individual (e.g. need for differentiation) and situational (e.g. collective pressure) factors (Kreiner, Hollensbe & Sheep, 2006; Gand et al., 2009). Here, specific transitions and situations, among which organizational change, increase

individual awareness of one's identity compelling identity work (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). In later work, Sveningsson and Alvesson discuss five types of identity work namely: identity adjustment, identity expression, identity juggling, identity wrestling and identity crash (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016). Initially, it seems that these do not account for professional identities specifically, but a closer examination of the literature reveals that Sveningsson and Alvesson refer to identity and describe it in several individual and social circumstances (2016). Hence, we can conclude that identity work may also be visible during the disruptive stage of organizational change.

2.3 Professional Identity, Professions and Knowledge-Intensiveness

In the past few years, most scholars studied the construction of an individual's professional identity in sectors as higher education (Ylijoki & Ursin, 2013), accountancy (Brouard et al., 2017), consultancy, banking (Ibarra, 1999) and frequently within the healthcare sector (Callan et al., 2007; Kyratsis et al., 2017; McInnes et al., 2006). In these studies, workers belong to a profession, significantly rely on knowledge application and conduct their work in a knowledge-intensive firm. Since the latter two concepts around knowledge are difficult to define (Alvesson, 2001), this study aims to challenge the concepts and detaches professional identity from its traditional context. Surprisingly, Schein's (1985) definition of professional identity seems to focus on how one sees him/herself in a professional role, but does not relate the concept to a profession or knowledge-intensive firm. Therefore, we argue that professional identity can be studied based on a more relaxed classification in a firm that is semi-knowledge-intensive. We elaborate on the nuanced application of professional identity and knowledge-intensiveness hereafter.

In accordance with the literature, a profession is an "organized group that possesses esoteric knowledge which has economic value when applied to problems" (Kyratsis et al., 2017, p.612; Pratt, Rockmann & Kaufmann, 2006, p.235). Others, however, argue for a more relaxed classification of this concept, whereby professional identities become skill- and education-based (Caza & Creary, 2016). Adopting such a relaxed classification of the term professions is not unlikely as professions are professionalized occupations (Neal & Morgan, 2000) and nowadays, occupations can become professionalized (Levay, 2016). Based on this, workers'

professional classification in a profession might be further relaxed which allows for a broader application of the concept among other occupations. In result, existing theories where knowledge workers enjoy autonomy (Newell et al., 2009; Kyratsis et al., 2017), a degree of privilege (Slay & Smith, 2010) and enact a professional role (Chreim, Williams, & Hinings, 2007; Kyratsis et al., 2017) are highly relevant in this study.

The clear division where organizations are or are not knowledge-intensive does not apply, as the organization studied shows similarities with a knowledge-intensive firm but can certainly not be classified as such, following the traditional definition. Instead, this study refers to the term knowledge-intensive in a context where workers require tacit knowledge, formal education (Newell et al., 2009) in an environment that is characterized by ambiguity (Alvesson, 2001). As Alvesson argues, defining knowledge can be problematic and therefore suggests an ambiguity-centered approach instead of a strict knowledge classification (2001). In accordance, we describe the environment as semi-knowledge-intensive where workers apply tacit knowledge and are highly educated. Hereby, we are aware of the risk of reproducing the existing knowledge classification.

2.4 Professional Identity, Discourse and Narrative

One's reflexively organized professional self-view can draw upon a multitude of "resources", such as language (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). One substantial source for constructing identity and deriving meaning for the self is through in- and external discourse (Giddens, 1991 cited in Brown, 2015). This is alike poststructuralists, who also view identity as constructed through discourse (Bond & Seneque, 2012). Discourse can be conceptualized as the adoption of particular language to construct and inform social as well as organizational practices (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000) which can manifest itself through narrative, rhetoric, metaphor, humor and irony in human interaction (Grant & Marshak, 2011; Hardy & Phillips, 2004 cited in Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2013). Especially narrative is crucial for sense-making during organizational change (Reissner, 2010) since several types and levels of narrative are crucial for the definition one's professional identity (Clarke, Brown & Hailey, 2009; Brown & Lewis, 2011; Ybema et al., 2009). Thus, language, discourse and narrative are important aspects that facilitate for the discursive construction of professional identities which therefore becomes

crucial for this research that aims to understand professional identities definitions during organizational change.

2.5 Organizational Change and Professional Identity

Several empirical studies illustrate the relation between change and identity and demonstrate how organizational change might influence one's professional identity. Gover and Duxbury (2012) briefly review studies on professional identity and change where they differentiate between quantitative (Callan et al., 2007) and qualitative (McInnes et al., 2006) studies in different changing context. The impact of organizational changes varied, such as mergers (McInnes et al., 2006; Van Dijk & Van Dick, 2009) and structural changes (Callan et al., 2007). The latter example applies to the organization subject to research in this study, where international higher management imposed a transformation in structure. Following the literature, an individual's response to organizational change can vary. This implies that professionals may experience threat (Callan et al., 2007; Van Dijk and Van Dick, 2009), loss (Jetten, O'Brien & Trindall, 2002) or change (Hotho, 2008; McInnes et al., 2006; Reissner, 2010) of their identity when organizations adapt. Some of these studies are centered around social identity theory (Callan, et al., 2007; Gover & Duxbury, 2012; Hotho, 2008; Van Dijk & Van Dick, 2009). These studies highlight the importance of social identity theory as a conceptual framework, but do not fully reflect our conceptual framework that mainly focuses on the redefinition of an individual's professional identity. Despite, we acknowledge that identity is constructed in social processes (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006) and therefore the social aspects in any workplace may inform professional identity.

Following Callan et al., professional identity can increase in multiplicity after organizational change (2007), which aligns with another study that shows how academic identities are further diversified and polarized due to managerial and structural changes (Ylijoki & Ursin, 2013). In line with the diversification of professional identities, Kira, Balkin and San (2012) studied discrepancies between one's new work role and identity in times of an organizational change Kira, Balkin and San (2012). Workers responded differently to organizational change by either accepting negative aspects, distancing themselves from the change or trying to impact the change through organizational crafting (Kira, Balkin & San, 2012). Throughout the

change process, workers might resist organizational change (Fleming & Spicer, 2007), a topic which is also widely discussed in the literature and connected to professional identity (Van Dijk & Van Dick, 2009).

Based on the literature, it becomes apparent that a professional identity can be impacted by organizational change. According to Reissner (2010), identities evolve during organizational change based on how employees' expectations of the changes are met, exceeded or disappointed. Even though Reissner (2010) does not specifically study professional identities, her work provides deep insights into the process by which identities evolve during organizational change. Next to this, Ibarra argues that an individual's professional identity will be influenced by an organizational change, but the process by which this occurs is underexplored in the literature and needs further research (1999). She identified three steps in which professionals identify, experiment and evaluate with provisional professional identities during an organizational change (1999). She noted that new roles require new skills, behaviors, attitudes, and patterns of interactions which may produce fundamental changes in an individual's self-definition (Ibarra, 1999). Especially during career transitions, workers are receptive to adjustments of their self-conceptions (Swann, 1987). The question if professional identity can be impacted by organizational change is hereby answered. The studies discussed give clear examples of the process by which professional identities evolve during an organizational change. Thus, changes in an organization can create adaptations in work roles and careers, which are likely to impact one's professional self-definition.

All in all, previous studies have indicated that organizational changes are likely to impact professional identities and professional self-views. The majority of these studies are conducted in knowledge-intensive firms in healthcare (Gover & Duxbury, 2012, Callan, et al., 2007; Van Dijk & Van Dick, 2009; Hotho, 2008), higher education (Ylijoki & Ursin, 2013) or professional service firms such as consultancies (Ibarra, 1999). Other studies related to organizational change and identity give deep insights into individual responses to change, but are not focused on professional identity specifically (Reissner, 2010; Kira, Balkin & San, 2012). Ibarra shows how professional identities may evolve during organizational change, but argues that the process by which this occurs can be further explored (1999). Despite the existing research on change and professional identity, little is known about the process by which

employees adjust their professional identity. Especially semi-knowledge-intensive firms, in which workers are autonomous, highly skilled and educated, provide space for more research. Therefore, this study wants to further explore how these employees redefine professional self-views during an organizational change.

2.6 Chapter Summary

To conclude, this literature review discussed relevant theoretical concepts related to the dynamics of professional identity, also in changing organizations. First, this chapter introduced and discussed the concept of identity. Then, identity was further specified as professional identity, defined and explained from a discursive perspective where professional identities are constantly rebuilt, reshaped and renegotiated in social interaction (Ylijoki & Ursin, 2013). Besides, we argued for the application and study of professional identity in a semi-knowledge-intensive firm, characterized by ambiguity. In addition, we discussed why we believe employees in this study should be considered professionals. We continued to explain that language, discourse and narrative are important aspects that facilitate for the constructive nature of professional identities. The last paragraphs reviewed several studies that discuss the influence of organizational change on professional identity or self-view. Finally, we discussed how our study ties into and adds to the current literature.

3. Methodology

This chapter presents the chosen methodology for conducting our study. We begin by introducing the research traditions and perspectives in which the study has been conducted. We then continue to describe our qualitative, abductive research design and elaborate on the methods and procedures used to collect our data. Further, we discuss how hermeneutics has been applied to make reflexive interpretations of the empirical material. We highlight the importance of reflexivity, thick descriptions and crystallization to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of this study. This chapter concludes by reviewing the generalizability of this study in the light of the chosen research tradition.

3.1 Epistemology

This study has been conducted within the post-positivist research tradition, which facilitates for a qualitative, abductive research approach. A qualitative approach was most suitable in this study as we are interested in interviewees' narrative and discourse used to construct their interpretation of the changes. Hereby, we better understood the effect on their professional view of themselves. Within the abductive approach, the researcher can move from theoretical findings to empirical data while reinterpreting the findings in the light of each other (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). This allowed us to continuously move between existing theories while theorizing based on the empirical data. At the core of this tradition are the socially constructed nature of reality (Prasad, 2015) and high levels of subjectivity that come with qualitative research (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). Therefore, understanding meaning and intentionality is prioritized over and above causal explanations (Prasad, 2015) in this study. Hence, this study adopted an abductive, qualitative research approach within the post-positivist research tradition.

3.2 Data Collection

The empirical data of this study was collected through ten semi-structured interviews as well as supplementary documents obtained at the regional office of an international organization operating in the automotive industry. To confirm our confidentiality, we signed a non-disclosure agreement. Therefore, the organization's name in this thesis is replaced with the

pseudonym CarCo. In addition, we used fictive names to ensure anonymity to the participants of this study. Moreover, company information such as specific numbers, could not be disclosed since this would jeopardize the agreement. During a period of three weeks, we conducted interviews with selected employees in different roles, positions and with varying years of experience within the organization. Interviewees were selected by CarCo and we interviewed (mainly managerial) employees with various professional and educational backgrounds, from engineering to business studies, working in the Swedish/Danish region. Their business experience with the organization ranged from two to twenty-two years. This diverse sample allowed us to observe the phenomenon from different perspectives. The interview participants had in common that they had been subject to the same organizational changes in the past two years. Since the sample was selected for us, we must acknowledge the risk that the organization puts forward attractive cases which may have created a unilateral view of the organization. This will be further explained in the limitations section of this thesis.

The interviews were set out as semi-structured, which allowed us to probe questions (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012) and obtain descriptions of the phenomenon from the life world of the interviewees (Kvale, 1996). Moreover, all interviews were conducted by both researchers. This allowed us to have one interviewer, primarily leading the conversation, while the other interviewer observed and probed questions. This allowed us to focus on the conversation, build rapport with the interview participants and ascertain tacit knowledge (Tracy, 2010). Although most interviews were face-to-face conversations at the regional office in Sweden, some interviews had to be conducted by telephone. During the interviews, we had the ambition to allow the participants speak up freely by creating an informal atmosphere and, occasionally, speak to them outside the formal office.

Each interview lasted approximately thirty minutes, as the sponsor company requested, which therefore required focus from us in guiding the interview and topics discussed. During the interviews, we discussed topics relevant to the research question, and guided by our initial understanding from the literature. At the beginning of each conversation, we started with general questions about the change such as: "How did your career path develop over the years" and "What do you enjoy most about your role". Later on, we moved toward more topic

specific question such as: “What changes did the new structure bring to your role”. In general, it can be said that while interviewing we employed guiding, probing and interpretative questions, in order to enhance our understanding of the phenomenon (Kvale, 1996).

Whereas the initial two interviews were set up in a broad manner, to remain open to unexpected topics, the other interviews were conducted with a focus on the questions presented above. This allowed us to capture interesting aspects we had not expected or thought of before. After each interview, we evaluated and discussed relevant and remarkable aspects that were mentioned by the interviewee. This allowed us to continuously reflect and refine our interview techniques and questions. Each interview was conducted with consideration of procedural ethics, by acknowledging confidentiality and anonymity (Tracy, 2010) as well as asking for permission to audio record the interviews. In addition to the semi-structured interviews, we used company documents to get a preliminary understanding of the organization and the ongoing changes (Bowen, 2009). These documents consisted of annual reports, internal documents and other forms of change communication such as emails. Even though these documents did not function as a primary source, they gave us insight into the organization before we conducted interviews. Overall, each interview followed procedural ethics and was evaluated to discuss remarkable aspects.

3.3 Data Analysis and Interpretation

After completing all interviews, the audio recordings were fully transcribed. The transcriptions were further processed in an Excel spreadsheet and given initial labels. After initial labeling, we continued by providing each quote or expression with a more abstract/theoretical label, which resulted in several categories. As a result, we systematically covered all empirical data by cutting and sorting important quotes and expressions that showed similarities (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Additionally, during the thematization process, we also used another scrutiny-based approach by looking for indigenous typologies, metaphors & analogies (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). This allowed us to obtain deeper insights into the interview participant’s experience of the influence of change on their professional self-view. Especially vocabulary was crucial, as the use of words creates a version of reality (Alvesson, 2004). After all findings were labelled into categories, we attempted to remove unrelated themes by questioning how each label

informed our research topic and using the research question as a point of guidance (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Instead of looking for the most frequent categories, we attempted to select the most interesting categories that could add value to the literature.

In line with the post-positivist research tradition, this study used a hermeneutical approach to make interpretations and understand subjective reality constructions (Prasad, 2015). This approach allowed us to look beyond the surface meaning (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009) and question the obvious meaning (Prasad, 2015) as the concept of “verstehen” explains (Weber, 1949 cited in Prasad, 2015). Verstehen emphasizes that “understanding meaning and intentionality is over and above causal explanations” (Prasad, 2015, p.14). Hermeneutics can be differentiated into objective and alethic hermeneutics, where objective hermeneutics says that parts are understood in the context of the whole, the alethic hermeneutics sees a relationship between pre-understanding and understanding (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). In this study, we decided to apply alethic hermeneutics and therefore texts are interpreted based on a continuous movement between our understanding and pre-understanding of the phenomenon (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). This highlights our involvement to make interpretations, and therefore we acknowledged our pre-understanding. Initially, our pre-understanding was that the organizational change would negatively influence identities and that, in line with Alvesson and Willmott (2002), organizational control would be further exercised by management. Overall, we expected organizational change to have a negative influence on one’s professional identity. In sum, we applied alethic hermeneutics in this study and continuously moved between our pre-understanding and understanding.

Moreover, we remained critical by attempting to question the self-evident and taken for granted assumptions in discourse, which became apparent through hermeneutical interpretations (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). Therefore, we continuously challenged interview participants to explain concepts that they used but also assessed underlying relations when interpreting the empirical material. In line with this hermeneutical and critical approach, we kept a reflexive mindset throughout the research process. Since empirical material hardly exists outside interpretative repertoires (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009), we must acknowledge that our interpretations are based on earlier theoretical conceptualization about professional identity in changing organizations.

Perhaps more importantly, when adopting a reflexive methodology, is that the interpretations made in this study relied on our reflexive judgment and intuition. (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). In the end, when making interpretations we remained critical and reflexive towards our thoughts, as interpretations never existed outside our theoretical pre-understanding.

3.4 Source Criticism and Credibility

Source criticism is a hermeneutical method which applies a multitude of criteria for the evaluation of our data by assessing authenticity, bias, distance and dependence of sources (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). For instance, we critically assessed if an interview participant was skewing the information, prejudiced by earlier stories or that we, as researchers, had any “blind spots” (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). By doing so, we assessed the subjectivity of interview participants’ responses but also reflected on our own subjectivity (Merriam, 2002). Since we conducted research within the post-positivist research tradition, we were not necessarily looking to find out the absolute truth, but source criticism certainly allowed us to achieve better interpretations (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009) of the socially constructed reality. After all, sources can be exposed to subjective distortion, and therefore this study was cautious with distortion of information (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009) which resulted in advocating reflexivity, thick descriptions and crystallization to establish credibility and enhance trustworthiness.

As discussed in the data analysis, we adopted a reflexive methodology to interpret the empirical material. Despite this, we attempted to maintain thick descriptions as another important technique to establish credibility in this study. Instead of decontextualizing empirical material, we aimed to show rather than tell the reader, maintain abundant and concrete detail (Bochner, 2000 cited in Tracy, 2010), explicate situated meanings (Geertz, 1973 cited in Tracy, 2010) and ascertain tacit knowledge (Tracy, 2010). From a practical perspective, all interviews were fully transcribed and systematically documented which allowed us to go back and forth between a quote and its context without explicating tacit knowledge or losing abundant detail (Tracy, 2010). Thus, credibility was established through thick descriptions that maintained abundant detail and explicated tacit knowledge from the empirical material.

Additionally, this study adopted crystallization to analyze the research findings from different perspectives by using multiple sources and lenses. Crystallization “relates to the practice of using multiple data sources, researchers, and lenses—but is motivated by post-structural and performative assumptions—...” (Ellingson, 2008 cited in Tracy, 2010, p.843). Doing so aligned with the post-positivist research tradition of this study where understanding a phenomenon from several perspectives and through several lenses is emphasized over finding the objective truth. Therefore, we adopted several lenses in the collection and analysis of the empirical data, for example by attempting to empathize with the interviewee to understand their line of reasoning and compared this to how another interviewee may have responded. Also, we attempted to analyze findings in the light of multiple theoretical concepts before deciding what explanation is most suitable. In addition, we tried to stay reflexive when making interpretations and aligned potential interpretations with other empirical cases. Occasionally, some questions were repeated during the interviews or followed-up by e-mail. Hence, in line with a reflexive methodology, we attempted to enhance the credibility of this study by adopting crystallization.

Finally, the interpretative nature of this study in combination with the high levels of subjectivity of qualitative research (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009) made it difficult to generalize and decontextualize the findings. Especially since the interpretations in this study are based on our understanding and pre-understanding of the phenomenon (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). Instead, we did not want to create a generalizable theory, but were interested in giving “insights into the nature of the phenomenon” (Easton, 2010, p.118) as well as understanding meaning and intentionality (Prasad, 2015). Hence, the findings of this study hardly lend itself to be generalized outside its interpretive context, but contributed by providing a better understanding of professional identities in changing situations.

3.5 Chapter Summary

In conclusion, this section introduced the epistemological stance of our study, the methods for data collection and analysis as well as addressed the credibility of this research. We started by explaining the considerations related to the choice of the research tradition and qualitative abductive research design. Furthermore, we elaborated on the data collection methods as well as the procedures and moved on to describe how we considered hermeneutics and reflexivity to analyze the data. We concluded this chapter by outlining the importance of thick descriptions and crystallization as well as the earlier mentioned reflexivity to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of this study. Finally, we addressed the generalizability of this study.

4. Findings

In this section, we present, discuss and interpret the results of our research, which aims to explain how professional identities are redefined in changing organizations. Based on the empirical material of this study, we discovered several themes that are represented as the subheadings in this section. The first section of the findings sets a scene for our study and briefly outlines the background of the changes. We continue to discuss how autonomy can be threatened in an attempt by the organization to centralize, but surprisingly find out how organizational actors resist. Then, we explain how a change in an organization can contribute to a positive redefinition of professional identity. Moreover, we highlight the negative impact organizational change can have for one's professional self-view. Next to this, we explain how employees create a functional distance during an organizational change. Finally, we conclude this chapter by providing a summary of the important empirical findings.

4.1 Background

The sponsor organization of our study operates on an international level in the automotive industry and was founded in the 19th century in Europe. Nowadays, the company employs approximately 200,000 employees worldwide, generating more than 50 billion euros in annual revenue. The organization produces and sells passenger cars, vans and trucks worldwide through their subsidiaries. Consequently, each country in which the organization operates has its local office and in several cases, these local offices are clustered in one region. For instance, in the case of Sweden and Denmark, approximately 300 employees collaborate in a so-called market operating center. In the past few years, the employees of this regional office have been subject to multiple changes initiated by the central European headquarters. As some interviewees explained when asked about the change:

“We are used to changing and we have changed several times before” (Alicia Steering)

It becomes apparent the organization has changed on a regular basis in the past few years and that this region is quite used to these changes. With this expression, the interviewee emphasizes the multiplicity of changes in the organization which may indicate that change has

been normalized in this organization. Although employees might experience the organizational changes as continuous, it becomes clear that the change initiatives are episodic since they are intentional, discontinuous and coordinated through global programs that aim to change the deep structure of the organization (Weick & Quinn, 1999). One of these change projects is named Customer Dedication (CD) and aims to create more customer focus through restructuring and creating focus within the business units. The change program started two years ago within the Scandinavian region, which includes the Swedish-Danish cluster.

“When I started 10 years ago, it was all business units and both countries in one team and now, we split up to business units, but before that we split up in countries but we were still all business units together. Then, a little later we split up the business units, but now we put the countries together back again. so, it is back and forth a little bit. And, it will be like that I think. Probably a few more changes in the years to come”. (Astrid Engine)

The interviewee explains what the Customer Dedication change program consists of, but also sheds light on how she looks at all the change initiatives that passed by in the past few years. Apparently, the changes are perceived as going back and forth where, in the end, a new organizational status quo is found. Nonetheless, the significance of this change program relies in that some work roles are split and reduce employees' their span of control, as we will elaborate on later. Additionally, there is another change project ongoing, named “Transforming Europe”, which aims to centralize organizational activities to exploit operational synergies between European markets in so-called market performance centers. For instance, through centralizing and standardizing marketing activities. This change program started last year and impacts all European regions. During the interviews, one participant compared this centralization project to a human body, where the countries execute what the central brain (European headquarters) asks for.

“A whole body and we in the markets, we will be the one executing what the brains would like us to do.” (Klas Road)

The use of this metaphor is interesting as it gives a deeper insight into the experiences of this worker with the Transforming Europe change. Deriving from the metaphor, it can be said that

this worker experiences his role to become limited to execution (e.g. arms and legs), while this manager used to be involved in “brain” activities. In the new European structure, the “body” is subordinate to what the “brains” would like him and the region to do. Although the majority of the organization has been subject to this European transformation, not all departments have been transformed to work in the new structure yet. For instance, in the case of Olivia Fast:

“We now had our first international regional meeting where we are trying to see find synergies if we develop something here, it perhaps they can benefit the countries and vice versa.” (Olivia Fast)

Clearly, the objective of this stage of the transformation is to identify and centralize overlapping organizational responsibilities between the markets. Throughout the organization, it is emphasized how this change will have a major impact on all organizational actors and their (local) autonomy. This will be further explained in the next section of this chapter.

4.2 Autonomy

As discussed before, the autonomy of the regional office as well as the autonomy of workers is likely and expected to be reduced by the Transforming Europe change project, which aims to centralize responsibility. In the current situation, a strong sense of autonomy is present within the regional offices across Europe. One of the managers strengthens this idea by using the following metaphor:

“We have Market Performance Centers (MPC’s) in every country. These MPC’s are kind of, you know, kings doing things in their own way, not utilizing whatsoever synergies between the different European countries inventing a lot of things themselves.” (Klas Road)

This metaphor reveals that in the current situation, regional offices are independent actors and any overlaps in processes, between the headquarters and the regional offices, are not

effectively utilized. Instead, regions decide and execute activities autonomously which is reflected in the interviewee's comparison to kings. This identification with kings is interesting since a king is usually associated with a self-governing individual who has a strong influence, power and high status. In this context, being free from external control also ties into the literature around autonomy that knowledge workers enjoy (Alvesson, 2004). In general, the idea that the Transforming Europe change project will reduce local autonomy is prevalent in and throughout the organization. As one manager from the Human Resource department explains in the following quote that there are several risks of centralization, which includes the loss of autonomy for workers:

“One problem here is that people think: I am a trained professional with an academic degree, I have this autonomy in my work, now I can see this is going away. That is demotivating for some people. If really the thinking should be done centrally instead of here [at the regional office], that of course changes the nature of the work and we will eventually need different kinds of people who do not need that kind of autonomy. That is one [thinks] challenge, but if you are aware of it, the turnover is okay, you win some and lose some.” (Linnea Gear).

This manager explains how the nature of work at the regional office will change in the new European structure. The risk she identifies is that workers perceive the reduction of autonomy as a threat to their professional view in the organizations. The concept of autonomy is often discussed in the context of knowledge-intensive firms where the executed work is complex (Alvesson, 2004). Our expectation was to see that employees will describe a decrease in autonomously executed tasks actively and resist losing this sense of autonomy in their role. However, we noticed active and passive resistance among the employees and their sense of autonomy remained relatively stable. For instance, one manager actively refused the organizational change and did not act as his changed role requires.

“That is why we do not, maybe it sounds like [laughs] we are creating a revolution, but we are quite clear to our stakeholders and say: “we are running it like this, if you would like to have it in another way, please say it, but we treat it as one company still and also working in one way to our customers.” (Oscar Brake)

Since the new organizational structure resulted in a division between passenger cars, trucks and vans, Oscar Brake is asked to work with separate procedures for customers in each division. However, he clearly describes that he still treats the company as “one”, revealing that he does not act upon the new distribution of divisions. This answer reveals that Oscar Brake disagrees with the new way of working, however, also acts upon this by further emphasizing his position and autonomy to keep activities intact. This idea is supported by the following response:

“Because what I would normally is that I, I would like to see okay, if I am responsible for this, I also have an impact and I can influence a problem of a customer. If I now have to do work with two or three others, different step, different layers I can only see we are making it more complex. There probably has to be a CEO for the vans sale department, then that person, whoever that did and whatever the F the real title would be. On a wholesale level, it probably makes sense, and even in HQ perspective. But I would like to have it stopped here and we don’t want to have it implemented on a retail level. Because there we really have to see the customer, we are one face for the customer we are one brand to the customer.” (Oscar Brake)

By doing so, Oscar Brake may perceive himself as free from control and autonomous enough to resist the change (Kunda, 1992; Fleming & Spicer, 2007). He justifies this resistance to himself by emphasizing the customers’ benefit, which shows similarities with the concept of constructive disobedience where individuals break with control systems because it will contribute to efficiency (Rennstam & Kärreman, 2014) and in this case, the organizational goal. This comment can be classified as an active form of resistance to the organizational change. However, there are also other cases in our study where workers rhetorically support the change but passively resist by not adapting to new work practices. Initially, it seems that these employees are acceptant towards the initiated changes when they express their agreement with it:

“I think it is needed, I think it is very good change. I [thinks and hesitates] I think, to be able to grow and to handle different sizes of the market. I think the change of how the company has now clustered and grew some countries is a smart way of working and is

needed also to get a smaller top management to be able to align more and grow out loudly long-term strategy.” (Freja Trunk)

Freja rhetorically supports the organizational changes while emphasizing the necessity and possibilities that come with it. However, when further analyzing the interviews in the light of passive resistance, we noticed that some employees did not actually adapt their way of working to the new standards and organizational structure. An example to illustrate this is based on a saying when the employee was asked about the impact of the organizational change on her role.

“We see a few topics where the European region wants to take control of it and I think we might have one or two critical issues but in Germany they say: “you cook the food hotter than you eat it”. And that means the issues sound hot and risky and everything but once you go down and look to it actually it is not that bad, so to say. And not meaning the changes are bad but that part of the changes seemed to us like it might not only be positive. Most of those anxieties have actually, in reality, it did not come that way as communicated.” (Elin Wheel)

Elin Wheel expresses how the actual changes in her department have not been executed the way they were communicated. She uses a saying to illustrate that the communication around the transformation project was more substantial than the actual changes in her department. The question arises if the absence of an impact for her department by the organizational change is caused by resistance (e.g. not aligning with the organizational change) or simply because the organization did not put in the effort to change this department. Although it seems that the manager of the marketing department as a whole downplays the change because to her, the job should be organized locally:

“I think that kind of stabilized pretty fast [laughs] once we saw that only a few people in the headquarters cannot lead eighty markets and a few hundred marketing employees that the main job is still in the markets.” (Elin Wheel)

This quote reveals that the marketing department had identified that the headquarters was in the beginning phase of taking over some responsibilities, however, as they have failed to take over these aspects from the first moment, the marketing department continued to do their “old” job. Another method to resist organizational change is through cynicism, irony or humor (Fleming & Spicer, 2007). When employees were being asked about the ongoing organizational changes and why it seems that employees are supporting these changes, some responses were unexpected. We selected two responses to demonstrate these reactions:

“Can't remember it had a name that change too. [laughing cynically]. Can't remember what that was called.” (Cornelia Catalyst)

“Who selected the people you talked to? [asked ironically and laughs]. “(Linnea Gear)

Both responses were surprising to us, in the context of the interview. The first statement was made by this manager when asked to reflect upon the changes in the past two years. The second question was asked by Linnea Gear when we stated how most employees seemed extremely acceptant to the changes. The responses signal a certain disagreement or cynicism regarding the changes.

Moreover, our study reveals how management is not exactly monitoring the new activities. One of the interviewees explained that, as long they do their work, management is not continuously assessing. This emphasizes the experienced autonomy that is, despite the changes, still present in these jobs. As Cornelia Catalyst explains this situation after the change:

“It is freedom under responsibilities. As long as I deliver my targets, it is basically, they are not on my work.” (Cornelia Catalyst).

To conclude, it becomes clear that employees within the organization enjoy a substantial amount of autonomy in their role before and still after the organizational change. Based on this autonomy, some workers actively resist implementing the organizational change or passively resist by rhetorically supporting it while expressing their disagreement indirectly.

Besides preserving autonomy for workers, the change also brought growth in professional self-views which will be discussed hereafter.

4.3 Workplace Status

Another important finding in the empirical material is the positive impact of organizational change on professional identity that several of the interviewees have expressed to us. When asked how the new structure has changed the way employees look at themselves and their role, the answers revealed that to some extent, their view of their professional selves has been strengthened because of the change. In the first place, one manager experienced a professional growth along the established hierarchy. As a manager explains:

“Usually I have one person in between me and the CEO, and that somehow, that gap needs to be filled. That means I cannot do my own job and fill the gap upwards, so to say. So, I kind of have to step up in general half a step so to say, I have to step on a strategic level. I would say to actually be able to, to sit there at the table and be part of the decisions that makes a huge difference in everyday life. It is clear now for everybody who is responsible and that is me. Which is, I would say, basically only a good thing.” (Elin Wheel)

Elin Wheel mentions how the new organizational structure has left a gap between her and the CEO. In the new situation, she feels the need to step up and report directly to the CEO. Hereby, she will get involved on a more strategic level of the organization. In line with the literature, managers want to be involved on a strategic level as this is considered important to work with (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016). “Sitting at the table” appears to have a significant impact on this manager’s everyday life, something we will further elaborate on in the upcoming paragraph. Obviously, having more responsibility is crucial for her view of self and it is interesting to see how, because of this, a transformational organizational change can be boiled down to “basically only a good thing”. Although she recognizes certain pressure that comes with her new role after the organizational change, she directly counters this by emphasizing the benefits of the change for her role:

“More pressure, but also more visibility, more possibility to directly...uh...impact what is happening in my area. Before I had a feeling that a lot of decisions and discussions being made, I was not part of the discussion, I was not in the...uh... it is not called board of management for personal cars, but we call it PC ExCom. I was not part of that group. That meant a lot of discussions. I only got half of them or a tenth of them and now I am part of this group and I am there to hear the discussions and can also impact them. A strong impact has become or I have more impact on my area.” (Elin Wheel)

The belongingness to this new group, the management board, is explained as a positive outcome of the organizational change for her. From this position, she experiences greater control as she is now able to better exert influence on decisions being made in the organization. This belonging to a new group is also present in another case where Alexander Airbag expresses his positive experience with the organizational change:

“And we are also due to the size of the region, we are being invited to Germany to see coming products at a much earlier stage than in the past” (Alexander Airbag)

The manager portrays himself and his team as closer connected to the headquarters, which may strengthen his professional self-view. After all, the roles of both managers substantially changed with the organizational changes and as a result, they experience their role as hierarchically higher in which they can exert influence. On the other hand, this greater influence is also expressed from a team perspective. Another manager also experiences greater influence in her new role, but relates this to her team:

“But also I feel that we have more influence at the headquarters with the new organization.” (Cornelia Catalyst)

It becomes clear that Cornelia Catalyst experiences that her entire team is closer to the headquarters and has a voice. Even though she was asked about her personal role and how this has changed, she decided to answer in terms of her team. This may mean that the whole team has had a shared experience with the new structure. Another manager experiences something similar where his team is able to gain more access in their day to day work:

“Basically, what we have gained access to now, we have gained access to higher level of product information, also product information we will get at an earlier stage than in the past.” (Alexander Airbag)

Since this was mentioned in the context where we were talking about growth in professional identity, access to a higher level of product information seems to influence the perceived importance of this manager's role. Freja Trunk explains how she perceives her role in the “new” organization to be different because it has a more international outlook:

“But from my point of view, it is needed. If you are in a bigger international company and you do not like that, than you have the opportunity to go to a local, privately owned company to have what you need or what is important. But I have to say that many people are not in favor of aligning decisions centrally. They want to take them locally, they don't care about Belgium or Germany, or Spain or whatever [laughs]. But I can see up sides of course, I see the better things that you can, if you have, if you have a lot of future organization and now you can align with competencies across the borders between different countries and therefore you can, [thinks] in total together add value to the company that makes.” (Freja Trunk)

It appears that this manager looks down on colleagues who do not support the increasingly international and centralized structure, while she sees the advantages of working in the new organization. Moreover, it appears that she finds her changed role of more value in an international organization. We would like to go further and reason that the transforming Europe change project created a more international organization where the employees benefit from when it comes to their professional self-view. Namely, under transforming Europe some interviewees obtained a more important role in the organization, where their role is more closely aligned to the European headquarters or became more international by managing multiple markets. As Alexander Airbag explains:

“Now with my new responsibilities for the Swedish market as well, January first this year. I feel that I am able to take my experiences and my [thinks] years of experience

with me from the Danish market to the Swedish market”. (Alexander Airbag)

So not only the individual manager gained more responsibility for an additional market, but both markets together also have larger significance and impact on an international group level. The cluster became more significant compared to the other international markets because they got higher on the organizational agenda:

“In an organization where hierarchy and structure is of importance that actually makes difference because you get higher on the agenda so to say” (Elin Wheel)

This expression indicates the presence of a strong hierarchy within the organization. Growing your importance in the organization occurs within these established hierarchies and structures. Elin Wheel sheds light on this by explaining that within the new organizational structure, her functional role moved from a hierarchically subordinate position to a more independent position. As she explains this:

“But this one, for me it was quite easy because my area got more attention, it was seen as a separate area, and not something that always part of sales, so to say, on the second place behind sales. Because usually the problem for marketing, you are just a kind of the tool for the sales guys.” (Elin Wheel)

Even though this manager’s functional area got more attention, her response indicates that the change allowed her team to break free from a subordinated position under the sales department. Instead of being at the second place, she moved to the first place which might have contributed to feelings of importance to herself and her team. Additionally, changes in the organizational structure have for some employees changed their voice in the organization (as mentioned before) and the support they receive from the headquarters. Based upon the interviewees, we selected three phrases that give an insight on this:

“Uh, I know I have stronger support from the headquarters centrally; It is easier to run the projects when you have the financial and [thinks], FTE back up at HQ and the support in the projects.” (Cornelia Catalyst)

“And tools needed to be more proactive in the product offering, u, for the markets, for both Sweden and Denmark.” (Alexander Airbag)

“The difference I see, when we roll out a project from HQ we have much more backup and much more power in the backup that we receive from the HQ that gives us more power and strength when we go to the dealer's” (Klas Road)

Obviously, workers experience stronger support from the organization since they have more resources, such as tools, finances, human resources but also power. At the first sight, these resources are practical implications of the new organizational structure. However, when looking further, one can see that these resources are able to provide workers indirectly with more confidence in the role. One of these quotes is derived from a context in which the interviewee refers to the responsibilities he had received and the professional confidence that this gave him. As the following quote underlines:

“I think getting more responsibility January 1st, this year, gave me more confidence that I am, to say, moving in the right direction because otherwise I don't think anybody would give me more responsibilities so it gives me professional confidence.”
(Alexander Airbag)

The concept of professional confidence becomes interesting as Alexander Airbag connects two concepts, his confidence and professional self-view, into one. Based on the empirical material, it becomes clear that workers ascribe positive feelings towards the organizational change since they can strengthen their professional self-view. The growth in role, hierarchy and inclusion in a professional group contributed to further enhance these views. Besides that, also practical implications were found through which employees experience greater professional confidence. Nevertheless, we should recognize there are also aspects that may jeopardize one's professional self-view. These will be discussed in the following paragraph.

On the other hand, one's professional self-view can also be deconstructed. For instance, in the case of a manager whose job changed to such a degree that, knowing this, she would not have

applied for the job. She mentions that her previous role, before the change, had more accountability and a larger group of subordinates. The downscaling of these aspects might have impacted how this manager looked to her job and eventually made her feel uncomfortable in the current position that she would not apply for it if the function would come out today.

“If I am honest, if this role would have come out now I do not think I would have applied for it. That is also because I don’t, because it is also a more limited role and my experiences historically have been working in other international companies where I also had a bigger accountability and a bigger group of staff.” (Freja Trunk)

Clearly, the change in the organization has created a discrepancy between what this employee thinks she is able to do (i.e. her competence, skills) and what she is currently doing in her role. This discrepancy appears to impact her professional self-view and if we assess the context of her response, she might think that her current role is unable to deliver the same status as she was used to (i.e. managing significant number employees and more accountability). A similar case exists on a more indirect level, for instance in the situation where the change is likely to jeopardize someone’s chief position:

“I cannot say how direct, but indirect I would say it will be a little bit strange to be a co-worker of this company because they are so used to, for those who are around for a while, that there is one boss. It is not that that is important for me but they also would then find it a little bit strange who is my boss? Okay, the direct workshop manager fine. But you know the big one. Okay, we have three, why do we have three? Sounds strange. Are we not supposed to be customer friendly? So, I can foresee quite a lot of explanation that is needed which sometimes would be hard to people to understand and accept, because you know we are people here who already have trouble to cope with the situation when it comes down to the rest of the company.” (Oscar Brake)

Obviously, Oscar Brake says that the organizational change will only have an impact on the employees, but looking underneath the surface of this response it becomes apparent that the

change is likely to impact his chief position in the organization. In accordance with the organizational change, his role will be split up in three positions which reduce his responsibilities and autonomy within the division.

“But If we do the split is total. We will have probably three CEO’s here. They will have their responsibilities in their areas so then it is definitely out of mine. We can cooperate, but we will have three CEO’s. My role, I will do the same things, but in a smaller box.” (Oscar Brake)

He already experiences his role to be existing within a box, but this box will become substantially smaller when his function will be split up. This changing situation, where his chief managerial position is potentially threatened, is likely to have an impact on his professional self-view soon. As discussed before, this identity threat appears that underlie his reasons to resist upcoming changes in the organizational structure. Because in the current position, he is sole chief for his division and has the overruling authority over anyone within that division. As he explains this to us quite strongly:

“That means I can direct whoever is her, no matter who he/she reports to” (Oscar Brake)

Apart from overruling authority exercised over employees, he hereby also constructs and demonstrates a certain degree of autonomy which will be threatened when the organization proceeds with the structural changes. This further refines our argument made in the previous chapter where autonomy is under threat and linked to resistance.

During the interviews, it also became apparent that mainly the employees in the marketing-related teams had to adjust their role and professional identity because of the transformation. The interviews reveal that due to the centralization, marketing work has become increasingly standardized and therefore the interviewees feel limited in their creativity and ability to do local adaptations.

“Because everybody had the feeling that they were taking away all the fun parts, all

the good stuff and they are leaving us with only the boring (employee later asked to change this to “heavy”) things, only the processes and everything that we actually think they should be doing.” (Elin Wheel)

Elin Wheel explains how the centralization has left the department with the procedures to distribute marketing material that has already been prepared by the headquarters for all markets. The local adaptation that used to belong to the department has become redundant and therefore she experiences the feeling of being left with the boring work.

“But the whole thing is that we are getting much more forced by region Europe to do what they say. It is limiting us in ways that we don’t always see as something good.” (Elin Wheel)

“I think that I could probably that I could probably share that with a few of my colleagues especially who work in what is supposed to be a creative department. They have pulled the plug from allowing us to excel in being creative, which is why we are here.” (Astrid Engine)

Another marketing employee mentions more explicit that she and her colleagues are being forced to work with their material which is experienced as a loss in their creativity. The previous quotes reveal that the marketing employees experience that the headquarters, or the new structure of the company, limits and controls them in their creative process. Newell et al. connect this to autonomy as workers need autonomy for creative problem-solving (2009). We can interpret that this employee describes marketing as creative work, which has now been limited due to organizational changes:

“So, we would be more an execution ...uh... function than doing from, you know, A to Z”. (Klas Road)

Focusing on an execution function rather than on creative work aligns with the body-brain metaphor mentioned in the beginning of our findings. Clearly, the organizational changes also

have a down-side for employees who attempt to construct and reconstruct professional self-views. Some of the employees experience a discrepancy between their new role and professional view, experience a greater focus on execution instead of creative thinking and others foresee a potential identity threat. Despite that, this study also observed alternative methods to deal with organizational change while securing a professional identity.

4.4 Inviolability to Change

Other interviewees have clearly disconnected or decoupled their identity or view of themselves from their role. This disconnection or decoupling often is linked to feelings of security based on their educational background and competence. When being asked about the influence of organizational change on their identity they responded as follows:

“My identity will not depend on that, because I will be able to contribute to it in my role and if CarCo decides you are now overpaid, or overqualified for this role I am also confident enough that I can do something else. Even if then this company or somewhere else.” (Linnea Gear)

Linnea Gear strongly expresses that there is no relation between her identity and the organizational change. This decoupling between her identity and role is interesting, as, from her perspective, it allows to easily go somewhere else if her role is dissolved. In line with this, another manager responded similarly by emphasizing her educational background and experience:

“I think that in one way I feel the security that I always have my education and my background in that sense to fall back on. I also have quite a broad experience so it’s at some point it would affect me that I don’t have a job here anymore but I feel like I will find something, somewhere else. I think okay if this position changes, if it's taken away then perhaps there is some other position. So, I guess that is why I don’t worry, I don’t know.” (Alicia Steering)

Alicia Steering’s response is relatively laconic in a sense that she will easily find some other

position somewhere else. Based on this, it seems that these respondents portray themselves as invulnerable to organizational changes. Another instance of distancing from the organizational change is downplaying your opinion regarding the change projects. When we questioned Linnea Gear, she somehow omitted to give her thoughts about the change project:

Oke, for me I don't really have an opinion. I see my task as really understanding what is the intention and what is the thinking behind and making sure this intention [gently laughs] and thinking behind is understood and that we, that we follow the right direction [...] (Linnea Gear).

Furthermore, two other managers appear to distance themselves from the group of affected employees, because of their significant experience with change in the organization. It can be said that change is perceived to be a competence, which you can learn and advance in until you are not affected anymore but have an active role helping others. According to Olivia Fast, she tries to secure colleagues around her during organizational change:

"It could be both, actually, I think I do it very well aware of what I am doing. uh, most of the time because I need to secure people around me because I am a Danish and I work in Sweden and Swedish people are quite different to Danish when it comes to change and also making decisions." (Olivia Fast)

It is important to mention that this manager is not part of the change management project team and is just as much affected as other employees, even though her explanation seems different. Another manager explains the impact he can make on the organizational change whereby he is also able to influence his own role and how is formed in a new organizational structure. As he explains:

"Yeah. Yeah. Definitely, I will. I am already impacting on it and I will continue to have an impact and uh.. create kind of a very good interface between us and those functions we are centralizing." (Klas Road)

This manager strongly identifies with the organizational changes by trying to impact it and

supporting it. This contradicts another manager, who clearly distances herself from the affected groups through her discourse and by mentioning her extensive experience with organizational changes. As Freja Trunk reflects upon it:

“There is nothing right or wrong, some people will cry if they move a desk, some people, you know, which you can think is ridiculous but you don’t. Everybody has the right to have their own feelings. [...] And don’t lie, that is very important. Do not lie, but you should also think through on what the information you send out is supposed to get a reaction. What is the aim for the information? So that I learned and we had all that. And often in my experience from this closure of sites, was that often it is the top management where the decisions are made is the biggest hurdle. That was also the case here, in the customer dedication project. They put a lot of emotions in play. [...]”
(Freja Trunk)

Through her discourse, she constructs herself to be separated from her colleagues. Employees, who are used to changes or have worked as change managers before, detach themselves from the group of affected employees even if they are hierarchically part of this group. This expression indicates that changing jobs creates some sort of immunity to external threats such as changing organization. As one of the interviewees explains.

“But when you talk to people who have changed jobs a few times within the organizational changed responsibilities, they would be more open. Perhaps not feel so threatened by it.” (Cornelia Catalyst)

Looking to it from another perspective, employees who have worked longer in the organization are perhaps more threatened by organizational changes. To conclude, some workers disconnect and distance themselves from organizational changes. While doing so, they portray themselves as managers who are competent enough to deal with organizational changes. In that sense, being able to deal with changing organizations become a professional competence.

4.5 Chapter Summary

In this section we presented, discussed and interpreted the empirical material based on our research, which aims to explore how organizational changes might influence on employees' professional self-views. Based on the empirical material, we have created several subheadings in which the main empirical categories were represented. First of all, we described the setting in which the changes occurred, briefly outlined the background and context of the changes. Afterwards, we continued and discussed how employee autonomy is threatened in an attempt by the organization to centralize, but surprisingly we found out how organizational actors resist this and instead fueled ideas of autonomy. Then we discussed two major themes, namely professional identity construction and deconstruction in the workplace. In addition, we noticed that employees misidentified with the organizational change and thereby feel inviolable to organizational changes. After making these findings, it becomes important to discuss them in the light of existing literature or theorize based on that as discussed hereafter.

5. Discussion

In the following chapter, we elaborate on the findings of this study in greater depth, to explore the dynamics of professional identity in changing organizational contexts. This study set out to assess how employees redefine their professional identity during organizational changes. Based on the empirical material of this study and the connection with existing literature, we identified three relevant themes around which we develop our discussion. First of all, we review and reflect on how (passive) resistance can reinforce an autonomous self-view of workers. This argument assumes an existing and relatively predominant professional identity in which autonomy is a crucial element. Moreover, we explain how social categories develop during organizational change and how this can lead individuals to redefine their professional identity. Finally, we will discuss that employees may choose to distance themselves in times of change and how this can be functional for an organization.

5.1 Autonomous Selves and Passive Resistance

From our study, we gather that most employees experience, alike in the initial definition of professional workers (Newell et al., 2009; Alvesson, 2004), a strong sense of autonomy in their roles. This autonomy is clearly expressed by one of our interviewees in the form of a metaphor, which compares regional employees and managers to kings. This comparison is significant as it emphasizes the degree of autonomous decision making in the regional offices. The sense of autonomy of employees is strengthened by several factors such as their educational background and years of business experience. Another important point is that the roles at the regional offices have historically been autonomous from the headquarters, where local employees were expected to work independently and make decisions on how their division acted on the market. The findings of this study suggest that, during and after the change, many employees have continued to execute their roles with the same autonomy while simultaneously expressing their acceptance and agreement towards the changes. Hence, the appearance is created that organizational actors align with the initiated centralization while, in practice, they continue to execute their initial job.

It becomes apparent that a sense of autonomy is present throughout the organization, and the loss of it is emphasized as a significant change for all employees in this study. Interviewees explain how change communication emphasized that autonomous decision-making will become a main activity at the headquarters, whereas the regional office will have the execution roles. This loss of autonomy can also be clearly observed from the metaphor that compares CarCo to a human body. Whereas the headquarters is compared to the brain, the regional offices are compared to the arms and legs, which illustrates a certain subordination. Reducing this autonomy potentially threatens work-role identities (Van Dijk & Van Dick, 2009) and requires employees to adopt new behaviors, attitudes and patterns of interaction, producing fundamental changes in one's professional self-definition (Ibarra, 1999).

Our study suggests that employees make efforts to keep their sense of autonomy intact, both through clear rhetoric of refusal and less apparent passive resistance (Fleming & Spicer, 2007). One of our interviewees clearly resists the change, by rhetorically refusing, and hereby strengthens his autonomous professional self. In the case mentioned, the employee reasons how the organizational changes will not benefit the end goal of serving customers well. Therefore, we realize that this case could also be an example of constructive disobedience. This disobedience is conceptualized as breaking formal rules since this will contribute to a more efficient (Rennstam & Kärreman, 2014) and effective (e.g. better reaching the organizational goal) way of working. In contrast, other organizational actors in our study are rhetorically acceptant to organizational changes when directly asked, but at different moments express to reject certain changes in procedures or communicated expectations. Existing studies underline how resistance can be a response to a threatened identity (Van Dijk & Van Dick, 2009) and how it does not necessarily always appear in an evident manner but may take different passive forms (Fleming & Spicer, 2007). According to Edwards, Collinson and Rocca, workers do not necessarily perceive themselves as resistant, however, a close observation may reveal organizational subversion (1995, cited in Fleming & Spicer, 2007), such as the use of humor, irony and cynicism (Fleming & Spicer, 2007). These forms of passive resistance become relevant for our empirical material as workers mentally disengage from organizational change.

Passive resistance reveals itself when analyzing the empirical findings in terms of cynicism, irony and humor. Our findings illustrate how employees turn to these responses when asked relatively serious questions about the organizational change and the seemingly acceptant regional workforce. This form of resistance may function as an escape whereby workers mentally distance themselves from realities of power and hierarchy (Fleming & Spicer, 2007) to mitigate experienced frustrations. Surprisingly, employees that turn to these forms of passive resistance, also create an impression of practicing other corporate rituals to some extent (Fleming & Spicer, 2008). This explains the paradoxical function of humor, irony and cynicism for workers, to distance from certain organizational changes while maintaining an autonomous self-view. In the literature, cognitive distancing occurs when one perceives that he/she is wiser than the activities of the organization (Fleming & Spicer, 2007). Being wise can be understood as being free of control and autonomous in knowing and expressing what is going on (Kunda, 1992, p.178; Fleming & Spicer, 2007). Hence, cognitive distancing through, for instance humor, irony and cynicism, allows for the reinforcement of autonomous self-views where workers consider themselves as wise enough to rise above the organizational changes.

Unexpectedly, our empirical material reveals how senior managers perceive to have an influence on organizational changes to an extent that they can better align it to their perception of professional self, e.g. by influencing work processes. The influences they mention would often result in positive changes to the manager or the manager's department. This influence is conceptualized in the literature as organizational crafting activities, through for example work crafting (Kira, Balkin & San, 2012). Organizational actors try to craft their job to reduce the discrepancy between their job and work identity (Kira, Balkin & San, 2012). By doing so, the study connects the concept of organizational crafting to identity work. Based on our empirical material and the existing connection in the literature, we argue that organizational crafting allows for identity work in the sense that it contributes to the construction of a distinctive and coherent (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) autonomous self-view for senior managers. As in this case, the organization fails to correct or provide employees with accurate and sufficient feedback on activities that are not in line with organizational goals, which provides employees with the ability to continue autonomous decision-making. In the absence of feedback, this process is continuous and reinforces an

autonomous self-view. Hence, organizational change comes with organizational instability which allows employees to exert influence on adjustments and craft work processes to make the change fit their autonomous and professional self-views.

Based on the discussion above, we suggest the following process to illustrate and add to what existing literature explains. The figure illustrates an organizational attempt to reduce the local autonomy of workers and consequently workers feel threatened in their autonomy which always has been an important aspect of their role and professional self-view. In response, workers actively and passively resist organizational change, but in the absence of feedback about this behavior, they reinforce their autonomous self-view. The literature already discusses resistance as a response to organizational change, but the reinforcement of autonomous self-views (dotted line) through this process is, to our knowledge, new.

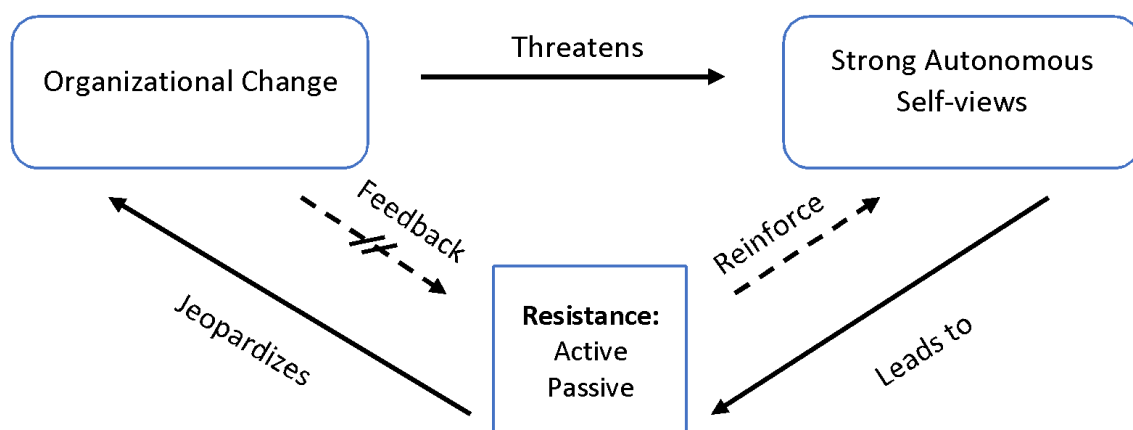


Figure 1: Dynamics Change, Autonomy and Resistance

All in all, our study reveals that an organizational attempt of limiting autonomy might exactly yield the opposite result. It becomes apparent that organizational change is often met by several forms of resistance, which some are not necessarily easy to reveal, such as humor, irony and cynicism (Fleming & Spicer, 2007). Also, employees may respond in different ways to employ their autonomy, such as constructive disobedience (Rennstam & Kärreman, 2014) or by engaging in organizational crafting activities (Kira, Balkin & San, 2012) or identity work (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Despite the literature on resistance and autonomy, which mainly focuses on how autonomous self-views can be threatened and generate resistance

(Van Dijk & Van Dick, 2009), this would be the first empirical study, to our knowledge, that illustrates how autonomous self-views can be reinforced through resistance. Besides that, this study further explains the dynamics and process of how autonomy and resistance can reinforce professional identities in changing organizational contexts.

5.2 Workplace Instability and Identity Redefinition

Apart from the threat to autonomy, organizational change may generate instability in social categories which allows workers to redefine their professional identities. Our study reveals that employees are aware of social categories that exist in the workplace, related to e.g. status and position in the hierarchy. Earlier studies show how individuals classify themselves and their colleagues in categories or social groups, based on high/low status, to make sense of social situations and behavior (Tajfel & Turner, 1986 cited in Callan et al., 2007). Other studies conceptualize professional identity in terms of social identity theory, which emphasizes the existence of social groups in an organization and the professional identities of these groups (Gover & Duxbury, 2012, Callan, et al., 2007; Van Dijk & Van Dick, 2009; Hotho, 2008). Even though our empirical material is mainly focused on individual professional identities rather than group identity, we must acknowledge how the existence of groups within the organization may contribute to the definition of professional identities. Our findings reveal that since the organization has been changing, existing social categories have been activated (Gover & Duxbury, 2012) and move along with the changes. An earlier study has shown how identities can be challenged by disruptions in the group landscape (Turner et al., 1994 cited in Price & Van Dick, 2012). Hence, it becomes apparent how social categories contribute to professional identity and that organizational change can cause these social groups to activate and change as well.

Even though it is said disruption in the social landscape may challenge identity (Turner et al., 1994 cited in Price & Van Dick, 2012), workers in our study reveal the opportunities change can provide. This means that we have observed how employees perceive the social groups to become less fixed meaning that they can shift away from one category into another and, consequently, redefine their identity. Still, often the negative effects of this instability on the individual or the threatened identity are discussed, for instance, when individuals move to

another lower status group (Van Dijk & Van Dick, 2009). In contrast, our study suggests that most employees utilize this phase and its opportunities to strengthen their professional identity. In our empirical data, it becomes clear that several employees have experienced that they can shift to the next hierarchical level (e.g. belonging management board and direct reporting CEO), experience increased responsibility given in times of change (e.g. managing multiple markets) and have a more international outlook of their job (e.g. connected to European headquarters). These opportunities are significant as they can contribute to a sense of professional confidence in roles, as well as having individuals belong to new status groups. We recognize that these changing roles require new skills, behaviors, attitudes, and patterns of interactions which may produce fundamental changes in an individual's self-definition (Ibarra, 1999). In our study, the organizational change is experienced to create opportunities for a positive redefinition of professional identity (Hotho, 2008). The positive redefinition of professional self-views because of organizational changes contradicts our expectation, as we expected that workers would mainly experience negative consequences for their professional self-view. Nevertheless, our findings suggest the movement that comes with organizational change allows employees to shift in social categories and work roles, and are likely to underscore self-proclaimed feelings of prestige and status.

We must be critical towards these findings since it has been found that high-status group members are likely to identify more strongly with their social category to protect their self-esteem. High-status groups afford members protection in a changing environment (Ethier & Deaux, 1994). In contrast, members of lower status groups may experience or adapt to change more negatively (Callan et al., 2007; Terry & Callan, 1998; Terry et al., 2001). Therefore, high-status group members adapt more easily to organizational change than low-status group members (Callan et al., 2007). As our empirical material was collected among individuals who are relatively up in the hierarchy, the opportunities explained may not have been available to lower status groups and might have led to a different result.

However, more importantly, by accessing more status in new social categories, the employees of this study increasingly start to fit in the formal definition of employees with a professional identity. Namely that, professionals enjoy a degree of privilege (Slay & Smith, 2010). Hereby, we can see how these changes may also contribute to a professionalization of their role,

category and self-view. The process in which social categories are activated has been researched before (Gover & Duxbury, 2012), however, what our study adds is the context in which the process is revealed. Thus, we reveal how workers professionalize their self-view even if they do not belong to the strict definition of professionals.

All in all, it becomes apparent that organizational change comes with both threats and opportunities for employees to shift in social categories to improve status. Even though the threats have been extensively studied, we have observed how employees utilize organizational change to enhance their status and professional identity. Our study reveals that employees experienced a shift to the next hierarchical level, increased levels of responsibility given in times of change and a more international outlook because of the changes. We can understand that these aspects contribute to a certain professional confidence through which workers strengthen their professional self-view, and consequently see the opportunity to construct a professional identity.

5.3 Functional Distancing

Organizational change may lead to employee responses of distancing. Based on the empirical material, it becomes clear that several organizational actors distance themselves from their role during organizational change. For instance, professionals express not to have an opinion, distance themselves from the change initiative (e.g. rise above the change) and express their inviolability to the change (e.g. opportunity to work elsewhere) to continue to perform in their roles. Moreover, it becomes apparent that the organizational change is downplayed with the explanation that their professional role requires an execution of the decisions already made, regardless of their opinion or feelings. The empirical material seems to overlap with the literature in other social sciences, such as psychology. There is a wide body of literature around distancing in psychology in which distancing means that an individual is separated from his or her environment (Michela & Vena, 2012) and that this psychological withdrawal from the organization might be problematic (Fried et al., 1996). For instance, Michela and Vena argue how individuals can reduce threatened losses of identity through psychological distancing such as disengaging cognitively or behaviorally (2012). In addition, the literature also emphasizes how workers create alternative identities and self-narratives to escape and refuse the change initiative (Fleming & Spicer, 2007).

However, we suggest that employees identify more strongly with their occupation and role in the organization, for which this distance becomes a requirement. Consequently, employees decouple their identity from their role in the organization which allows to better function in the organization. In that sense, distancing of the organizational change and decoupling from one's professional role becomes beneficial for the organization as this facilitates for a better execution of the change initiative. This contradicts existing literature, as it considers decoupling to be a form of resistance (Pitsakis, Biniari & Kuin, 2012) and mainly emphasizes how organizational change results in further diversification and polarization of professional identities (Ylijoki & Ursin, 2013). However, from our empirical material it becomes clear that one's professional self-view is not directly altered by organizational change, but the professional separates him/herself from the role to execute the role in a more functional manner, a practice we call functional distancing.

In contrast, existing literature emphasizes a relative synonymy between one's role and identity (Alvesson, 2004). Especially when it comes to managers, which made up the largest group of our sample, Sveningsson and Alvesson (2016) argue that these employees must be at one with their role, without a separation of identity and managerial role. Instead, our empirical data clearly shows how managers distance from this identity to act in their managerial role. This contradicts the existing literature on the synonymy between identity and role. However, we argue for the functionality of this distance for the changing organization, as the professional can better execute the job and support the organizational change. Based on this, we suggest that this distance should be considered functional.

Another contrast we see with existing literature is how professional identities are traditionally researched in knowledge-intensive firms and that this identity is mainly constructed in these environments (Callan et al., 2007; Kyratsis et al., 2017; Ylijoki & Ursin, 2013). Our empirical material reveals how an employee, who is not considered formally a knowledge worker in a knowledge-intensive firm, strongly identifies with her profession to an extent that she distances from her opinions or feelings about the change to perform in the organization. This in result might redefine one's professional self-view, in a sense that he/she is competent enough as a manager and can function despite disagreement with the change. Hence, workers who do not belong to the strict definition of knowledge workers, may still strongly identify with their role to an extent that they utilize cognitive distancing mechanism to perform.

To conclude, organizational change may lead to employee responses of functional distancing, where an individual decouples its role from the self. Employees may employ this functional distance to continue to perform professionally in their roles. This may be because their professional role requires an execution of the decisions already made, regardless of their opinions or feelings. Although the literature considers distancing as a relatively dysfunctional concept (Fried et al., 1996; Michela & Vena, 2012), we believe that our empirical material shows this concept in a functional and beneficial manner. Functional distancing may contribute to a stronger professional identity as employees believe they are more competent in their respective occupation to perform even if they may disagree.

5.4 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, we explored our findings of this study in greater depth, connecting it to existing literature and to understand dynamics of professional identity redefinition in changing organizational contexts. Despite a wide body of research about the fluidity of identities, we realized that professional identities are adjusted during organizational change, but in line with Schein (1985) and Reissner (2010), maintained a certain degree of stability since workers rely on their educational background, skills and experience. Based on our empirical material of this study and the connection with existing literature, we discussed three relevant themes which we argued for. First of all, we reviewed and reflected on how (passive) resistance may reinforce an autonomous self-view of workers. In addition, we explained how social categories were disrupted during organizational change and how this can lead individuals to redefine their professional identity. Finally, we explained that employees may choose to distance themselves in times of change and how this can be functional for an organization.

6. Conclusions and Future Work

In this final chapter, we revisit the research question as well as the aim and reflect on these in the light of our study. After reviewing the findings, we address several limitations of our study, such as the sample and timeframe, and explain how we tried to overcome these limitations. We finish by elaborating on the practical implications of this study, for management and other scholars, as well as make suggestions for future research.

6.1 Main Findings

This research explored the dynamics of professional identity in a changing organizational context. More precisely, our aim was to understand how employees redefine their professional identity in a changing semi-knowledge-intensive organization. Based on our empirical material and existing literature, we found three major themes which are relevant to professional identity redefinition. Firstly, we noticed that an organizational change attempt to reduce local autonomy, reinforced ideas of autonomy when workers resisted the change. Another point that we argued for, was how organizational change led to workplace instabilities where workers developed their professional self-views. The final point we made in this dissertation is how employees built a functional distance for themselves during organizational change, to perform in their role regardless of their thoughts and feelings. We noticed that professional identity also exists outside its traditional context, and therefore our purpose to broaden the formal definition was fulfilled. In the following paragraphs, we elaborate on these arguments in the light of our research.

First of all, we argued that an organizational attempt to reduce local autonomy may lead employees to reinforce their autonomous self-view when they passively resisted organizational change. The reinforcement of autonomous selves brings us to an understanding that an organizational attempt to limit autonomy yielded the opposite result. We observed clear active resistance such as rhetorical refusal and less obvious forms, such as passive resistance through humor, irony and cynicism (Fleming & Spicer, 2007). Some

employees responded in alternative ways to maintain and utilize their autonomy, such as constructive disobedience (Rennstam & Kärreman, 2014), organizational crafting activities (Kira, Balkin & San, 2012) and identity work (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Despite the extensive literature on resistance and autonomy, which mainly focuses on how autonomous self-views can be threatened and generate resistance as a response (Van Dijk & Van Dick, 2009), this is the first study, to our knowledge, that illustrated how autonomous professional identities are reinforced through resistance.

Moreover, our study revealed that organizational change comes with opportunities for employees to shift in social categories and improve their professional identity. We argued how employees are aware of the social categories that exist in the workplace, related to e.g. status and position in the hierarchy. The empirical material revealed that since the organization was in change, these social categories had been activated and started to move along with the movement in the organization. We have observed how employees utilize destabilized social groups and shift from one category into another. It became apparent that several employees have experienced that they can shift to the next hierarchical level, experience increased levels of responsibility and experience a more international outlook of one's job. We argued that these aspects can contribute to a certain professional confidence through which workers strengthened their professional self-view, and consequently see the opportunity to construct a professional identity. The literature demonstrated that transitions in work roles are accompanied by adaptations in one's professional self-view (Ibarra, 1999), but we further discussed the process by which this occurs.

Finally, the last argument made in this study is that organizational change led to employee responses of functional distancing with the organization. Based on the empirical material, we argued that some organizational actors decoupled their role from their self during organizational change. Some workers expressed not to have an opinion, distancing themselves from the change initiative (e.g. standing along the sideline or rise above the change), expressed their inviolability to the change (e.g. ability to use experience and educational background to get a job elsewhere) and continued to perform professionally in their roles. Workers are doing so since they believed that their professional role required an execution of

the decisions already made, regardless of their opinions or feelings. Although the literature considered distancing as a relatively dysfunctional concept, we argued that our empirical material shows this concept in a functional manner. As a result, workers constructed a professional self-view in the sense that they thought they were more competent in their occupation and performed even if they disagreed.

6.2 Limitations

After doing extensive research in the field of professional identity construction during organizational change, this study has a few possible limitations. One of the main limitations of this study is that the number of interview participants was relatively small and selected by the organization. While ideally, we would have selected interview participants based on a snowball sample, the organization selected several, mostly managerial, employees. Therefore, we must acknowledge the potential bias of seeing only the positive cases in the organization in which the employees are expected to be ambassadors of the organization and its changes. Additionally, employees on higher levels of an organization may experience changes differently than lower level employees do. On the one hand, interviewing these employees might have created a better picture of the phenomenon. However, other studies have often focused on employees at all levels, and therefore this study can provide a contrast to existing literature. Besides this, the interviews had been conducted in English, which implies that both the interviewers and interviewees had to communicate in their non-native language. Therefore, we must acknowledge that interpretations of this socially constructed phenomenon could have been easily lost while speaking and translating. We tried to overcome this by constantly reflecting on our interview methods and further ask questions when a certain answer remained unclear during the interview.

Furthermore, the limited research time available did not enable us to conduct a longitudinal study in which professional identity development could have been observed over time. Instead of having a retrospective on professional identities before and after the change, we had to ask for a retrospective description of this process by the interviewee. Even though this provided us with sufficient insight into the phenomenon, conducting a longitudinal study time could have further strengthened and enhanced our findings. Finally, the subjective and socially

constructed reality is complex and we are aware of the oversimplification error which can be made in categorizing and theorizing. Hence, while conducting this study we have been exposed to some limitations that we acknowledged and, where possible, overcome.

6.3 Practical Implications

The results of this study are of direct practical relevance for the organization in which we collected the empirical material. It surprised us that in an attempt to reduce local autonomy did not turn out to give the desired result. Executing a centralization change program on this basis can become problematic as the reinforcement of autonomy would be considered counterproductive. Therefore, it is recommended for the organization to evaluate the underlying responses of workers to such a change program and intervene if needed through several change intervention methods. Another implication of this research is relevant for researchers studying organization studies. We reasoned how distancing by workers during organizational is not necessarily dysfunctional and might facilitate for a better execution of the job. Overall, we can say that organizations can review our concepts to better understand the counterproductive effects a centralization might have on the creation of autonomous self-views as well for researchers to see how organizational change can create a functional distance between the organization and its members.

6.4 Directions for Future Research

Several questions remain to be resolved, however, our findings make a first attempt to further develop the literature around professional identity constructions in semi-knowledge-intensive firms. The existing divide between non-knowledge-intensive and knowledge-intensive jobs provides clarity, but overlooks the potential of studying professional identities in other firms and jobs that are somewhere else along the spectrum. Therefore, it is suggested to further study professional identities in firms or for jobs that are not necessarily knowledge-intensive but rather skill- and education-based as professionalization in occupations can be further explored in the literature. Overall, we argue that the concept of professional identity outside its context can be and should be further studied.

Moreover, we are surprised by the positive effects of organizational change for the professionalization of one's professional self-view. We suggest that further research can provide the research area with more and alternative examples in which this occurs. Finally, it is interesting to observe how professional identities that are strengthened can also function as a form of identity regulation by which change in professional identities in sense exercises control over workers through this process. Instances are already known where identity regulations function as a form of subjugation (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002), but it remains interesting to understand how this occurs in a changing organization. In general, future research can create alternative perspectives on the positive outcomes for a professional identity and how this process of professional identity constructions during organizational change can be a form of control.

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8. Appendix

8.1 Interview Questions

Primary Questions

1. What is your role in the organization?
2. What do you think of the change in the European structure?
3. What do you think of the Customer Dedication change program?
4. How did this [the change] impact your role?
5. Do you feel in your role?
6. How has the change impacted your professional self-view?
7. Can you tell us about the course of your career?
8. Could you tell us something about your professional background?
9. What is your view of your job/role before, in and after the change?
10. Is this [career path, current role] what you wanted for your life?
11. Are you happy in your role?
12. Are you on the right track to achieve your professional/career goals?
13. How do see yourself further develop your career?

Secondary questions

14. Reflection on critical events: tell me your side of the story about the change from begin till end/If you had to write a book or a movie about yourself in the change at CarCo?
15. What does it mean to be a good employee at CarCo?
16. Which responsibilities are taken away and what do you think about this? Does this influence how you see yourself at work?
17. With what do you most strongly identify with in CarCo?
18. How do you see the future yourself at CarCo?