

CHAPTER 11: CONTROLLING MANAGERS' 'BECOMING': THE PRACTICE OF IDENTITY REGULATION

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Abstract: I explore here the process of controlling managers 'becoming' through the practices of identity regulation. My focus is on how identity regulation is performed through individuals' concrete actions. Through a qualitative longitudinal study on managerial training, three contributions are offered. Identity regulation discourses are performed through micro-practices showing that identity regulation is far from being a top-down process; identity regulation practices are sustained by "side" practices which secure organizational members' participation and enactment of these discourses; finally, identity work is not only an autonomous and individual process and it can be a deliberate target of identity regulation practices.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to better understand how identity regulation – a key mode of control – is exercised within organizations. This process “encompasses the more or less intentional effects of social practices upon processes of identity construction and reconstruction” (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002:625). It is mainly constituted by the discursive practices that allow identity definition to prompt identity work, a form of more or less conscious self-work that is aimed at “forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a precarious sense of coherence and distinctiveness” (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002:626). Thus, identity regulation forms, along with identity work, the basis of identity construction – the process of becoming.

To date, several studies have provided strong evidence of organizational discourses' influence on individuals' identity work and identity (e.g. Ainsworth and Hardy, 2009; Alvesson and Robertson, 2006; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Thomas and Linstead, 2002), despite the fact that this influence is only partial due to both conflicting and incomplete discourses and to the inescapable individual agency (Thomas and Linstead, 2002) that is exercised through

identity work. Nevertheless, in spite of these valuable insights, we lack an understanding of the basic practices that support (and sometimes fail) to achieve identity regulation, i.e. the critical operation that consists of the *linking* of discourses to identity (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002:628). In order to better comprehend this new mode of control, we need to know how identity regulation is performed through individuals' concrete actions.

This paper advances such an understanding by conducting a qualitative longitudinal study concerning managerial training. The paper begins with a theoretical review of identity regulation and the current lack of knowledge about the linking of discourses and identity work, which can be solved through the study of practices. The paper then focuses on the case study's methodology and the findings of this empirical investigation. Finally, a concluding section discusses the implications of this research and paths for future studies.

Identity regulation and practices

Identity regulation

Recently, scholars have become increasingly interested in the construction of identity within organizations (Alvesson, Aschcraft and Thomas, 2008; Thomas, 2009; Ybema, Keenoy, Oswick, Beverungen, Ellis and Sabelis, 2009). Managerial attempts to shape individuals' inner-selves are seen as more and more salient (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Knights and Willmott, 1989; Kunda, 1992; Rose, 1989). Identity refers to the answer that people give to the question: "Who am I?" (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). In this paper, we adopt a non-essentialist view of identity, positioning it as something that is fluid, fragmented, and reflexively understood by an individual (without necessarily being clouded by uncertainty). In this view, identity is never entirely realized, but nevertheless has a certain precarious stability over time. To sum up, we all are in a constant state of "becoming" (Andersson, 2010; Clegg, Kornberger and Rhodes, 2005; Schultz, Maguire, Langley and Tsoukas, 2012). Moreover, we hold that identity is multiple, much like a multi-faceted crystal (Tracy and Trethewey, 2005). Each of these facets, which are all potentially struggling with one another, is expressed in a specific context (Watson, 2007). This process of identity becoming has been referred to as "identity formation" or "construction", and is mainly composed of "identity regulation" and "identity work" (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002).

Identity regulation is a mode of control that is "accomplished through the self-positioning of employees within managerially inspired discourses about work and organization with which they become more or less identified and committed" (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002:620). It is

composed of not only organizational and extra-organizational discourses (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2009; Wasserman and Frenkel, 2011), but also of the symbols that are embedded in organizational arrangements (Alvesson and Robertson, 2006). It is not simply a “top-down” process; in fact, numerous organizational members and extra-organizational members (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2009) can be sources of identity regulation. According to Alvesson and Willmott (2002), there are three main sources of this specific mode of control, which are all frequently intertwined in practice: (1) managerial (discourses directed at organizational members’ self-definition), (2) cultural-communitarian (organizational as well as extra-organizational discourses about shared beliefs and understandings), and (3) quasi-autonomous (a situation of discursive cacophony). In this view, social identities are linguistic resources that are mobilized not only in the process of self-definition (Thomas and Linstead, 2002), but also in order to define others in offering potential points of identification. A social identity that is conveyed by identity-regulation discourse can therefore be a source of identification if it represents a valued, “desired” (Beech, 2011) or “aspirational” identity (Thornborrow and Brown, 2009). Additionally, it can act as an anti-identity (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003) and trigger a counter-identification.

At a *locale* level, there are always several competing identity-regulation discourses that form a specific “array of discursive possibilities available for identity construction” (Kuhn, 2006:1354). Thus, “individuals are always controlled in partially unique ways” (Zanoni and Janssens, 2007:1393). Furthermore, discourses of identity regulation are not static – they are fluid and ongoing, reproduced by a wide range of actors in multiple situations with conflicting interests (Musson and Duberley, 2007). Such situations can destabilize identity, yet are conversely spaces for micro-emancipations (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992). Thus, as a control mechanism, identity regulation is rarely overwhelming, even if it is directly and strategically used to define organizational members or to help organizational members to cope with these identity tensions (Gotsi, Andriopoulos, Lewis and Ingram, 2010). Moreover, individuals exercise an irreducible agency through identity work, a process “*whereby people strive to shape a relatively coherent and distinctive notion of personal self-identity and struggle to come to terms with and, within limits, to influence the various social-identities which pertain to them in the various milieux in which they live their lives*” (Watson, 2008:129, original emphasis). Thus, “discourses [of identity regulation] can be reflectively ignored, rejected, adhered, [...] translated by individuals,” (Gendron and Spira, 2010:298) or even resisted, openly or not, both individually and collectively (Musson and Duberley, 2007; Wasserman and Frenkel, 2011). The concept of identity work is precious in understanding the extent to

which organizational members mobilize social identities and convey them through discourse in order to define themselves.

Essentially, identity regulation *prompts* identity work, which in return *informs* identity regulation (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). For identity regulation to prompt identity work, a discourse of identity regulation must be available, repetitive and intense in some way (O'Doherty and Willmott, 2001), regardless of its intentionality. The positive feature of the social identities that are conveyed by discourses is also important (Zanoni and Janssens, 2007). However, according to Alvesson and Willmott (2002), what is critical to understand beyond these conditions is the way that such discourses can link themselves to organizational members' identity work. This link can be created through various *organizational practices of identity regulation*. Alvesson and Willmott have offered a theoretical overview of those practices (detailed in Table 11-1), and to date, several studies have attested of their empirical relevance (e.g. Empson, 2004; Musson and Duberley, 2007).

- **Table 11-1. Targets and practices of identity regulation, adapted from Alvesson & Willmott (2002:632)**

Targets of identity regulation	Organizational practices of identity regulation
The employee (who one is or is not)	- Directly defining the individual - Defining a person by defining others
Action orientation (the definition of appropriate actions)	- Providing a specific vocabulary of motives - Explicating morals and values - Providing knowledge and skills
Social relations (group belonging and differentiation)	- Group categorization and affiliation - Hierarchical location
The scene (broader level, such as the organization or the industry)	- Establishing and clarifying a distinct set of rules (what is to be found as 'normal' and 'abnormal' in a specific area) - Defining the context

These practices of identity regulation are precious insights into understand how identity regulation is bound to the identities of organizational members. However, these categories are and do not allow us to understand why discourses of identity regulation are enacted (or not) by organizational members. Because organizational members are exposed to identity regulation incentives in specific contexts (Kuhn, 2006; Zanoni and Janssens, 2007), we need to take into account the diverse manners through which identity regulation practices are exercised. To date, few studies have explored the contextual performance of Alvesson and Willmott's broad identity regulation practices. For example, Ainsworth and Hardy (2009)

have found that for older workers, the discourses of identity regulation are enacted through a pivotal mechanism – older workers’ *participation* in such discourses. This concept of *participation* can also be found in Musson and Duberley’s (2007) study concerning managers that are confronted with new “discourses of participation”. These managers are forced to use discourse during weekly meetings – at least for impression management. In both cases, the linkage between discourse and self-identity is realized. However, we lack an understanding of the specific means by which this *participation* is triggered and of why it produces (partially) effective regulation; the only study that focuses on these specific means adopts recruitment processes as its focal point (Bergström and Knights, 2006). In this instance, we can speak of *micro-practices*, as the authors are concerned with the various *moves* that allow organizational interviewers to have systematic control over how candidates express themselves: e.g. response control of the candidates, specific and oriented enunciation of organizational discourses, and “various housekeeping moves” used to control and secure the acceptability of organizational discourse for candidates. However, “as a means of realizing more fully how and when organizational discourses constitute subjectivity, there is a need to complement this study with studies of other kinds of interaction [than recruitment practices] and in other contexts [than consulting firms]” (Bergström and Knights, 2006:373). Therefore, there is a need for studies to explore this gap. As we are dealing here with several kinds or levels of *practices*, it seems relevant to mobilize the concept of practice in order to shed light on what we mean by micro-practices.

Practices

Practice theories are focused on the dynamics of organizational members’ everyday activities, in both their routine and improvised forms (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011); i.e. what people really *do*. Practices can be conceived of as “embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding” (Schatzki, 2001:11). Moreover, following Bazin’s theoretical review (2011), practices are generally viewed (1) “as patterns of repetitive actions that require a constant *bricolage* in order to be enacted” (p. 8), and (2) “as institutionalized patterns of actions emerging from a constant ongoing *bricolage* required to invent relevant local solutions in similar, yet always different, situations” (p. 14). Thus, the organizational practices of identity regulation provided by Alvesson and Willmott (2002) can be seen as general templates for identity regulation. What we call “micro-practices” refers to the “ongoing and intelligent coping that produces local solution in similar, yet always different, situations” (Bazin, 2011:12). These levels are mutually constitutive:

organizational actors perform Alvesson and Willmott's set of practices through micro-practices, which in return (re)produce this broader set of practices.

Practice theories share a number of key conceptual points with the identity construction theory introduced above. Indeed, practice theorists reject the duality between structure and agency (Whittington, 2011), holding that the articulation of these two elements is mutually constitutive (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011). Similarly, identity researchers reject the dualism and unidirectional influence between identity regulation discourses and agentic identity work (see Bergström and Knights, 2006). Individuals enact the social identities that are conveyed by the organizational discourses of identity regulation via identity work, and at the same time (re)produce organizational discourses of identity regulation (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Moreover, practice theorists acknowledge that this mutual constitution is imbued with power (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011). Likewise, identity regulation is a mode of controlling the "inside" of organizational members. Based on these similarities, we argue that the practice concept is a useful for understanding the very (micro) process of identity regulation.

Research Design

Following Alvesson and Willmott's call for in-depth and longitudinal studies aimed at investigating the processes of identity regulation (2002:638), we have conducted a 12-month case study of a single identity regulation device: managerial training. The rationale for this choice was twofold. Firstly, managerial training is one of the identity regulation social practices identified by Alvesson and Willmott, which collectively "are developed in ways that have implications for the shaping and direction of identity" (2002:625). Indeed, several studies have emphasized that managerial training programs (such as MBAs) have implications for managers' identities (Andersson, 2010; Sturdy, Brocklehurst, Winstanley and Littlejohns, 2006). Secondly, a training is a set of micro-practices that are tailor-made in order to reach certain goals – more specifically the development of a particular knowledge and skill set – and that result in a number of unintended outcomes, such as identity formation (Warhurst, 2011).

Case context

FUN is a worldwide entertainment company. The French division of the company employs 14 500 workers in various domains dedicated to tourists recreation. In 2006, the Occupational

Health and Safety Department (OHSD) decided to begin combating the occupational risks of mental health such as stress and harassment. Consequently, a measure was adopted that called for an on-site training program for FUN’s 450 managers. The measure’s conception took place from December 2009 until December 2010. It was an iterative process which involved multiple interviews with managers and the participation of three main employees from the health and safety department: a well-skilled health and safety team leader, a psychologist, and the future main trainer, who was recruited specifically in order to set up the training due to her pedagogical background. The training was launched in January 2011. This two-day training was composed of eight different sequences (see Table 11-2). Its formal aims were to teach managers to identify stress factors in their team and to implement preventive actions. A third goal was to discuss how to take care of a subordinate that is suffering from a stressful situation. The trainer limited groups to eight to ten managers due to the fact that the training was highly participatory, relying heavily on managers’ personal involvement and work in sub-groups. Attendance to the training was not compulsory. The training was followed by monthly short sessions (called “managers’ coffee”), which lasted one and a half hours and were dedicated to a group composed of eight to ten managers (still on a voluntary basis). Its aim was to allow managers to expose their difficult personal situations and to analyze them along with their peers.

• **Table 11-2. Description of the training session**

Day	Sequence content
Day 1 – morning	S1. Introduction; trainer and participant presentations; video analysis whose debriefing consisted of the iterative building of a conceptual tool aimed at analyzing working situations
	S2. In sub-groups, case studies were conducted on individual stressful situations in the context of other firms; there was a back-and-forth exchange with the conceptual model; in sub-groups, individuals did exercises consisting of the writing questions and answers (question: portraying a managerial situation implicating stress; answer: writing of three potential answers – only one was considered as most accurate)
Day 1 – afternoon	S3. “Snakes and ladders” game (competition between sub-groups on the basis of previously-written questions and answers)
	S4. Exercise in sub-groups, then with everybody: each manager shared a personal and successful managerial situation with others that involved his/her subordinates and stress; day concluded
Day 2 – morning	S5. Exercise with all the participants that identified stress indicators among teammates, as well as organizational supportive actors that could help managers

Day 2 – afternoon	S6. Exercise in sub-groups, then with everybody each manager shared a personal and successful managerial situation with others that involved his/her subordinates and stress; rephrasing exercise (labeled “speed dating”)
	S7. Training summary; guidelines for personal improvement
	S8. Training appraisal; conclusion

Data collection

Data was collected over a 12-month period. In order to understand the history and the context of the training, we conducted three interviews with the trainers. These interviews were complemented via informal conversations. Furthermore, in order to study the identity regulation practices and their related effects, we made several participant observations of the training device and conducted interviews with the participating managers.

Observations. In order to identify the micro-practices of identity regulation, we attended two training sessions as well as three “managers’ coffee”. During these observations, we took extensive notes about the organization of the session’s sequencing (timing, content, nature and organization of exercises, participants’ reactions, etc.), the discourse of the trainer (what was said, to whom, etc.), and the discussions that took place between participants during both the exercises and breaks. All of the documents that were used during the sessions were also gathered. Before the beginning of the training, the trainer asked participants to what extent the presence of the researcher was problematic – none of them had an objection. We attended the training program’s lunch and helped the trainer to install and store the pedagogic materials in the beginning and end of each day, which triggered a number of informal conversations about participants’ reactions to the training.

Interviews. In order to comprehend the nature of identity work that the participants undertook, we conducted 45 interviews with 24 participating managers. The first set of 24 interviews was conducted during short period after the training (an average of one month). The second set of 21 interviews took place four to six months after the first interview, and were aimed at taking managers’ perceptions of the training into account as they developed over time. Despite their desire to do so, three managers were not available to participate in the second interview. Every manager that was interviewed was of equal rank. Ten managers were in charge of operational teams, and 14 managed support staff (e.g. various HR functions). Their teams varied from four to 120 organizational members, with an average of 30. All of these managers were contacted after the training program via the trainers, who had informed the managers about the study and asked them if they were willing to participate. The interviews were conducted in managers’ offices and varied in length, spanning between 40 and 100 minutes

(with an average duration of one hour). All interviews were recorded and the total transcribed dataset was 720 pages. We asked a broad range of questions that were focused on the managers' perception of the training or of their self-perception as managers. Examples of our questions include: "What do you think about the training?", "Did you question yourself or your practices during the training?", and "How will you doing things differently now?". In order to further investigate relevant themes, we were asked a second set of more specific questions.

Data analysis

We followed a process of analysis that involved several related steps. Firstly, by following Musson and Duberley's methodology (2007), we reread our observation notes in order to locate data that coincided with the nine *organizational practices of identity regulation*. We took special care in linking each practice with (1) the moment of its exercise during the training and (2) relevant quotes from both the trainer and the participants. This coding process was "analytical", and was designed to enable us to fully understand the meanings in their specific context, as well as to create "categories that express new ideas about the data" (Richards, 2009:102-103). We followed this step by carefully analyzing the content of each category in order to identify the micro-practices through which identity regulation was exercised. Through this reading, we first separated all micro-practices, then looked for common patterns. These patterns were further grouped into two main categories: a first type of practice performed solely by the trainer, and a second type that has been identified in the literature as *participation* (see Ainsworth and Hardy, 2009; Bergström and Knights, 2006).

Secondly, in order to identify participants' reactions to these micro-practices of identity regulation, we again read our interview transcripts, this time in search of emerging common themes, a process that Richards calls "topic coding" (2009). These themes became the basic codes that we would use in order to further extract the data and to classify it into coded categories. These categories included: "things learned", "training pedagogy", "changes in managing", "managers' coffee perception", etc. After this step, we read the data pertaining to each category in order to identify the key points, a process that subsequently provided us with insights about the effects of identity regulation discourse on managers' identities, as well as other factors that favor or temper the effects of identity regulation practices.

Practices of identity regulation

We have divided the presentation of our findings into five sections. First, we present the identity regulation discourse that was promoted during the training, as well as the social identities that it conveyed. Second, we analyze the practices whose aim was to expose managers to identity regulation discourses. Third, we illustrate the practices that led to the enactment of the linguistic and conceptual resources that were related to identity regulation and that were provided by the first set of practices. This second set of *participation* practices is striking, as it can be seen as having prompted managers' identity work. We then detail the practices that allowed managers to freely and authentically engage in the training and in the various training exercises. Finally, we discuss the effects of identity regulation on managers' identity and a number of the factors that favored or tempered the efficacy of the aforementioned practices.

A promoted identity embedded in the discourse

The goals of the training were to “identify psychological health-risk and protection factors; undertake actions that improve subordinates' psychological health with the help of peers; identify and orient distressed subordinates” (training presentation slides). Through these aims, we have identified a central figure: the “caring manager”, i.e. the manager who listens to the occupational and personal troubles of his or her subordinates, who looks for changes in their moods in order to detect individuals that are suffering, and who offers support and directs them to a specialist (occupational physician, social worker, psychological helpline, HR, etc.). This “caring manager” is also a social identity that is built between two anti-identities (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003) – “managers who deny their subordinates' troubles” and “those act as if they have a psychology degree” (OHSD Executive, MC3¹). These anti-identities can be seen as encapsulating the “cold hearted manager”, who does not care at all, and the “psychologist” or “social worker”, who cares too much. These social identities were fuelled by the discourse of identity regulation that was given during the training. We will now direct our focus towards the specific practices that *concretely realized* these figures.

Providing linguistic and conceptual resources

We will focus here on the practices of the trainer – practices come from a *managerial* source – whose aim was to imbue the participants with the discourse of identity regulation. Through a mix of top-down (“direct speech”) and bottom-up (“rephrasing participants' accounts' and

‘billsticking’”) micro-practices, the trainer provided participants with a specific vocabulary and defined set of conceptual ideas, which together are consistent with the identity regulation discourse of the “caring manager”.

Direct speech. The official and managerial discourse of identity regulation was delivered to participants through micro-practices of *direct speech*. For example, the trainer would begin the training by *defining the context* and *setting the rules of the game* through a short talk introducing the training, the context of its organization and its objectives. A number of slides also projected a summary of the speech. The trainer would present the history of the training and explain that the Occupational Health and Safety Department (OHSD) had launched a second campaign in order to improve employees’ psychological health. Then, OHSD defined four main priorities, including the integration of “psychological health improvement into managerial practices” (Trainer, T2). Through this presentation, the trainer placed managers within range of the organizational actors in charge of employees’ psychological health.

During the training, the trainer also promoted the “caring manager” identity by employing “direct speech” micro-practices, using two other organization practices of identity regulation: (1) “defining the person directly” and (2) “providing a vocabulary of motives”. For example, she said:

“You managers are not doctors, occupational psychologists, or even psychologists.” (Trainer, T1)

This very direct sentence reminds the managers to remain attentive, but to be aware of the existence anti-identities that carry with them a negative value. While the position of a “psychologist” is not negative in itself, it is an inappropriate position for the manager to take. In this, excess of “care” transforms the “caring manager” into something that he or she is not. At the end of the second day, the trainer concluded the training by explaining:

‘If you remember one thing from this training, remember that when there is a conflict between individuals, it is the tip of the iceberg – there is always something else underneath it.’ (Trainer, T1)

This sentence provided participants a vocabulary of motives, as it details what to do when faced with a conflict between two persons on their team. Indeed, the trainer strongly suggests that they think about way lies below the surface, i.e. seek out the other, perhaps deeper causes of the conflict (e.g. inside the work organization) via questions and active listening (i.e. be a “caring manager”).

Rephrasing participants' accounts. Instead of giving knowledge to participants during lectures, the trainer drew on participants' insights in order to produce both the appropriate knowledge and the vocabulary of motives that exemplified the "caring manager". In doing so, she was frequently reframing sentences or answers of participants in order to *translate* them into the identity regulation vocabulary. For example, when a participant said:

"[...] it comes back frequently. Preserve, to preserve an equilibrium is not simple...To preserve oneself because we are real absorber sometimes."

the trainer just rephrased his idea:

"You are sponges [...] you must step back and give to the other some space to breathe around the work he has to perform." (Trainer, T1)

This sentence draws on the participant insight that it is difficult to maintain an equilibrium. By doing so, the trainer qualifies what the manager should do and reinforces the discourse of the "caring manager", i.e. that they should stand back and give subordinates a sense of responsibility (i.e. not to simply take charge of the situation).

Moreover, and more importantly, the first sequence (S1) was dedicated to a video analysis whose debriefing consisted of an iterative building of a *conceptual tool* in order to make sense of the situations that cause trouble for the participants' subordinates. The trainer did not give this analytical tool directly to the participants, but instead built it using participants' insights. During this operation, she was also constantly "rephrasing" – it was she that decided what to write and how to write it before writing the participants' suggestions on Post-it notes, which were ultimately assembled on a large board. At the end of the sequence, all of the participants had the same conceptual model, which was called the "*daisy*" because of its five major petal-like categories (task content, work relationships, socio-economic environment, physical environment and work organization). This method of continuously building this conceptual model was used in every other sequence: it was a way to provide participants with skills, knowledge, and a vocabulary of motives. Indeed, this model aimed at helping participants to reflect on their own managerial experience and to find appropriate ways of dealing with their subordinates' troubles. It supported both a deeper analysis of their subordinates' painful situations and the search for consistent managerial solutions. In doing so, this process conveyed two key messages: listen to your subordinates (by asking questions meant to shed light on their situations) and support them (act after listening and respect the limits defined by the daisy's dimensions – beyond these boundaries is the specialist's territory).

Billsticking. Because the board and the daisy were always visible for the participants, we can add a third micro-practice, which supports the supply of linguistic and conceptual resources: “bill sticking”, i.e. the display of key messages on the wall, always in sight of both the trainer and the participants. During the training, two big boards were used to organize participants’ insights as rephrased by the trainer. Apart from the above-mentioned daisy, the trainer also created another conceptual tool during the fifth sequence – a list of symptoms indicating subordinates’ distress as well as the relevant specialists who were to be contacted in specific situations. Other material supports are also put up on walls, such as exercises, instructions and questions (with a space for participants’ answers). Finally, the trainer took pictures of all of these devices and sent them to participants after the session. These “bill sticking” practices contribute to the display and concrete enactment of managerial identity-regulation discourse.

Triggering the enactment of identity regulation: leading participants to identity work

The trainer would actively look for participants’ reactions to the linguistic and conceptual resources via the management of exercises. Sequences one through seven included various exercises that followed similar patterns: exercise commencement, exercise monitoring and exercise conclusion. Each of these steps was characterized by micro-practices of identity regulation, which had the effect of “leading participants to identity work”. There were three different kinds of exercises: (1) case studies, (2) a “snakes and ladders” game and (3) a reflection on (personal) managerial situations. Each of these exercises was part of the identity regulation process. However, in order to highlight this process, we will focus on the third type, which exemplified and intensified the *participation* of managers. We will first describe the exercise before detailing its underlying identity construction process.

This exercise took place twice (in S4 and S6) and lasted between one and a half hours to two and a half hours. It was directed by the trainer, and consisted in participants writing down a personal managerial situation that centered on their subordinates’ psychological health troubles. This situation must have been already solved (in S4) or currently problematic (in S6). Participants were invited to write this situation on a sheet of paper that was distributed by the trainer and which contained two “text blocks”: the first one listed the descriptive facts that the manager had to provide in order to characterize the situation (e.g. team description, seniority in team management, context etc.) and then provided a space for describing the situation; the second demanded the participant to “read the situation again using the five factors” from the daisy. After having written the situation, participants shared it within their sub-groups. During these individual presentations, managers engaged in discussions with

other managers, which were characterized by three types of interactions: (1) general *comments* such as, “It is so surprising, they are opposed to you when you try to help them!” (Marc, T1) or, “I’ve had got the same problem with one of my subordinates” (comment made by several managers, T1 and T2); (2) *questions* about the situation that aim to gain more specific details or to ask if the manager has tried “to do this or that” (managers that presented frequently had to justify themselves); (3) *advice* to help the managers to deal with their situations. In order to monitor the exercise, the trainer moved from one sub-group to another and also asked questions to challenge the participants’ situations. For example:

“Concerning the work-life balance, what is this equilibrium between the two? What are your levers, pillars, and how is it maintained? What are the vigilance key points?” (Trainer, T1)

The trainer then asked each sub-group to select one situation and to present it in front of the other participants. This interactive process between participants – comments, questions, advice – began again, however, this time the trainer would often rephrased participants’ insights and would then write some of them on Post-it notes in order to complete the “daisy board”. Finally, the trainer concluded the exercise by synthesizing key messages that were consistent with the identity regulation discourses that were displayed.

How was identity at stake during these exercises? First of all, during the exercise commencement, the trainer asked managers to produce a self-narrative about a personal situation, which was an opportunity for inward identity work (i.e. an internal self-reflection about who one is, see Brown, 2006; Down and Reveley, 2009; Humphreys and Brown, 2002). This identity work was not freely undertaken by participants. Indeed, they were asked to follow the “sheet categories”, which pushed them to build of their narratives. In doing so, the trainer forced participants to enact linguistic and conceptual elements of the “caring manager” social identity into the presentation of a personal situation. What is at stake here is the strong incentive to *link* identity regulation discourse with participants’ identity. Then, during the monitoring of the exercise, the trainer asked participants to present their narratives to the peers of their sub-groups. The presentation of these narrative in front of other people can be analyzed as another form of identity work, i.e. an outward identity work (i.e. the external engagement of oneself toward others, see Down and Reveley, 2009; Watson, 2008). Participants were led to reflect on the image of themselves that others would send back to them, granting or challenging their identity claims, and leading to the refinement of their self-narratives (Beech, 2008). Two sources of identity regulation were exercised through the micro-practices of comments, questions and advice: the *autonomous* identity regulation of

other managers, which can more or less be aligned with the other source, the *managerial* one, carried mainly by the trainer, and its identity of the “caring manager”. Thus, comments, questions and advice are micro-practices of identity regulation that are aimed at orienting the outward identity work of participants. For example, during an exercise on the second day of training, Wendy (a manager participant) spoke about one of her subordinates who was in distress: “She doesn’t know to say no”. The trainer asked her, “But, is it easy to say no?” Wendy responded, “That is not what I’m saying. It is because I do not know to say no...it’s hard to say no to one’s superior.” Here, we see the trainer attempting to avoid a victim-blaming mechanism while at the same time emphasizing that the managers should be more empathetic – alike to a “caring manager”. The next step, the presentation in front of the other participants, followed the same principles. Finally, the trainer’s debriefing and conclusion led participants to “close” the identity work that was originally triggered by the exercise. During this time, she repeated the session’s key messages, such as “a conflict between two persons is not a problem of personality but of underlying problems of work organization” and “he can have personal problems, whatever, if he is focused on his problems, it interferes with his work” (Trainer, T2), which conveys the idea that a “caring manager” should move away from his or her first impression in order to search for other causes for their employees’ distress, as in doing so the manager will be able to listen to them and provide support.

To sum up, a link between the identity regulation discourse and participants’ managerial identity was created and (re)worked through these exercises. The participants’ engagement with these exercises drove them to mobilize the linguistic and conceptual resources that were provided by the trainer. In doing so, they “putting to identity work”. The same type of process was also repeated during the monthly “managers’ coffee”.

“Side practices”: supporting identity regulation practices

We have identified other micro-practices whose aim is not to regulate participants’ identity, but rather to secure their engagement in the training and their attitude in front of the discourse being displayed. These “side practices” consist of practices of both discourse legitimation and of reassurance.

Practices of discourse legitimation. These practices are intentionally designed to favour managers’ receptivity to identity regulation discourse and its enactment. An important practice in this process is the appropriation of managerial critics. The training was prepared during one year using a sample of volunteer managers who told the trainer (through interviews and tests of several sequences) what they expected of the training. They expressed

the fact that they did not want to be stigmatized as being responsible for their employees' psychological health problems, nor positioned as their employees' only support. The result was quite successful:

“We had what we wanted and not what we didn't want!” (Queenie, E1)

This year of training design was also the opportunity for the trainer to identify managers' “needs”. Indeed, she found that a majority of managers were questioning themselves about what to do when faced with subordinates' troubles. The discourse of the “caring manager” provided a vocabulary of motives that was designed to answer this question and to fulfill managers' needs. By doing this, the identity regulation discourse gained legitimacy as well as the ability to be positively perceived and accepted by managers.

Practices of reassurance. We have identified several kinds of reassurance practices. First, the trainer created a specific material environment that provided her with the opportunity for reflexivity. The training lasted two days and allowed peers to interact and converse. This temporal and spatial environment fostered contemplation regarding managers' situations. Many of them expressed that it was an opportunity to take a step back from their intense day-to-day schedules – they needed both time *and* space to reflect on their experiences. Through this, managers could take the time to re-construct their past practices using the linguistic and conceptual categories provided by the trainer. Moreover, they discovered that all managers were facing similar problems:

“The sequence of exchange with colleagues who we do not necessarily know and who face completely different problems in terms of business, we realize that in terms of human management, we were roughly the same.” (Hugo, E1)

This sense of communal belonging was a by-product of the training and contributed to managers' engagement with the prescribed exercises. Moreover, it allowed managers to cope with the danger of being exposed to others' judgments. This reassurance was further supported by a second kind of practice: rule setting and maintenance. Indeed, the trainer established the rules of the training so that they would constitute and maintain a climate that would allow managers to safely reflect on their past and present experiences. These rules were acknowledged by participants and were systematically repeated throughout the training. One of the cornerstones of this was the absence of top managers or subordinates in the room and a general benevolence from peers. The other pillar in maintaining this safe climate was the careful monitoring of the trainer. She was constantly navigating from one sub-group to

another in order to reframe the sub-group conversations around the acknowledged rules. She would even open the “managers’ coffee” by restarting the rules and saying “protect yourself, don’t put yourself in danger, we can’t guarantee that what you tell in this room will not be repeated.” This warning acted as a reality principle and contributed to the enhancement of the specific pedagogy of the device, which as appreciated by managers:

“We spent two days... Two days which went quickly. We have not been subjected to the training. It was a learning method... it was different. We didn’t know about it. As [the trainer] said, it is an adult method” (Noé, E1).

Effects on identity

The official aim of the training was to teach managers to identify stress factors, to implement actions and to take care of suffering subordinates. These aims were not specifically geared towards developing managers’ identity. However, because the training defined and promoted the behaviors of a “caring manager”, identity work appears to be a rather important outcome of such a training (Sturdy, et al., 2006; Warhurst, 2011). The first effect on identity was that participants were provided with a set of social identities that they were able to use during the training (and reuse after it) to (re)define themselves as managers. However, participants were not “becoming managers” or shifting their organizational identities from a “professional” role to a “managerial” or “leadership” role. The social identities discussed during the training were in fact facets of a broader managerial identity. The “social worker”, the “caring manager” and the “cold hearted manager” are specific facets that are linked to specific situations and behaviors. Moreover, the practices that led managers to resolve their ontological anxiety about specific managerial dilemmas (i.e. developing self-confidence) also allowed them to confront present and theoretical future managerial situations, a process that was continued through the “managers’ coffee”. In this way, managerial identity was not threatened during the training; however, if managers were to confirm their managerial identity, they would return to work with adjusted means of defining themselves in specific situations, more precisely, those in which they deal with subordinates’ problems. In such a situation, the practices developed by the training produce identity work that confirms a broad managerial identity, but that is slightly enriched and adjusted by new or renovated identity facets. Indeed, managers’ perception of the training was not one of discovery, but rather, a confirmation of previous practices that were “not so bad”:

“And we try over time using the feedback of others... We try to work with that and with the elements we've seen during the training. And we see that there is not... There is a gap that is

not so high. And we try as much as possible to adjust our ways of dealing with the situations.”
(Auguste, E1)

“Well, the training has comforted me. It has comforted me in my way of doing things. It gives advice; it gives tips, for sure. It also readjusts some things.” (Ugo, E1)

However, the way this move or adjustment operated was not entirely under the trainer’s control. It works to the extent that managers were willing to “play the game” and engage in the training exercises. Identity regulation, even though well designed, remained an open process whose results were always partially thwarted by other discourses and individual agency. Indeed, in accordance with previous research (e.g. Bergström and Knights, 2006), this process did not produce strong disciplined outcomes, such as “corporate clones”. The discourses that were provided to managers and that were intended to frame their experiences did not come solely from the trainer or the training supports. Other participants, such as peers, also brought their own vocabulary to the training and challenged managers’ self-narratives in asking questions and suggesting other ways of behaving. Moreover, identity work (and identity outcome) was not always triggered with the same intensity – it instead depended on managers’ appraisal of their past and present behaviors when confronted with social identities brought about by the training.

Discussion

This study makes several contributions to existing literature. Firstly, we confirm and extend the idea that identity regulation is not (only) a top-down process. We confirm Ainsworth and Hardy’s (2009) claim that discourses of identity regulation are expressed by numerous actors in society. We also extend their claim in pointing out that these numerous actors can belong to a single organization: the trainer, trainees, the occupational physician, human resources experts, senior managers etc. Managers are defined by numerous other actors, including their peers. We also confirm that discourses of identity regulation are not monolithic, but that they evolve (sometimes slowly) over time (Musson and Duberley, 2007).

Secondly, our study brings empirical support to Alvesson & Willmott’s conceptual framework (2002), confirming prior studies about identity regulation (e.g. Empson, 2004; Musson and Duberley, 2007). We add an original contribution to this framework in documenting specific practices of identity regulation and their effects on identity work and identity. In doing this, we demonstrate that identity regulation should not only be studied through the organizational discourses that prompt organizational members’ identity work, but

as a result of micro-practices, including, but not limited to, discursive practices. Indeed, we show that identity regulation occurs via micro-practices whose effect is to trigger and to frame an intensive identity work. The training studied was made up of interrelated practices that acted together in order to lead managers to produce self-narratives in front of their peers, e.g. the asking of direct questions about “who they are”, and the performance of exercises that invited them to exert their reflexivity. These micro-practices of identity regulation act as “identity work trigger mechanisms”. We further show that the managers’ engagement in this process was facilitated by another kind of micro-practice: “side” practices such as “discourse legitimation practices” and “reassurance practices”. In providing ontological security and a sense of continuity with previous self-conceptions, the exercises allowed managers to open and then to close an identity work, which resulted in a confirmation of their overall managerial identity, albeit lightly reworded. Subsequently, we hold that identity work is not an autonomous process that individuals undertake as an expression of their free agency, but rather, that it can be a deliberate target of identity regulation incentives that creates a link between discursively promoted social identities and organizational members’ identities.

Finally, we both confirm and extend the account provided by Warhurst (2011) and Sturdy et al. (2006) concerning the effects of managerial trainings. We found that identity work and self-confidence were the unintended outcomes of the training; however, we extend the previous findings outside the specific range of MBA programs. According to our analysis, every kind of (managerial) training is an identity regulation device and can be studied as such. Further research could thus enrich our repertoire of specific practices of identity regulation.

Our findings are limited to the single case study of a managerial training program. The managers interviewed were recruited on a voluntary basis, and as such, we did not meet managers that did not identify with the identity-regulation discourse provided during the training; the program’s participants were all very positive about this discourse. Nevertheless, without assigning a general validity to our findings, we hope that it may provide elements for a theoretical generalization. As Feldman and Orlikowsky note about the use of practice theory: “Although each context of study is different, the dynamics and relations that have been identified and theorized can be useful in understanding other contexts. In this way, theoretical generalizations are powerful because they travel” (2011:1349). For example, further research could refine and extend the range of micro-practices identified in this paper through the analysis of other identity regulation opportunities, such as interviews and meetings between a manager and his subordinates or other kinds of trainings based on different topics and pedagogies. Such research would produce valuable insights that would

allow us to better comprehend how new modes of control (of the “inside” of individuals) are performed and resisted.

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ⁱ In the paper, data from observations are labeled T1 and 2 for the two trainings studied and MC1 to 3 for the ‘managers’ coffee’. Interviews are signaled by E1 or E2. E1 refers to a first interview realized with a manager, E2 to the second realized with the same manager (usually four to six months after the first).