



# Making space for ambiguity: Rethinking organizational identification from a career perspective



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## ABSTRACT

This paper argues that organizational identification is more ambiguous than currently depicted in the literature, especially as people try to make sense of their multiple organizational affiliations over the course of their careers. Based on the detailed analysis of ex-consultants' career narratives, and especially the interplay of multiple, partly conflicting positioning practices through which they express proximity and/or distance towards a past and present working context, this study provides a nuanced understanding of how ambiguous organizational identifications arise in the first place. Rather than problematizing these ambiguous identifications as undesirable for organizations and their members, the study aspires to make space for ambiguity by rethinking identification from a career perspective which is sensitive to aspects of temporality and change, thereby providing a more dynamic conceptualization of organizational identification in the contemporary workplace.

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## 1. Introduction

Organizational identification is often referred to as people's psychological attachment to a specific organization, assuming that "[m]embers become attached to their organizations when they incorporate the characteristics they attribute to their organization into their self-concepts" (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994: 241–242). Organizations often encourage such attachments, not least because they are associated with better performance outcomes, employee commitment and positive evaluations of the organization. As Ashforth, Harrison and Corley (2008) rightly point out however, it may seem odd to speak of organizational identification in times of much-discussed societal upheavals and disruptions, where loyalties and long-term relationships – also between individuals and organizations – gradually erode (Braham, 1987; Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Marks, 1988). This trend is reflected as well in people's professional career trajectories which are no longer characterized by continuous employment and upward mobility within a single firm (Hall, 2002), but rather by numerous career changes and thus a great variety of professional experiences across different organizations. To partly account for these conditions, the literature on organizational identification has moved into the direction of framing identification as a 'verb' and 'process of becoming' rather than as a 'noun' or 'fixed state'. A process-model

highlights how organizational identifications steadily evolve, momentarily fluctuate and potentially change as individuals link their own self-image to the image of an organization (Ashforth et al., 2008; Scott, Corman, & Cheney, 1998).

And yet, even when taking into account that people's organizational affiliations change dynamically over time, there seems to be no literature which systematically investigates how people make sense of multiple, possibly competing affiliations over the course of their careers. Instead, studies which have looked at organizational identification in the context of career change have mostly framed it as a linear process of gradually shifting identifications from one working context to another, namely by revising and altering previous identity positions, and by constructing and internalizing new ones (e.g. Ibarra, 1999; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). This understanding is based on the assumption that the salience of a past organization and the related sense of belonging fade with the passing of time (Mael & Ashforth, 1992), especially when a new organizational setting becomes more prominent for identification.

Counter to this depiction of fading attachments in the course of career change, the literature on alumni identifications has above all emphasized continued positive identification with a past employer (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Bardon, Josserand, & Villesèche, 2015; Iyer, 1998; Iyer, Bamber, & Barefield, 1997; Lennox & Park, 2007), supported by empirical studies which indicate that the length of time elapsed after leaving a firm does not have to be negatively related to continued organizational identification (Iyer et al., 1997).

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These studies take a particular interest in the supposedly positive implications of continued alumni identification, where companies are expected to benefit when previous employees, as a valuable marketing resource, recommend the company to others or even become clients who generate new revenues (Bardon et al., 2015; Denney, 1983; Iyer, 1998; Iyer et al., 1997; Lennox & Park, 2007). Alumni in return are deemed to continuously benefit from the prestige of their former employer, continued intellectual stimulation as well as identity stability over time (Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Pickett, 1986).

Both these literatures, on changing identifications in the course of career change or continued identifications in the post-exit arena, do not take into consideration the possibility of multiple positionings (Kuhn, 2009) and multiple organizational identifications (Ellis & Ybema, 2010) as people reflect upon their overall career trajectories. So in order to account for a greater variety, in this paper I set out to shed more light on people's multiple and potentially ambiguous identifications over the course of their careers. More concretely, I investigate the identification processes of former management consultants as they reflect upon past and future career moves, thereby addressing the question: *How do ex-consultants' multiple and potentially conflicting positionings towards their consulting past as well as their current employer invite ambiguous identifications as they reflect upon their careers more broadly?*

To investigate this question empirically, I studied the career narratives (Christensen & Johnston, 2003) of 30 ex-consultants. The analysis indicates that interviewees engaged in multiple positioning practices, which in their interplay resulted in more or less ambiguous accounts concerning their organizational affiliations and overall career trajectories. By zooming in on seven particular interplays of positioning practices, the paper highlights that an unambiguous positive (or negative) identification with either the past or the present is rather the exception, while most interplays indicate some form of ambiguity. In addition to providing a first detailed overview on how different types of ambiguity come into being through different interplays of positioning practices – an analysis which is so far missing in the literature, the interpretation of results contributes to a more time-sensitive and dynamic conceptualization of organizational identification in the contemporary workplace. It underlines that identification in the present is very often linked as well to previous and future identifications, thereby suggesting that identification in the present is a hybrid production (Van Laer & Janssens, 2014) which always draws on past and future resources (Ybema, 2004, 2010), especially as people reflect upon the overall course of their careers.

In the following I will review the literature around organizational identification and give first indications of how identifications may be more varied and conflicted than currently assumed, especially as people reflect upon their identifications in light of their career paths. In the conceptual framework I will elaborate upon the theorization of ambiguous organizational identifications through the interplay of various and partly conflicting positioning practices in people's career narratives which takes note of multiplicity, contradiction and change, thereby providing a solid ground for better understanding ambiguous identifications in the context of changing careers.

## 2. Ambiguous organizational identifications along the career path

As we know from the literature on organizational identification more generally, there may be a range of different ways in which individuals connect to or distance their own self-image from that of an organization (Garcia & Hardy, 2007), often in

multiple, ambivalent and conflicted ways (Larson & Pepper, 2003; Maguire & Hardy, 2005). Since individuals and organizations continuously create and re-create themselves in highly reflexive processes of interpretation and enactment (Goffman, 1959), identification tends to be dynamic and diverse (Humphreys & Brown, 2002). In order to capture this diversity, Elsbach (1999) suggested different processes of individual-organization relations, including positive identification, disidentification and schizo-identification. While positive identification signifies the degree to which people define themselves in terms of their membership to an organization, dis-identification respectively indicates the degree to which a person defines herself as not sharing the same characteristics that she believes define the organization (see also Hogg & Terry, 2000; Turner 1985; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987).

While plenty of studies have investigated examples of positive organizational identification (e.g. Bamber & Iyer, 2002; Dutton et al., 1994; Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Van Knippenberg & Sleebos, 2006) or dis-identification (e.g. Elsbach & Bharracharya, 2001; Holmer-Nadesan, 1996; Kärreman & Spicer, 2009), in this paper I take a particular interest in the less widely explored phenomenon of ambiguous identification, also referred to as conflicted, ambivalent or schizo-identification (Elsbach, 1999; Humphreys & Brown, 2002; Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004; Pratt, 2000). Ambiguous identification describes a process in which people simultaneously identify and dis-identify with certain aspects of an organization and its identity narrative. While a person may be pulled towards identification on one dimension and towards dis-identification on another, she may also be pulled however into two opposing directions regarding the same aspect of the organization. The explanation for this is that organizational phenomena tend to be multifaceted, complex and loosely coupled so that one can easily have mixed feelings about a single aspect, leading to ambivalent or conflicted forms of identification (Elsbach, 1999; Humphreys & Brown, 2002; Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004).

Even though Elsbach's (1999) expanded model of organizational identification provides a more nuanced picture of organizational attachments than most studies that exclusively focus on processes of attaining positive organizational identification or dis-identification, the model does not explain the variations of how multiple, ambiguous identifications may arise in the first place. Moreover, with a focus on identifications in the context of single organizations, the model does not account for people's multiple identifications over the course of their careers. And yet, it can be assumed that particularly when people reflect upon their overall careers, organizational identifications become even more numerous and ambiguous, drawing attention to changing, competing or simultaneous organizational affiliations. Beyer and Hannah (2002) for example observed that career changers describe their identities as both being based in the past as well as in the present. As career changers start to feel emotionally disengaged and separated from their former employer, they may at the same time not have developed an attachment to the new organization (Rossiter, 2009). Instead, "people oscillate between 'holding on' and 'letting go', between a desire to rigidly clutch or grieve for the past and the impulse to rush exuberantly into the future" (Ibarra, 2005: 26).

This state of 'in-betweenness' may especially be observed among former management consultants as they come from 'ambiguity-intensive' organizations in the first place (Alvesson, 1993, 2001). On the one hand, management consultancies seem to be successful in terms of eliciting strong positive identifications among their employees through discourses of elitism (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006; Armbrüster, 2004; Gill, 2015) so that people who exit the consultancy show signs of 'post-exit loyalty' (Alvesson, 2000) and express continued identification through their membership in alumni-networks (Bardon et al., 2015; Sturdy & Wright,

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