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Identity struggle, professional development and career

A career/life history of a human resource management professional

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Abstract

Purpose – Through a single-person career/life history of a human resource (HR) manager, the purpose of this paper is to illuminate the relationship between professional identity and “being” a manager in the context of a “whole life”.

Design/methodology/approach – The approach of this paper is to use an extended interview with a single HR management professional to consider the complexities and discontinuities of managing a professional and personal life. The interview is considered in light of Alvesson’s seven images of self-identity.

Findings – Managers are constantly negotiating a professional identity, “being” a manager and a career in the context of their whole life. In developing managers in an increasingly stressful and competitive environment, the intersection between the various elements of a manager’s life should be taken into account.

Research limitations/implications – Closer attention should be paid to the lives of managers in the context of their identity and careers. Research should more closely consider, in detail, the lived experiences of managers and professionals.

Practical implications – Management development should focus on lived experiences of managers rather than competency and skill development. Managerial performance is related to the coping and sensemaking that occurs within specific contexts and management development professionals should focus more on these aspects of a “managerial life”.

Originality/value – The value of the paper is in highlighting the importance of very focussed and very personal management development.

Keywords Being a manager, Career, Career/life history, Professional identity

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Through a single-person career/life history (Tierney, 1998) of a human resource (HR) manager this paper seeks to illuminate the relationship between professional identity and “being” a manager. In particular, through applying Alvesson’s (2010) “seven images of self-identity” to a career/life history we hope to show empirically how a manager is faced with a struggle for identity as they seek to negotiate a successful career in the context of the ebb and flow of a whole life. In focussing on a single life history our objective is to highlight the ebb and flow of professional experience, its relationship to career as bounded (King et al., 2005), professional development and the struggle for identity by which it is characterized. Our argument is that while a professional person has choices in the pursuit of a career they are constrained, not only by the materiality of their life, but also by discourses that shape what they should want and what they have to “be” (du Gay, 1994; McKenna, 2010). The contribution of this paper is to the literature that highlights the complexity, uncertainty, discontinuity and ambiguity of managerial and professional lives and work. More specifically it shows the manner in which individuals negotiate their way through their lived
experiences in order to maintain a coherent professional identity, professional success and personal fulfillment. Identity, we suggest, is therefore constructed in an ongoing way, through many agentic choices and socio-cultural and economic influences that shape how an individual makes sense of their professional and personal life.

Identity

We apply the lenses of Alvesson’s (2010) “seven images of self-identity” to the professional lived experience of Betty[1], a HR manager, as reflected in an extended interview narrative. The concept of identity has been a major area of concern for scholars in recent years (Albert et al., 2000; Alvesson, 2010; Beech, 2008; Collinson, 2003; McKenna, 2010; Rhodes, 2000; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Watson, 2008, 2009). The questions of Who am I? What should I be? How should I be it? Why is it I should be this way?, are all questions that managers and professionals may ask themselves from time to time through their internal conversations (Archer, 2003). They may ask these questions about their professional roles and the relationship between their professional roles, professional goals and other aspects of their lives. The answers to these questions are not simply generated through personal choice and agency. Identity is also subject to both the influence of structure and discourses as well as personal agency and construction.

The use of “images” or “metaphors” to understand and interpret organizational phenomena and managerial and professional lives is not new and can help to construct a fuller understanding of individual and organizational experiences (Morgan, 1997; Inkson, 2007). In this paper, first, we outline Alvesson’s (2010) images of self-identity. Second, we examine Betty’s extended interview as an exemplar of a career/life history in light of Alvesson’s images of identity. We focus on the insights we can gain into professional identity in the context of her lived experiences as Betty seeks to develop a cohesive, integrated and successful whole life. Third, we consider the career/life history of Betty in relation to the intersection between professional identity, professional development and career to highlight the complex, discontinuous, uncertain and ambiguous nature of managerial and professional “being” (du Gay, 1994; McKenna, 2010). Finally, we offer a discussion.

Images of self-identity

Alvesson (2010) identifies seven images that can be derived from the work on identity prevalent in the literature: self-doubters, strugglers, surfers, storytellers, strategists, stencils, soldiers. He distinguishes between them in a fluid way along two dimensions. First, images where the individual predominates in the construction of their identity – strategists, storytellers and strugglers – and images where a “force” (context, discourse, structure, “messy world”) imputes or imposes an identity that a person partly or wholly has to accept – self-doubters, surfers, soldiers and stencils. The second dimension differentiates images depending on the degree to which an identity is coherent, robust and has a direction – more likely strategists, storytellers, soldiers and stencils – and those images that emphasize an insecure, ambiguous and fluid identity – surfers, self-doubters and strugglers.

The self-doubter identity is one that highlights insecurity and anxiety. It might be apparent in the manner in which a person doubts their worth and efficacy through their experiences in life, or as a professional doubts their worth to an organization. A key question/issue for the self-doubter is “Can I find who it is I am”? The struggler image implies more agency than the self-doubter where the identity constructor is engaged in
“more active efforts [...] fighting through a jungle of contradictions and messiness in
the pursuit of a sense of self” (Alvesson, 2010, p. 200). The struggler confronts the
question of “Who am I?” with the answer, “I will struggle to find out.”

The surfer image points to the serial construction of a person within a range of
discourses, structures and messiness that impact their lives. A person becomes who
they need to be at any given time; their self-identity has no central core neither is it
integrated not particularly coherent. The question is not so much, “Who am I?” but
“What do I need to be at this given moment?” The fourth image is the storyteller.
Storytellers construct life narratives to build a robust and coherent identity and to
create a sense of direction. Answering the question, “Who am I?” the storyteller
answers with an attempt at a firm narrative saying “This is who I am” derived from
“how I view my past, experience my present and see the future” (Dauite and Lightfoot,
2004; Down and Reveley, 2009; Watson, 2009).

Whereas the surfer tends to go with the discursive flow in the construction of their
identities, the strategist is fully in control of the identity they wish to exude. Alvesson
(2010, p. 212) notes that a strategist, “tries to craft a sense of self that is then to be
mobilized for the accomplishment of a personal or collective objective.” The question of
“Who am I?” is here replaced by “This is who I want to be.” A professional/manager
operating as a strategist would be working to construct a suitable identity to achieve
the goals and objectives they have in mind. The stencil identity is created by forces
external to the individual. The individual is interpellated (Althusser, 2001), subjectified
or scripted (Alvesson, 2010) and are an effect of discourse operating at a macro level
(Alvesson and Karreman, 2000). The stencil is not choosing to adjust to what is
required, they are simply produced – “This is what I have to be.” Somewhat similarly
the soldier image emphasizes compliance. The loyal soldier or the professionally
committed zealot, however, surrenders a sense of self-identity to the harmony of the
unit or the profession.

It seems reasonable to assume that a professional/manager might represent
their experience in such a way that all of these images have some relevance in
understanding how a professional identity is discontinuously formed in organizational
and other contexts. We attempt to show this using Betty as our exemplar, and so utilize
Alvesson’s (2010) images of self-identity as a tool of analysis. We are not concerned to
identify the meaning of “identity.” We assume that an individual is a self and social
construction put together from the experiences of life as it is lived.

Methodology
This paper is a single-person career/life history. According to Watson and
Watson-Franke (1985, p. 2) a “life history is any retrospective account by the individual
of his (sic) life in whole or part, in written or oral form, that has been elicited or
prompted by another person.” In an important text Dollard (1935, p. 3) asserted that
a life history is “an attempt to define the growth of a person in a cultural milieu and
to make theoretical sense of it.” What is important is the relationship between an
individual and his/her socio-cultural, political, economic, organizational and personal
context in shaping a life story and a life history.

In using the life history approach we seek to come to terms with Betty’s reality;
how can we understand the ebb and flow of her life and its relationship to the way
professional identity and career is shaped? How can this approach ensure that “we are
not all assimilated into one mainstream sameness” (Tierney, 1998, p. 51) but that
recognize unique experiences that shape and define us and who we are professionally
and personally? Tierney (1998) identifies two “competing conceptions of life history” (p. 58). The first is life history as portal. Here, the researcher attempts to gain insight into aspects of a person’s life as an “objective” account of the way they live. Second, life history as process; here we (as researchers) are interested in the cacophony of a life (Tierney, 1998). The career/life history permits a more descriptive perspective as to how people cope and make sense of their life in a distinctive way.

In this paper we combine life history as portal and process. We want the reader of this paper to “feel” Betty’s identity and career struggles as a process that she experiences, but also to view it through Alvesson’s (2010) framework for self-identity. Betty’s career/life history may tell us something about her life, but also something about the lives of others (and our own) in the complex, competitive contemporary world. Following Tierney (1998, p. 66), we feel that our “job is to situate the interview so that particular experiences of people are shown in relation to the cultural and social worlds in which they exist.” Our job, we feel, is not to generalize from Betty, or fragment her into parts, but to emphasize Betty’s unique lived experiences such that it might resonate with others or be suggestive of forces and pressures that, although a factor in the lives of many professionals, stimulate different responses, reactions and sensemaking in different people.

As a method the life history approach requires extended in-depth interviews in which we wish to prompt the participant to engage in “thick description” about their lives (Geertz, 1983). Within a single in-depth interview we focus on our key themes of professional identity, career, a “whole” life and “being” an HR manager. In analyzing Betty’s interview, Alvesson’s (2010) images of self-identity provides a frame within which we could locate the data. It enabled contextualization of the data within the personal choices and social and career norms that operated to influence Betty’s identity. In the following sections of the paper we hope to show how aspects of Betty’s career/life history unfold through her “thick description” in ways that allow us to say something about professional and managerial life at a practical level.

Betty
Betty is a senior HR professional and manager working in the technology industry. She is 30 years old, married with no children but has two dogs. She has eight years of professional HR experience in a variety of industries including manufacturing, finance and IT. In the following we investigate elements of Betty’s extended interview through the images of identity, identifying potentially overlapping interpretations between the images within each segment.

Interview segment 1
Betty and her husband are clearly career-oriented individuals. They travel extensively with their work, yet Betty has other interests that she would like to pursue:

So I spend about 25% of my time probably travelling, ummm, and the fact that obviously my husband has a job too and he also travels so that has been difficult [...] Which for last week was a real pain. Umm, you know we don’t have kids but I have two dogs and I have a house and I have responsibilities and things that I like to pursue outside of the office, and I found that those things are really going by the wayside. So like last week I was in San Francisco he was in Vancouver, the dogs were in the kennel. I come back we have a $500 bill from the kennel for the dogs like it is just you know, tough, hmm and with school. School has been a major part of what we have been doing together (Betty is completing a Masters in Human Resource Management). He did his MBA part time. And as soon as he had finished his MBA
part time I started at * part time. So for the last four years one of us has been going to school part time, as well as obviously both of us working full time. So it has been tough.

Betty and her husband are a contemporary dual-career couple, struggling to achieve the type of personal and professional circumstances deemed to be successful by society. Betty indicates a strong sense of striving for goals related to her career that are privileged over her desire to do other things and fulfill her responsibilities outside of work. There is a sense that her identity is connected very much to success at work, and that other important aspects of who she is are “really going by the wayside.” This struggling, however, should be put in the context of why this struggle occurs. Betty appears as a strategist with an appreciation of what is required (Masters degree, preparedness to be mobile) in order to craft an appropriate business identity.

**Interview segment 2**

Further along in the interview Betty talks about her current professional life:

> So, I am down the chain but not so far down the chain in terms of seniority I suppose. I think I am like halfway in the grade structure or something. So, umm, we have, we have fairly senior roles in the organization as business partners. I think it is an organization that values human resources. It is an organization that sees the strategic value that we are bringing and we have good partnerships with the business. So compared to other organizations where I have been, I don’t know a catch all for things, or we focused on compliance; here it is not what it is about.

There is a sense that Betty has a clear idea of what the role of an HR professional should be, and also identifies with her current organization because it recognizes the importance of the role of human resources. This suggests an identity as a soldier. Not only does her organization require her to be a “business partner” and “strategic,” but this is the role she is performing and wants to perform. There is a fit between Betty’s idea of what professional HR identity is and the identity/role she currently has in the organization. She is professionally and personally aligned to this organization – it “has the structure right.” What also appears relevant here is Betty’s identity as a storyteller. It is perhaps important for her sense of efficacy and self-worth to narrate that she is in this positive professional space, reporting that she has a purposeful self-identity connected to her profession. The image of self-identity apparent here is different from that in interview segment 1, which implied that while in the broad ebb and flow of “balancing” work life with a dual-career relationship and other aspects of life, identity issues become complex and confused. Isolating and compartmentalizing her professional and working life Betty describes a “fit” between her professional and organizational identity. This is further exemplified in the following comment:

> I would say what is working is that I have a good relationship with the business. What is working is that I feel like I am in an organization that values what I do. Umm, I feel like I am able to make, umm, I feel like there is an impact to what I do. And, and I am committed to that. I like coming to work. Which is, you know, more than what I think most people can say most days.

Betty is emphasizing her fit with her professional and organizational context; she also narrates a sense of worth, efficacy and purpose (Baumeister and Newman, 1994). But her identity as a soldier and storyteller is not necessarily fixed. It is important to note that both the fit a person might feel between their “selves” and their organizational and professional context, and the story they might tell to create their current identity is inevitably precarious, subject to change quickly. An individual who has an identity as a soldier can quite easily become a self-doubter given the nature of the rapid changes
that take place in organizational life and how individuals perceive such change. This might be the case particularly for middle managers (Willmott, 1997). For example, Betty is currently based in Canada, but her American employers have indicated that in order to advance her career she will need to relocate to the USA:

So you have articulated (to the employer) that you would like to progress, but you cannot progress in Canada. They don’t want to be supported out of Canada they want to be supported out of the US. We think you are the right person to do it but in Canada you can’t do it. So if you want to stay in Canada this is the area you get to play. And that is basically it. You hit the proverbial glass ceiling.

Umm, I think on one hand I understand what they are saying. I get it. On the other hand here is something personal about, umm, being told that you know, that the country that I am from, where I am, is not good enough. I think that I know it is the right thing from a career standpoint, I don’t know if it is the right thing from a personal standpoint, so that is really what I am struggling with.

Betty articulates the precariousness of the soldier identity and takes a different direction in narrating her story. In a very short space within the interview she exemplifies the unstable nature of identity and the boundedness of a career (King et al., 2005). The stability and value of her role and her fit with the organization (soldier) clashes with her desire for achievement (strategist). In order to fulfill her need for achievement she will need to make choices in a broader, yet constrained context defined by her organization. In this sense she will need to become a stencil, partly surrendering her identity and “self” in order to realize her goals. This requirement pushes her into struggle and self-doubt. She reveals, in the extended interview, some anxiety in the face of her professional needs and organizational forces. This indicates how fluid and changeable identities are when confronted with choices to be made within a context of constraining external forces, structures and discourses. There is an element of self-doubt apparent here as Betty’s sense of whom she is and whom she wants to be clashes with the requirements of her organization, an external force. This collision of identity “construction” and identity “constructed” is at the heart of this segment of Betty’s interview. Moreover, there is a crucial “face off” between the individual “doing” identity and having identity “done” to them. Fitting an organization requires a stencil type identity done to them and a willingness, in some part, to be scripted by the organization.

Interview segment 3

While Betty has alluded to her relationship with her husband much of the first part of the interview concerns her self-identity in the specific context of her professional life. Identities though are also thought about, changed and shaped by relationships of all kinds in which we are implicated and connected; in other words, by significant others. Identities are related to our roles and relationships. In a close personal relationship(s), people may often think about their identity in terms of their relationship with significant others (Berger, 1963). The seven images of identity are equally applicable to identity construction as a consequence of these relationships. We can construct an identity within those relationships, or can have an identity constructed by what is normalized as appropriate roles and identities for certain kinds of relationship (mother, father, wife, etc.). Given that a move to New York (and therefore out of Canada) is one possibility in order for Betty to achieve her career goals, the opinion of her husband about such a move is relevant:

So he would be fine to move to New York from a career standpoint. He likes the idea. He would like me to go so that he could come. He likes the idea of moving to New York. But,
ummm, he just applied for a PhD […] And we will find out by the middle of next month where and if he got it.

Umm, but we are kind of at that weird crossroads right. We are waiting to see. I mean we kind of will have the decision made for us in a sense that if he gets into a ******** school we will stay in ********. If he gets into a US school he won’t do his PhD and maybe we will go to New York. I am still not totally sold on New York he is more sold on it than I am.

The identity of an individual is wrapped up with the concerns of and about others. In the case of Betty and her husband we might suggest that they are strategizing how they both might achieve their individual goals within a relationship. The self-doubt and struggle arise because a stencil largely determines “what I should be.” This argument suggests that there are powerful agents, structures and discourses that provide clear direction for identity construction for middle managers and professionals in the contemporary business environment. The need for achievement, to have goals, to be ambitious, is a precariously constructed subjectivity, a form of regulation of professionals and managers to ensure that they do what is required to support the requirements of a business organization. This pressure to conform may induce identity self-doubt and struggle but the identity itself and the characteristics of it may serve a purpose beyond the individual. Middle managers such as Betty are enjoined to develop an achievement orientation and it renders her periodically anxious and fearful in a way that enhances her commitment to strive, to not fail, to not “fall.” This, in turn, serves as a form of identity regulation through self-disciplining to ensure that middle managers offer, “trust and cooperation” to the organization (Willmott, 1997, p. 1354; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002).

Interview segment 4
We have consistently alluded to the fluid and dynamic nature of the images of identity and how they enjoy a complex and changing interaction as played out in the life of one HR professional. It is also probable that when confronted with an identity construction that does not fit who they wish to be agentic humans will, if possible, reject and resist such a construction. This discussion concerns the interface between identity construction and identity constructed. In her interview Betty gave an excellent exemplar from her past of the fluidity, dynamism and complexity of identity:

The easiest way to say that I like my job is to compare it to the place where I used to be, right? Umm, that is probably for me the easiest way to make the comparison.

Interviewer: So how do you know, when we talk through say your previous experience, and we talk through what wasn’t working for you there could you identify that you were unhappy in these moments?

Yeah

Interviewer: So how did you know that?

Because I cried. Because I always felt, I always felt beaten up. So at the end of every day I just felt drained. And I felt like no matter how much I did or what I did I would always feel that way. Umm, I also felt like I didn’t have any measure controls. So again this goes back to the reporting relationship. I reported into the business. So how are you going to, how are you supposed to negotiate with someone around what is right and what is unhappiness wrong when you report to them, right? So how are you supposed to influence someone that ultimately has power over you from, from, so that power dynamic was very skewed.
So I always felt like I was never in a position to stand up for myself because that wasn’t the structure of the organization. And it was very demoralizing, it was very demotivating and so when I say I went home and cried I had these meetings and they went terribly, terribly badly and I’d just go home and think like, what am I going to do, I mean right? There is nothing, there was nothing positive, there was no feeling of forward momentum or accomplishment. So, umm, it was more in the moment it was very easy to identify how bad you feel that how good you feel.

How did I get there? So, umm, I had been for a large portion of my career in unionized manufacturing. That is where I started out and I decided to make the transition. I wanted to do something different and it is tough to make that transition, it is not easy an easy transition to make I mean, you are a tech company you want to hire tech based. I mean it is a difficult transition. So, I had a friend that used to be a recruiter that she knew, and she had a friend and blah, blah, blah. In any case, so, I got a job at a financial services firm as their director of HR.

Betty offers an exemplar of identity self-doubt and struggle; a period in her career of not knowing who she was, feeling a lack of worth, efficacy and purpose. Yet these feelings of anxiety and uncertainty and the identity that accompanied them were related to decisions and choices she made through attempting to develop a strategic identity, to make a “career transition” that would make her CV more “acceptable.” Her felt need to conform, to “be” a particular kind of HR professional, with the appropriate experience on her CV, caused a collision between the push of a career orientation and the achievement discourse, and the pull of an agentic strategically oriented individual. The result appears to have been a collapse of identity, a sense of worthlessness, purposelessness, anomie, isolation and alienation. She was not a loyal soldier in this organization, there was no harmony or fit present. There was no “dependable source of self-identity and security, there is always the risk and/or the anticipation, of de-objectification” (Willmott, 1997, p. 1346). Without social identification Betty was left bereft of a coherent HR professional identity, and was “unhappy.”

This existential insecurity, fear of failure, fear of falling, of going soft and of inner weakness is evident as the interview continues (Ehrenreich, 1989). Betty hated her work with the financial services company; she had no identification with it, felt professionally worthless and organizationally alienated. This context created an identity of self-doubt, while this crisis of identity perpetuated a dis-identification (Costas and Fleming, 2009) with the context:

I couldn’t quit and say I tried for eight weeks, it didn’t work. I couldn’t go back to where I had been because that would be admitting defeat. Right? It would be like saying I wasn’t able to make the transition. It would be like saying I made a mistake. I mean like, I wasn’t going to do that. Because I am in HR I should be smarter than that. What type of person takes a job that isn’t a good fit? What type of HR person fails to see the warning signs? What type of, what would they say about how good I am at my job? What would that say about me? So, umm, I actually. How long did I last? One year and two days. It was just enough not to be, in my mind, not to be a failure.

Betty articulates self-doubt in these passages. But it is important to note that this expression of self-doubt is shaped by the stencil of a normalizing discourse. The measure of whether Betty had failed, or made a mistake, is a discourse that provides a guide to identity construction. She emphasizes that professionals in human resources should not make errors of judgment that HR professionals themselves warn against within a careerist discourse (Grey, 1994). As Willmott (1997, p. 1347) notes, as “sellers of labor, managers are typically and even obsessively concerned about their individual performance, job security, career prospects.” As Betty soon discovered in the financial
services company, she was expected to “be” something she was unable to be. She was caught between and alienated from the material requirements of her work in an organization and her fear of failure. Her idea of what her professional identity meant trumped her identification with the organization. However, while she was not prepared to be a soldier or a surfer, accepting any identity that was required, she was a stencil, accepting the identity constructed by the normalizing discourse of professional careerism. Her self-doubt was related to resistance to one social identity (being a soldier) through commitment to construction by another (being a stencil of the normalizing discourse of career, achievement, fear of failure, ambition).

There then followed an interesting exchange between the interviewer and Betty:

**Interviewer:** But really who would it have been a defeat for. If you had said, you know, I had been backpacking in Africa for the last two months rather than admit that I worked here. I mean you know what I mean? Did you think that through?

**Betty:** So I made, so I gave myself goals. Right? So one of the things I had done is I applied for the Masters in *** at ******** University. So I thought, OK, well, if I get in and I still hate it I can say I quit to go to school full time. And I can go to school full time for a semester or two and then I can say I did that. It was all about rationalizing when someone asks you the question, what are you going to say so that you can spin it in a way that you can live with. Because I can’t live with saying I failed. I just couldn’t do it. So I just strung myself along.

Even within a situation that has created self-doubt, particularly about her worth and efficacy, Betty is aware enough to think about how she can “spin” a positive situation from a potentially difficult career circumstance. Underneath this “spin,” however, is a disciplining power, the power of the career-oriented achievement discourse, as a force that shapes how Betty will respond to the situation she is in and that enables her to cope with the prospect of “failure” and the anxieties that this induces in her. She is “rendered anxious about [her] career prospects” (Willmott, 1997, p. 1354) and is controlled by it to the extent that it shapes how she confronted future situations. After being “let go” by the financial services company Betty was much more careful in ensuring that she made the “right choice” in her next job. She was very careful to ensure that there was a fit between her and the organization; thinking very strategically about who she was relative to where she worked within the context of not wanting to “fail” again. She engaged in a process of personal reflection and development, as exhibited in this passage:

With this job I interviewed, I interviewed with every company in the entire city, and I had job offers and I was like “NO”. No, because I didn’t have a good feeling and my husband was like “Betty”, like, you are really, no because I didn’t have a good feeling and I stayed true and I am not doing it. No because he did ask A and B and it was equal to X, Y and Z and I mean I was so overly cautious and I as, umm, so careful. I think more carefully than I ever had before. Because I still see that one year on my resume as a real failure and because of that I was like the next one I better knock it out of the park, right?

**Interview segment 5**

In this phase of the interview there is extended conversation about Betty’s personal life and professional life. In all sorts of ways the intersection of personal life and professional life is important for self-identity: the social identification of mother, father, husband, wife and what it is to be these things in a North American world of dual-career partnerships, have the potential to create anxieties, insecurities and uncertainties. While both Betty and her husband appear to have identities constructed within the context of careerism and achievement, which causes contradictions and demands, at another level
she is able to compartmentalize her personal and professional life. She notes that while she can control her personal life she has little control over her professional and working life. This is important because it implies a separation or fragmentation of identity(ies) rather than an integration:

But I guess I have always felt like I am very happy personally. And you know, my husband has a good job and we have a nice house and have cute dogs and we go on nice vacations. Things are good. So I guess I have never really thought about being defeated in that area. Because. Like. I met my husband when I was an undergraduate. I mean we have been together for eleven years. Like of course, we are not getting a divorce. It is just foreign to me. Umm he has an MBA, and he has a good job, we have a nice house and so, we are not going to be defeated in that area, maybe it is just that I have never felt defeat in that area so I don’t know how it feels. Whereas I have felt defeat in my career, so I am so much more cognizant of it. I have never felt defeat in my personal life. Ever. Umm, I have been with the same person for so long. We are so happy together and I don’t know any other way. And so it is not something I am scared of. Whereas I felt defeat in my career so I am scared of that. I am actively trying to do things to avoid that. Whereas my personal life is like on autopilot.

Betty’s concern with “failure” and “defeat” is apparent in this quote. It is brimful of anxiety, fear of “defeat” and what this represents in terms of “weakness” and “softness.” Her professional identity is wrapped up in achievement, success, challenge, “winning.” Her personal life offers her security, a freedom from anxiety and an acceptable middle-class professional marriage. Her marriage also reflects an identity built on the normalizing discourse of the professional “partnership”; a career-oriented couple with “normal” professional anxieties. As two strugglers Betty and her husband deal with their professional existential insecurities within a relationship ideally suited to the postmodern organizational environment (McKenna, 1999a, b). Betty’s identity struggles cannot stand outside of the “messy world” in which they take place. She struggles, strategizes, has self-doubt, becomes a soldier, is a stencil, surfs and constructs a story all, to some extent, at the same time. Identity is constructed and the construction of identity ultimately takes place “inside” a given world because there is no “outside” within which it can be constructed. However, the nature of the given world(s) is varied and complex. Everything is bounded, nothing is boundaryless.

Discussion
The construction of an identity occurs “inside” a given world because it cannot occur “outside.” An important issue in discussions about identity is the nature of this “inside” within which identity work is undertaken. There has been a move away from the psychological concept of the “essential self,” the idea that an identity is constructed internally without reference to the context in which it unfolds. We suggest that individuals such as Betty and her husband are: professional, middle-class, achievement-oriented Canadians in a dual-career relationship, and that they can be viewed as both identity constructors and products of identity formation and regulation. Using Alvesson’s (2010) proposed seven images of self-identity, we have sought to show how all seven images can be used to interpret aspects of Betty’s professional and personal life as she describes it in the interview.

As Betty experiences professional and personal life she will experience self-doubt about who she is; struggle to establish who she is; will sometimes strategize about who she wants to be; sometimes find a fit with an organization and her professional identity and become a soldier; resist being interpellated as a stencil; fluctuate occasionally as a surfer; and tell stories about herself that creates coherence. We also argue, however,
following Foucault (1995) that there is a dominant discourse, a regime of truth that calls Betty, as part of the professional middle class, to want certain things and to “be” a certain way. This discourse normalizes this identity for Betty, alternatives are simply inconceivable as well as “abnormal.” A rejection of this professional, middle-class identity and what is involved can only happen with a rejection of the tenets with which it is associated: the achievement orientation, careerism, consumerism and ambition. Identity is constructed in the way we have been shown to think (Sarup, 1996). The idea of a career in this context is bounded.

To this extent we agree with Willmott (1997) that the business system requires a certain kind of (middle) management subjectivity. While Betty may resist some identity regulation she resists “inside” the system. Some middle managers may be ambivalent about their position at work, feeling anxious and precarious and insecure, but this is what is centrally important in “capital’s circuit of control” (Willmott, 1997, p. 1354). Managers, such as Betty are required to strive. Their anxieties and insecurities serve to ensure that striving, doing better, never failing remains critical to who they are, and critical to their role as managers, for it is here, doing this work, that they derive their status which they are so anxious to protect, and it is this type of managerial “being” which is important for the business system itself.

We acknowledge that we are imposing an interpretation on to and about Betty. She is in many ways a product of and relevant for the postmodern business environment. She and her husband are representatives of a particular kind of modern western professional employee engaged in a struggle for a particular kind of identity. However, aspects of this struggle are precarious and stressful. It is also developmental and reflects the psychological and material boundedness of career “progression.” Choices are made by professionals like Betty in the context of their whole lives, but they are always made within a context(s). Professional and managerial development is as much about coping with and negotiating ways through these complex and difficult choices as it is about doing the job of a manager itself. In management development there continues to be a need to confront openly these vulnerabilities in order to assist managers to cope with the increasingly intense global business environment. This is particularly the case as managers and professionals think through and strategize about their careers. There is an interplay between shifting identities, shaped identities and career choices, constraints and opportunities. A poor career choice can have a negative impact on a professional identity, inducing self-doubt and struggle. From both a research and practical perspective these issues need to be further considered.

We are also led to the question of what exactly is identity. Identity, as a tool of analysis, can be everything, something or nothing. Our point, however, is that individuals shape their identities in unique, ongoing ways. This applies to personal and professional identities and their intersection. This may be unsatisfying as an explanation, however, we suggest that professional and managerial identity is “less a rigid identity than a series of repeated performances that intersect at various times with other identities – social, cultural, racial, ethnic, and so on” (Tierney, 1998, p. 299). To which we might add class, gender and others. Moreover, “individual lives are constant constructs embedded in societal and cultural forces that seek to constrain some and enable others” (Tierney, 1998, p. 299). Betty is therefore, a work in progress, her career/life history unfolding multi-dimensionally within complex, uncertain times. This has implications for how managers are prepared for and developed in the contemporary business world because no “one temporal structure can express the multitude of experiences for all people, across all times” (Tierney, 1998, p. 304). Coping
and sensemaking is individual and unique. The way managers cope and make sense are directly pertinent to their ability and capability and, we believe, to how they perform and succeed.

Note
1. A pseudonym.

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**Further reading**


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