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On the dynamics of work identity in atypical employment:

Setting out a research agenda.

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Abstract

Starting from the notion that work is an important part of who we are, we extend existing theory making on the interplay of work and identity by applying them to (so called) atypical work situations. Without the contextual stability of a permanent organizational position, the question "who one is" will be more difficult to answer. At the same time, a stable occupational identity might provide an even more important orientation to one's career attitudes and goals in atypical employment situations. So, while atypical employment might pose different challenges on identity; identity can still be a valid concept to assist the understanding of behaviour, attitudes and well-being in these situations. Our analysis does not attempt to 'reinvent' the concept of identity, but will elaborate how existing conceptualisations of identity as being a multiple (albeit perceived as singular), fluid (albeit perceived as stable), and actively forged (as well as passively influenced) construct that can be adapted to understand the effects of atypical employment contexts. Furthermore, we suggest three specific ways to understand the longitudinal dynamics of the interplay between atypical employment and identity over time: passive incremental, active incremental and transformative change. We conclude with key learning points and outline a few practical recommendations for more research into identity as an explanatory mechanism for the effects of atypical employment situations.

Keywords: identity, identification, atypical work, non-normative employment .

On the dynamics of work identity in atypical employment: Setting out a research agenda.

At the outset of the paper, we issue a challenge to the state-of-the-art in work identity theory and research. We propose that current research on work identity - defined as the subjective meaning of who one is at work - is no longer sufficiently complete to represent the contemporary world of work. This statement is an observation on the nature of the research literature on work identity set against the context of changing times, in which atypical employment situations that in the past represented boundary conditions of work identity research, are now increasingly commonplace for workers.

Contexts of work are shifting radically. Increased economic as well as political uncertainty have led macro-economic forecasters to predict severe labour market repercussions in the intermediate future (International Monetary Fund, 2017). Stable, good quality employment will be more difficult to obtain and retain; and, due to rising inflation, jobs will offer lower incomes less able to cover the costs of living; requiring many people to take up multiple employment. Furthermore, developments in technology, advanced manufacturing, energy supplies, robotics, Big Data (to name a few), will continue to create novel types of jobs and eradicate others, while fundamentally changing the way, how, where and when we will work (Frey & Osborne, 2017; World Economic Forum, 2016). Job growth in the coming years is anticipated in work that "moves work beyond the boundary of the firm" (Spreitzer, Cameron, & Garrett, 2017, p. 474) and are likely to create atypical work situations.

We define atypical work the polar opposite of regular employment that consists of an open-ended, five-days a week work contract paying contributions to taxes and social security and being subject to national labour legislation and protection (Eurofound, 2017a). Regular work is usually with a single employer and may last for several years. Atypical work consists

of a variety of employment situations including: involuntary part-time, fixed-term work that mostly adheres to standard employment regulations; agency work (with three parties involved in the contractual arrangement); as well as ultra-short-term, zero-hours, on-call, digital platform-managed work that often departs from standard contractual obligations and employment protections (Eurofound, 2017a). For the purpose of this paper we will call all these types of jobs atypical forms of work. Defined along these lines, there has been a sharp increase in atypical work since the economic recession; for example (involuntary) part-time work in the European Union has risen to 20% of all work contracts (from 16% in 1996); with an increase in people working shortened weekly hours (Eurofound, 2017b). The very atypical, least regulated category of employment situations, are predicted to become more common in the near future (Spreitzer et al., 2017).

Atypical employment contexts bring new challenges (flexibility, variety) but also potential pitfalls (less protection, inconsistency, uncertainty) for workers (Spreitzer et al., 2017). Particularly, developing a sense of who one is in these contexts will be different to traditional organizational settings. Given the increasing participation of employees in atypical employment contexts, it is important that theory and research advances to capture and explain their identity experiences, to assist our understanding of work behaviour, attitudes, well-being and other critical outcomes.

The intention of this paper is to incorporate atypical work contexts into our existing understandings of work identity, and to make a compelling case for the developing of a research agenda in this area. In atypical work situations in particular, a positively evaluated identity will be more challenging to develop. But, having a clear sense of a work-related identity will be an important asset in atypical work as it can provide needed clarity and orientation lacking in the context. Furthermore, just as normality can often only be understood in contrast to the non-normal, investigating identity in atypical work contexts allows new perspectives on 'standard'

work contexts to be explored. In doing so, we would wish to inspire other researchers to include identity as a lens for examining behaviour and attitudes in today's radically shifting contexts of work.

The Importance of Work for Identity

Work and identity are inextricably connected. People spend around one third of their waking life at work; with work enabling them to 'be and become someone'. Identity is the answer to the question "Who am I" (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016, p. 113), with work contexts (job roles, organizations and occupations) providing further detail to this answer. Hence work not only provides regular income and social benefits (Jahoda, 1982), it offers an important place to learn about what one is able to do; which is fundamental to enhancing self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982). Moreover, having work is acknowledged to be central to a sense of social inclusion; of belonging to society (Sen, 2000). Work has an important self-reference function: identity scholars (e.g., Ashforth, Harrison & Corley, 2008) note that work indicates which social groups people belong and thereby helps define an individual's place in society (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Identity lies at the heart of the goals people set for themselves and expectations and values they have (e.g., Miscenko & Day, 2016; Van Knippenberg, 2000); thereby driving behaviour and attitudes. In traditional organizational settings, identity has been found to play a relevant role in determining motivation and performance (e.g., Van Knippenberg, 2000), attitudes (Van Dick, Van Knippenberg, Kerschreiter, Hertel, & Wieseke, 2008), and well-being (Haslam, Jetten, Postmes & Haslam, 2009). At the same time, the identity-providing function of work is also increasingly demanded by people searching for meaningful work that fits their passion (e.g., Kahn, 2007); simply 'having just a job' does not satisfy many people.

But, the world of work is changing. Finding a satisfying answer to the question "Who am I" based on one's work is more challenging in atypical employment situations. In

comparison to standard employment situations atypical work contexts are less stable, often involve low level jobs, and are less likely to be conducted out of choice (Eurofound, 2017b; Spreitzer et al., 2017). For one, atypical employment will make people more aware of their work status, simply due to their minority position in comparison to the majority of workers. Secondly, the increased volatility of a person's atypical employment context will make it more difficult to develop a stable sense of what they can do, what they want to do and where they 'belong', in an organizational, occupational and skill-based sense (Caza, Moss & Vough, 2017). For people who are working multiple jobs across multiple organizations, a stable organizational identity is unattainable as the organizational context fluctuates (see Caza et al., 2017 for empirical evidence). For underemployed people, not working in their trained occupation, a stable occupational identity will be challenging to develop. For people employed in short-term, low skilled jobs with little developmental opportunity, learning what they can do and developing a positive, skill-based identity will be difficult. Even for people in more established forms of atypical work (e.g., fixed-term contracts) committing to one type of occupational identity or career may not be achievable (Petriglieri, 2011) particularly as they need to stay flexible in order to adapt to the next job (e.g., Collinson, 2004).

However, at the same time the atypical employment context is likely to motivate people to forge their identity, declare their belongingness, as ways to reduce uncertainty and anchor themselves better in reality (e.g., Vignoles, Manzi, Regalia, Jemmolo, & Scabini, 2008). Even if the employment context is turbulent, knowing better who one is professionally, could act as an important guideline enabling people to navigate uncertain and unclear job contexts. Furthermore, identity fluidity that may develop from a varied employment history can be helpful in future career changes (cf. Caza et al., 2017). In short, in atypical employment 'crafting selves' will be more difficult, more needed and perhaps more impactful. Not only are these identity effects of atypical work relevant to individuals; they are also of interest to

organizations – if they want to understand when atypical employees are truly of benefit (which is not always straight forward, e.g. Fisher & Connelly, 2017).

Atypical work is largely absent from reviews on identity at work

The literature on identity at work has grown substantially over the past two decades, and there exist a number of excellent and comprehensive reviews (Alvesson et al., 2008; Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Brown, 2015; Ibarra, 1999, Miscenko & Day, 2016; Ramarajan, 2014; Winkler, 2016). As an overview, research on identity at work can be grouped in two broad areas. On the one hand there are the more static, positivist, functional perspectives; contrasted with the more dynamic, interpretivist and critical approaches (Alvesson et al., 2008; Miscenko & Day, 2016). These two perspectives have traditionally focussed on different topics in the field of identity and work. The more positivist, functionally orientated researchers concentrating on uncovering cause-and-effect relationships between identity and varieties of managerial and organizational outcomes; with the social identification approaches being the dominant theoretical framework in the area. Here, identity has been found to play a prominent role in explaining wide-ranging organizational phenomena ranging from new comer socialisation to role transitions and organizational change (see Miscenko & Day, 2016 for a recent review). Researchers coming from a more interpretivist angle have been focussing on how people craft their identity and the contextual conditions of identity narratives and identity constructions. These approaches are less interested in explaining specific organizational outcomes but instead focus on uncovering how identity is affected by context (see for example Ibarra & Barbulescu's 2010 work on how identity narratives are revised). Further, there is a large body of critical sociological work investigating how identities in organizations are interwoven with structures of power. For, example, these scholars focus on how self-images are crafted to align with managerial expectations, how organizational structures tend to reinforce certain self-images over others, and how an organizational identity can be a subtle

tool of managerial control and regulation (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Casey, 1999; Collinson, 2003).

What is remarkable is that all these reviews of identity highlight that identity issues would be particularly prevalent in contexts of transformation recognising that times of "eroding individual-organizational relationships" (Ashforth et al., 2008, p. 360) and "...in a frequently imperfect and hostile world" (Alvesson et al., 2008, p. 12) are notable environments making the role of identity more prominent. But still, research continues to explicitly investigate identity focussed on job situations within organizational settings. With the exception of some sociological work (e.g., Strangleman, 2012) existing psychological reviews offer little guidance as to how to analyse atypical work situations from an identity angle; or how atypical work can be understood from an identity angle.

The purpose of the present position paper is hence to expand existing reviews with an eye to non-traditional, atypical employment, career and occupational situations and their relevance for identity. Our aim is not to provide a new definition of identity, or to prescribe a specific approach. Instead we would like to highlight how work situations beyond traditional organizational settings impact identity and how contemporary approaches can be extended to non-standard atypical employment situations that are increasingly common and relevant. This will not only help understanding those situations better, it will also allow for better predictions of the behaviour, attitudes and well-being associated with atypical work situations.

To people new to the study of identity we provide an introduction to the topic against the backdrop of precarious, insecure, atypical work. We aim to develop an understanding of the way in which work and identity interact with each other in the context of atypical work. The model that we propose is based on a literature review and our discussions as a group of researchers. Our intention is to stimulate future research and encourage researchers to take up identity as an explanatory factor.

First we will review classical definitions of work identity and its characteristics for the atypical context. Next, the interaction between atypical work and identity is addressed by proposing three dynamic ways how identity can change over time: passive incrementally, active incrementally and transformatively. The position paper concludes with key points and directions for future research and possible applications.

Theoretical overview and introduction to identity

A lot has been said and written about identity. Identity is a so called 'root construct' for understanding behaviour, attitudes, and well-being in organizational studies (Ashforth et al., 2008). In line with others (e.g., Ashforth et al., 2008; Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Miscenko & Day, 2016; Van Maanen, 2010) we define work identity most broadly as the collection of meanings individuals (and others) attach to the self in the work context to ultimately answer the question "Who am I?". Hence, identity is not like other psychological characteristics that people can have to a more or less strong degree, but rather something that will look differently for each person. Also, the answer to the identity question will depend on how salient the respective identity category is in a certain context. Consider for example a person's occupation as an identity relevant category. People differ not only in their occupation, but depending on the situation their occupational identity will be differently important and salient to their understanding of themselves.

Identification is the psychological, emotional, and cognitive attachment to that entity (Miscenko & Day, 2016) or the process by which people internalise group membership (Ashforth et al., 2008; Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Identity and identification are often used interchangeably in the literature, but are subtly different. We use identity to describe the identity relevant category itself, and identification to describe the process by which people adopt a certain aspect of an identity relevant category group to make it their own.

Identity has three core functions: it provides people with a cognitive tool to order the social environment, it is a source of self-esteem enabling people to feel good about themselves, while also guiding expectations, attitudes and behaviour. Often, collections of meanings can be captured in discourses, cognitive schemas, and narratives around entities such as personal characteristics (e.g., intelligence, education), membership to certain social categories (e.g., work team, organization), or roles (e.g., leader, professor) (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016). In this sense salient identity categories offer insight and explanation for the decisions and actions people take, and the attitudes they have towards other people (Haslam, 2004). These identity categories also serve as an orientation in work situations. A salient identity category can facilitate adjustment by offering a goal, which might in turn influence occupational, organizational choices, interests and activities people engage with, and people that they interact with (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016). The social categories that have traditionally been distinguished vary in their level of inclusiveness: from identification with the organization, the occupation, a team or group within the organization, to identification with a specific role and specific persons within an organization (Miscenko & Day, 2016).

Entities that have rarely been considered, but can function just as well as identity relevant categories are the employment status of a person (i.e., whether someone is in and out of employment, unemployed, insecurely employed, retired or seeking work), the style of working (i.e., someone defining themselves as hard working), the nature of contract (i.e., whether someone is a full-time, part-time, or agency worker, someone on probation, or a voluntary employee), or the career progress associated with a job (i.e., a Chartered Psychologist, describing the person's seniority in a profession). These more organization-independent entities have rarely been looked at as identity-relevant categories as yet, but are just as well suited to answer the question "Who am I?" (see Selenko, Mäkikangas, & Stride, 2017 for a recent exception). Rather than defining themselves alongside organizational

categories, people in atypical jobs may define themselves in these non-organizational identity categories. In the context of atypical work the answer might be: "I am someone who is precariously employed, who is trained as a psychologist but work outside my profession, who has a temporary contract with several organizations, who works hard and reliably". Here we see the bridge to existing research on work and identity. Just because people are in atypical employment, outside the classic career definitions and standard organizationally bound jobs, does not mean that they cannot identify with what they do and that identity would not play a role (see also Barley, Bechky, & Milliken, 2017).

We propose that forging a satisfying work identity in atypical work is difficult requiring creative effort and persistency (Barley et al., 2017). Holding multiple, temporary job-roles outside the standard organizational norm, may lead to a fragmented, disorganised sense of self (Caza et al., 2017; Schwartz, 2007). Consider for example a person who is a trained journalist but also works as a barista to be financially solvent. This person might struggle finding a satisfying work identity based on their multifaceted work environment (see Romm, NY Magazine, 2017). This context is likely to affect well-being, job role behaviour as well as future career planning. However, those who succeed in crafting a salient identity may benefit in three ways: by knowing who they are they will be better able to navigate atypical work contexts, have a better well-being and will be better prepared to handle future ambiguities and disruptions in their employment. This identity related adaptability that atypical work contexts require might be just what is needed to succeed in today's increasingly uncertain employment contexts.

Three tensions in the nature of work identity in atypical work

We make three core assumptions based on the existing literature (Ashforth et al., 2008) that can be applied to identity in atypical employment. Identity is something that: a) is made up of multiple, not necessarily coherent elements but is usually perceived as something singular at any moment in time; b) can be actively shaped but is also passively influenced; and c) is rather

fluid but people prefer to perceive it as being stable. We will outline below how these seemingly contradictory tensions may be reconciled.

The first tension hinges on the single versus multiple nature of identities. It is widely acknowledged that people have a wide set of identities based on organizational membership, professional roles, nationality and gender (Caza & Wilson, 2009; Ramarajan, 2014), despite generally feeling as 'one'. According to social identity theory, any feature that can create an "us vs them" distinction can create an identity relevant group (e.g., Haslam, 2004); with identity being made up of the multiple group memberships a person holds. Depending on the situations different identities would be salient (Turner, 1999). While a good deal has been written about the structure of multiple identities, recent research shows that multiple identities can be simultaneously salient (Ramarajan, 2014).

In atypical employment situations, which are signified by their fixed term, often fragmented, irregular nature, a specific organizational identification is difficult to develop. Depending on the specific nature of the work, holding multiple, short-term, unconnected jobs might make the establishment of a coherent sense of work identity difficult (Caza et al., 2017). Having multiple work-related identities can come as a blessing (e.g., lucky if you hold more than one job if another job fails) as well as a curse (e.g., how many different jobs can you hold until you feel a sense of identity confusion and disorientation (Caza et al., 2017); with consequential effects on well-being (Schwartz, 2007). Crafting a positive unified identity out of the many may be difficult as people struggle to synthesise different aspects of the self. Consequently, identity-related activities such as career planning and goal-setting would be more challenging as well.

The second tension concerning the concept of identity is between the active versus passive nature of identity. The active nature of identity refers to the extent to which identity is formed, constructed, crafted and changed in a conscious and deliberate manner. This

perspective on identity is reflected in the stream of research on 'identity work' defined as "[…] the range of activities individuals engage in to create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept" (Brown, 2015, p. 23–24). Research on the use of 'provisional selves' to experiment with new identities supports the idea that people can consciously craft their identity (Ibarra, 1999). In this regard, there is a component of decision and choice in how identities or identifications are crafted. In addition, it is possible to distinguish between self-assigned identities and identities attributed by others. There is an undeniable impact of external contexts, roles, social categories, and social structures influencing the formation of identity. Sometimes these forces can impose identities, for example the organizational identification that may be controlled and influenced by organizational culture and brand (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016). Rather than deciding and crafting who one is, identity development in this context is rather the result of an automatic, instinctive, and unselfconscious process (Brown, 2015); an area that is still under-researched (Winkler, 2016). So both, active and passive identity formation takes place; sometimes even simultaneously and antagonistically to each other, potentially creating insecure identities for some individuals (e.g., Knights & Clarke, 2014).

People working outside classic employment situations anecdotally describe a dilemma – they might actively want to craft a specific occupational identity, but at the same time they are pushed by external circumstances into a different unwanted identity. In other words, people in atypical jobs often don't have a choice: they can rarely be selective about their job situations to craft or protect certain identities. Recent European data (Eurofound, 2017c) shows many people are involuntarily in part-time or in other forms of atypical employment; which possibly obstructs them from crafting the identity they want while pushing identities and roles upon them they do not choose. Turning to the earlier example, for how many hours can a person work in a coffee shop while still feeling able to call themselves a journalist? This

mismatch between sought after and enacted identities can create ambivalence, confusion and impostor feelings (i.e., Caza et al., 2017).

The third tension in the nature of identity lies between the stability versus fluidity of identity. The previous discussion on active and passive identity formation already implies a certain degree of fluidity of identity. In its most extreme form, a fluid identity suggests that all identities are provisional, ever shifting, and evolving, in a constant state of flux, depending on the context. For example, research on newly qualified doctors shows the processes of identity adaption during their first post-graduate years describing the changes doctors need to make in order to assume their professional identity (Pratt, Rockmann & Kaufmann, 2006). Some changes were minor, such as gaining a deeper understanding of the professional identity, but others were more dramatic; such as customising work behaviour and professional identity in response to mismatches they experienced between errors they made and their developing sense of self. Other research has shown that identities can be something quite quickly changed, lost, and switched depending on the context. Further, people actively craft their identity based on the situation (Brown, 2015). However, people strive for a relatively stable and authentic sense of who they are (a consistent sense of self) as this understanding is required for effective functioning and to be better able to control the environment (Ashforth, 2001; Caza et al., 2017). This consistent identity is evidenced by the coherent narratives people offer describing who they are at any given moment (Watson, 2009; Ybema et al., 2009). In atypical work situations, if you have no clear core job, a consistent identity might be more difficult to achieve.

In addition, a sense of a coherent and stable self is also beneficial for well-being and self-esteem. Knowing better who one is in terms of social categories and what one can do will reduce perceptions of uncertainty, change appraisals of stressors and enable mobilisation of social support (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Haslam, O'Brien, Jetten, Vormedal, & Penna,

2005). A coherent sense of self also satisfies the fundamental motive of self-continuity, which if dissatisfied would lead to distress and confusion (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016).

Atypical work contexts, no matter whether they comprise of work in an organization on a temporary contract or work managed by a digital platform could be argued to provide fluid and contrasting contexts, which are often not situations of choice so that developing a sense of a stable, synthesised and positively evaluated identity will be more challenging. At the same time, once a coherent sense of self is achieved, perhaps acknowledging and becoming comfortable with the fluidity, these identities might offer a rare stable anchor and cognitive orientation in highly volatile work contexts. As one of the multiple jobholders in Caza et al.'s (2017) study reflects *"I don't know what my work will look like in ten years, or even five years. And that is okay because I am open to where my passions take me."* (p. 26).

While identities are undergoing change (actively or passively) keeping a sense of stability may be particularly challenging in atypical work contexts. The degree of change, the processes that trigger change, and the mechanisms that facilitate change are now described in more detail.

How identities and atypical work contexts interact over time

Now we have outlined the fundamental nature of identity and how we believe that atypical work contexts might create specific tensions, we would like to illustrate how we believe identities and these contexts interact over time. Work identity and contexts are not independent of each other; rather they dynamically interact with each other. Whatever the specific identity, it is contextually influenced; gaining and loosing meaning, status and relevance in relation to the social context. Specifically, we propose three distinct ways in which work contexts and identity interact: a) passive incremental; b) active incremental; and c) transformative (radical) as depicted in Figure 1.

A central process within each of these three forms of identity development is a cycle of activation and reinforcement of behaviour; leading to strengthened internalisation of self-impression and identity self-perceptions. This process resembles mechanisms proposed by the emergent literature on personality development and change in adulthood (see Woods, Lievens, De Fruyt & Wille, 2013 for a review). Specifically, in their Dynamic Developmental Model (DDM), Woods and colleagues (Woods et al., 2013) highlight how work contexts serve to activate traits, which are expressed in behaviour, thought and emotion, and as a consequence these traits become strengthened and deepened. Psychological cues in context and situations are more or less salient to different traits, and when traits are activated by such cues, they guide behaviour. Social identity scholars (Ashforth et al., 2008; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher & Whetherell, 1987) have proposed similar mechanisms for the activation of social identity categories. That is, certain contexts make aspects of identity salient, which in turn guide how a person acts or responds in those contexts.

In the DDM, the development mechanism is further completed through the Corresponsive Process, which comprises cyclical processes of selectivity and reactivity through the life course. Traits lead people to select into situations or contexts that are consistent or in some way appealing to their individual differences. Those same traits are then activated by the context, and through repeated expression, reinforced, strengthened and deepened. Identity scholars propose a similar process from a different angle: people are motivated to show identity-consistent behaviours to affirm valued identities (Ashforth, 2001). They also strive for belonging to identity-confirming groups. This would motivate them to select (where afforded a choice) into identity-consistent occupations, job roles and organizations which echo valued parts of their identity. The experience within those identity consistent situations then subsequently reinforces and strengthens these aspects of identity.

People strive for continuity of self-affirming situations in order to allow for a sense of self-coherence (Ashforth, 2001; p. 59).

However, it is the assumption of stability of working life that we challenge in the current review. Atypical employment situations raise questions about the implications for work identity stability, conflict, salience and affect and how people are coping with these situations.

Building on the DDM and the process of work adjustment (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984) we suggest that over time the interaction between identity and work contexts can take three different forms; and typically identity would undergo a rather passive change over time. However, people could also actively incrementally craft their identity, for example by exposing themselves to certain contexts or seeking out identity affirming activities, such as taking on a specific project while working in their job role. Eventually there are more radical transformative ways of change. Whereas a passive incremental identity change is subtle and may result in a more stable perception of identity; a transformative change is something more radical. Passive incremental interactions represent the most standard form of change which occurs continuously; while the other two types are expected to be less frequently occurring.

One determining element is the factor of choice. The volition or autonomy associated with a work situation has been found to be a crucial factor for predicting work behaviours and well-being (e.g., Van den Broeck, Vansteenkiste & De Witte, 2008). Consequently, being in atypical employment situations voluntarily or because people are left with no choice will make a difference in the interplay between contexts and identity.

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INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

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Passive incremental interaction between atypical work contexts and identity

This type of interaction is characterized by its passive nature, implying that work situations and identity automatically mutually influence each other. "Everything we do, say, or think reflects and shapes how we define ourselves" (Alvesson et al., 2008, p. 19). Being in certain work contexts makes particular identities more salient. This will then influence behaviour and help with enacting certain work tasks, which in turn strengthens certain aspects of identities as well as influencing the situation. People generally strive for a consistent and positively evaluated set of self-categorisations (Turner et al., 1987).

A problem arises when there is a mismatch between the enacted and aspired work identity; such as when an aspiring journalist is required to spend more time as a barista and less time doing journalistic work (see Romm, NY Magazine, 2017). In an atypical work context, people might not have the chance to enact the occupational identity of their choice, while at the same time the work context might enforce other occupational identities they did not aspire to have. This could potentially result in identity conflicts and feelings of inauthenticity which can lead to mental health problems and cognitive overload (Caza et al., 2017). Moreover, being hindered in enacting an aspired identity might even provoke feelings of identity threat, which in turn has been associated with a variety of protection responses (Petriglieri, 2011).

This is not to say that atypical work contexts cannot enable the creation of positive identities. One relevant factor here is the degree to which atypical work allows the experience of meaning. Charlwood (2016) observed that working in a supportive, appreciative organizational environment provided opportunities for warehouse workers in atypical employment to experience greater meaning in their work and to develop a positive identification with their job. This validates Ashforth's (2001) proposition that meaning would facilitate control, belonging and identity; as well as the behavioural element of the affect-behavior-cognition model of constructing identity (Ashforth, 2001; Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016). 'Doing

an identity' suggests that the more people have the chance to enact prototypical behaviour associated with an identity, the more likely it is that that identity is internalised and people feel they are being authentic towards their true self (Caza et al., 2017). For example, by conducting experiments and performing statistical analyses the professional identity of a doctoral student as a researcher will be further developed. By feeling competent in one's daily work, professional identity can be fostered (Pylat, 2016).

Besides the enactment of the work role itself, the passive incremental process is expected to be influenced by feedback people receive. People look for cues, both explicit and implicit, and situations that could confirm their identity (Bargh, 1982; Coleman & Williams, 2015). Feedback guides the behaviour that is shown, influences how behaviour is translated in identity development, and steers people towards or away from certain situations. For example, Collinson (2004) found that research assistants on temporary contracts gained most identity validation as researchers from their interactions with peers and research directors and when they felt competent in their research work. Therefore, social interaction not only influences the situation but also activates and validates certain parts of identity. Both, feedback and social interaction provide opportunities for social validation of the new or adjusted identity, as it is recognised that the perception of others affects individuals' self-perceptions (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; DeRue & Ashford, 2010).

Eventually, when being exposed to atypical employment over the longer time, people might slowly shift their standards and expectations regarding what normal work is. After holding multiple jobs over some time, in an economy that creates the need for multiple jobs, this might become the new 'normal', and 'multiple job holder' might become one of a person's identity categories. Indeed, there is evidence that multiple job holders can reach a stage where they are at peace with their perhaps inconsistent job roles and start to see their multiple roles as an expression of their multiple selves (e.g., Caza et al., 2017).

Active incremental interaction between work and identity

This type of interaction presumes a similar reinforcing circle as above but is characterized by the notable element of choice. People have influence on their own identity by the choices they make, not only with the more obvious choices of occupational paths and career decisions, but also over the social entities people choose to recognise. Moreover, people can actively craft the situations they are in, for example by reframing their job to increase meaningfulness, take on additional tasks and responsibilities or seek out interactions with new and different people to spread the choice of identity relevant entities (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). These can be conscious choices to enhance self-esteem. Alvesson and colleagues (Alvesson et al., 2008) remark that individuals impose and construct identities in ways that better fit their preferred self. Enhancing self-esteem is one of the essential drivers of constructing certain identities (e.g., Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). But, due to the nature of atypical employment, self-esteem enhancing identification is likely to be more difficult to achieve and an alignment of identity with the context might not necessarily be beneficial for self-esteem (Kira & Balkin, 2014).

In this regard, people in atypical jobs will be more likely to engage in creative strategies, such as a reframing of the situation or making selective social comparisons, to achieve a positive identity. In a study among people working in multiple jobs Otto, Frank, Hünefeld, and Kottwitz (2016) found that working in multiple organizations can threaten a persons' professional identity. Compared to single job holders, multiple job holders valued organizational embeddedness more; perhaps being a member of an organization is more difficult to achieve and hence is perceived as more valuable.

Urbach and Fay (2016) showed that people who work in stigmatized occupations such as funeral directors engaged in defensive strategies to buffer the stigma of that profession and to enhance their identification with and commitment to their job. Funeral directors in this study

actively sought out different and high status leisure time activities, to widen their pool of social categorisations for positive identifications. Also, as other research on people in dirty jobs shows, people tend to engage in selective social comparisons with others who are in somewhat similar situations but are disadvantaged in some way (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999).

On a more positive note, atypical employment situations can offer greater flexibility in opportunities to develop positive work identities. Different to typical employment situations where identity crafting might be naturally enforced (or limited) by the job role, profession or organization, people in atypical jobs would be more inclined to define themselves alongside employment contracts, job tasks, projects and competencies. However, this bears certain risks: the effort required to actively maintain positive self-esteem in situations when a sought for identity cannot be achieved can be overwhelming. Also the chosen identity might not be stable due to changing and insecure employment contexts. Therefore, the sheer choice of possible selves might create disorientation for the individual; rather than a feeling of belonging (Caza et al., 2017).

Transformative (radical) changes in work contexts and identity

The third way work situations and identity interact is characterized by a transformative event that triggers the conscious awareness and attention of the individual's identity and self-concept. Major changes (such as being made redundant from a job), that incur a transformational shift in a person's life have been recognised as triggers of identity construction (Alvesson et al., 2008). In the organizational context Ashforth and colleagues (Ashforth et al., 2016) describe situations of "sense-breaking" where current understandings of the self are challenged.

We believe such sense-breaking situations are more likely in atypical employment. When people work in multiple jobs, as an agency worker or in involuntary temporary employment, job roles and contexts fluctuate (sometimes on a daily basis). Some extreme forms

of atypical work (e.g., gig-economy work) are often less regulated and protected, leaving employees susceptible to radical changes at the whim of (often just) an algorithm. In these cases it is more likely that people find themselves in ambiguous, unexpected situations that trigger a questioning of 'what is going on' (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Respective identity categories will become salient as they are suddenly in misalignment. A person might be a doctoral student in the morning and an Uber driver in the afternoon. An Uber driver might pick up a disgruntled customer and be banned from driving the next day due to low ratings. This type of radical misalignment between one's preferred work identity and the actual work situation is likely to have strong effects going beyond solely feeling inauthentic.

The more disruptive and critical the events and situations are the more likely they may lead to an identity threat; defined as the "… experiences appraised as indicating potential harm to the value, meaning, or enactment of an identity*"* (Petriglieri, 2011, p. 644). Identity threat is the mechanism behind the impact of transformative changes on performance and well-being of individuals. Transformative changes in work context that trigger a certain level of self-doubt, insecurity, fear, or excitement emphasising aspects of identity by making them salient, conscious, or in need of addressing (Cascón-Pereira & Hallier, 2012; Winkler, 2016). People rely on their identity for self-worth and a positive and coherent self-concept, which is why a threat to a central aspect of identity can be a serious stressor.

Atypical employment settings are signified by an accumulation of identity threatening elements of a disruptive nature. This is likely to have transformative effects on peoples' identity, often emphasised in individuals' identity narratives (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Watson, 2009). In a study comparing those who have lost their job with people who are still employed, Selenko (2016) showed that unemployed people reported a weaker identity as members of the working population. Further, this weaker identification with the working population partly explained differences in well-being between employed and unemployed people. Vanbelle, De Witte and

Boonen (2016) similarly found that identification with being unemployed and the negative image of unemployment compromises the social identity of unemployed people negatively affecting their self-esteem, mental and physical health, and life satisfaction.

To deal with transformative work changes and the stress of identity threat, people can engage in a variety of coping strategies. Strategies may involve the reappraisal of the threat on one's identity (Petriglieri, 2011) or a modification of identity to diminish the importance of the threatened aspect. For example, Kira and Balkin (2014) argue that the experienced misfit between work and one's identity, which can be considered a threat, can be solved by people changing their work, their immediate work colleagues, or the things they do. Dis-identification, detaching oneself from (negative) aspects of the atypical work situation, might be another way of protecting identity. Kreiner and Ashforth (2004) suggest that identification with wanted aspects of a job and dis-identification with unwanted ones can occur simultaneously.

In atypical job contexts where people often are involuntarily in temporary, part-time or multiple job situations, a rearrangement and reinterpretation of ones' identity structure is often more realistic than the change towards standard employment. However, reconfiguring one's identity may not always be a simple option as some people appear to have a more rigid identity structure than others. Berkers, Mol, and Den Hartog (2016) found those employees who displayed a highly rigid identification with their work, were more affected by emotional exhaustion because they were less able to adapt to the transformative changes affecting them. This indicates that a certain degree of flexibility can be beneficial to successfully master the transformational changes occurring in atypical work contexts.

For people in extreme forms of atypical work (digital platform work, zero-hours work), transformative changes are likely to be more common and perhaps more taxing due to less employment law protection. Such challenging situations require a higher level of resilience and

the development of new tactics to bounce back from such transformative shifts in one's work life.

Conclusions and future research perspectives

The intention of this position paper is to show how an understanding of identity can help develop a greater awareness of atypical, non-normative, fragmented employment experiences which a growing body of today's workers face.

Research conducted in more traditional organizational settings found that identity plays a substantial role for a wide range of work place behaviours, attitudes and well-being (e.g., Haslam et al., 2009; Van Dick et al., 2008; Van Knippenberg, 2000). While there is considerable understanding regarding the nature of the interplay between work and identity (e.g., see Ashforth, 2001; Miscenko & Day, 2016) most of this literature highlights the role of identity in standard, traditional forms of employment. Our review paper extends these existing theoretical perspectives by explicitly focussing on atypical work situations. We propose that atypical forms of employment such as involuntary part-time work, agency work, multiple job roles and on-call work will have effects on identity; and making sense of these forms of work makes it more difficult to establish a positive, stable, authentic sense of identity. We aim to illustrate that identity can improve our understanding of the meaning and consequences of non-standard employment situations for the workers concerned. Developing an awareness of the threats to identity posed by atypical work opens the way for more meaningful interventions to support those seeking a transition to more standard work experiences. Learning from atypical workers about strategies to craft a satisfying sense of identity in disruptive contexts could be of benefit to all workers in today's volatile economic climate.

Most fundamentally, we offer a theoretical framework for the better understanding of atypical work. We propose that atypical forms of work will affect identity. This theoretical grounding opens up a list of unanswered questions for future research on atypical employment

to explore. In the following we highlight six areas where we feel more research is needed to advance our understanding of the relationship between atypical work situations and their consequences for individuals.

First, more empirical evidence is needed to support the argument that the question "who are you" in employment related terms is more difficult to answer for atypical workers. Recent qualitative studies and theoretical papers (Caza et al., 2017; Barley et al., 2017; Selenko et al., 2017) suggest this might be the case, but more evidence encompassing a greater variety of atypical work environments is needed. If supported, these identity issues might explain well-being and behaviour related differences between atypical workers and people in normal employment.

Secondly, we need to understand which social categories people prefer to identify with when they find themselves in atypical employment. Some people in multiple employment may prefer to identify with different categories (e.g., their occupation, their employment status, their competencies), or specific activities they do outside paid employment rather than their work role or organization, such as voluntary work or family work (e.g., Collinson, 2004). Multiple-job holders might identify with their specific nature of being a multiple jobholder and frame that as something positive for themselves (e.g., Caza et al., 2017). Retired people in atypical jobs to subsidise their income might continue to identify with their previous job role; just to highlight some of the numerous possibilities. A better understanding of the conditions when which of these identity relevant entities would be adopted, would enable a better prediction of well-being and behaviour.

Thirdly, we need to explore the organizational consequences of the identifications adopted by atypical workers (Fisher & Connelly, 2017). We propose that in times of atypical employment, positive work related identifications not only serve a self-esteem function, but they can also act as a guideline for work behaviours and career planning. Having a positively

valued identity that is attached to a meta-work identity (e.g., a personal work style, or their occupation) may be a valuable tag-line to guide behaviour in atypical, disruptive and transformative employment situations that do not easily allow for predictable career planning.

Fourthly, looking at atypical work through an identity lens enables better interventional design. We would presume that to change behaviour, people's identity and identification need to be targeted. This could be done by making people aware of certain aspects of their identity or by creating situations that allow for the salience and enactment of aspired identities. In an international study among young female job seekers Carter and Parry (2016) found that participants benefited from reflexivity training when constructing novel employment-related identities needed for successful work transitions. Other suggestions would be to enhance the meaningfulness of atypical work arrangements in order to strengthen the identification with an organization (cf. Spreitzer et al., 2017).

Fifthly, we believe an important direction for future research can be found in better understanding the conditions that facilitate or hinder the (successful) interaction between atypical work contexts and identity over time. We have tried to exemplify how identity can develop and change in atypical work contexts (passive, active, transformative). While there are a number of influential studies that concentrate on the impact of dramatic changes on how people define themselves at work (e.g., Alvesson, 2008; Ibarra, 1999), longitudinal studies on how identities and work contexts mutually influence each other on a day-by-day basis are still rare (Miscenko & Day, 2016).

Finally, by looking at atypical work situations and their interplay with identity, we might eventually get a better understanding of typical work situations and identity. Atypical work situations typically deprive people of standard elements of work (e.g., job security, a single organizational employer, role stability, career choice), forming natural field investigations,

enabling us to discover to which degree identity hinges on, or is informed by these standard elements.

Critically, we note that although reviews on identity at work often stress the multitude of approaches that are available; different schools of thought concentrate on specific areas of research interest. For example, most research on identity threat and crafting relies on qualitative studies with an interpretivist orientation (Ashforth & Shinoff, 2016; Brown, 2015; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010) whereas research on the functions and outcomes of identification is dominated by the application of quantitative methods and a more positivist approach (Miscenko & Day, 2016). This orthodoxy may create unnecessary divisions and obstacles for future research. We feel that more cross-fertilisation of approaches and topic areas would be beneficial.

One thing we noted during the current review, is the concern by more quantitatively minded researchers about the lack of standardised measures, for example in the measurement of identity threat (Petriglieri, 2011) or of multiple identifications (Ramarajan, 2014). While there is room for development here, we would like to point to a number of already well-established, valid measures of identity and identification available, that can be adapted to capture identification with atypical work related entities. For example, Vanbelle and colleagues (Vanbelle et al., 2016) used items developed by Ellemers, Kortekaas and Ouwerkerk (1999), Bagozzi and Lee (2002), and Bartels, Pruyn, De Jong and Joustra (2007) to assess identification with the unemployed; Selenko (2016) adopted Doosje, Ellemers and Spears' (1994) scale to measure identification with the working population. Berkers et al. (2016) showed that it is possible to capture the rigidity of people's work identity and Urbach and Fay (2016) illustrated how occupational stigma can be measured quantitatively. In other words, once the type of identity of interest has been identified, there are several options for quantitative measurement.

In conclusion, we trust this position paper will interest other researchers to adopt an identity perspective when exploring atypical work situations; and that we have outlined suggestions of how this can be done. Work is likely to remain important as the main source of income generation and societal participation for most people. People who manage to establish strong, positive, forward-looking work related identities may not only feel better and be more resilient, they may be more able to navigate those uncertain, disruptive and unstable work contexts, ultimately discovering more satisfying careers.

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Figure 1: Three ways of interaction between work and identity

1. Passive incremental interaction work - identity

Situation

Identity development

Identity activation

Behaviour
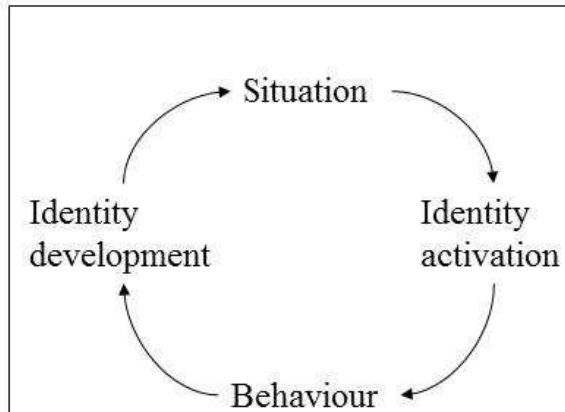
Mechanisms: role enactment, social interaction, feedback (e.g., on success and failure) and selectivity and reactivity in the context.

*Process:* largely unconscious and automatic.

2. Active incremental interaction work - identity

Choice

Identity development

Situation

Identity activation
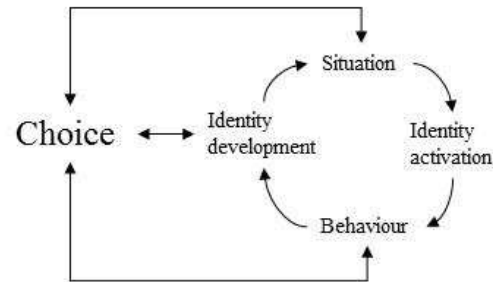
Behaviour

Mechanisms: self-reflection, motivation and goal-driven behaviour and identity work/play.

Process: largely conscious, intentionally.

3. Transformative (radical) interaction work - identity

Disruption

Situation

Identity change

Identity development

Identity activation

Behaviour
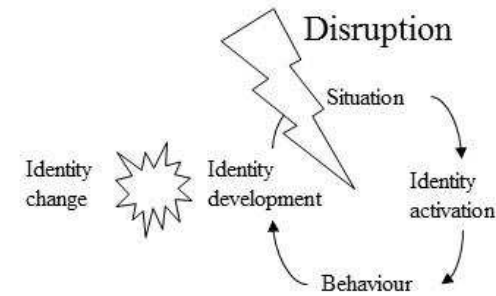
Mechanisms: trigger based (e.g., job loss, changes), experienced misfit, identity threat and identity work as coping strategy.

Process: becomes (suddenly) salient and conscious.