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2011/01/OB

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Revise and Resubmit, *Administrative Science Quarterly*

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FAST TRACKS AND INNER JOURNEYS: ADAPTIVE AND EXPLORATORY PATHWAYS TO PORTABLE IDENTITIES FOR ITINERANT CAREERS

ABSTRACT

Through a longitudinal, qualitative study of managers attending an international master's of business administration (MBA), we examined why and how individuals who were engaged in a prolonged transition within itinerant careers conducted identity work in a context that featured discretion in self-definition, a diverse community, and multiple possible outcomes. We found that individuals approached the MBA with identity work orientations geared toward either achievement or discovery. The interaction between these orientations and the institutional ideologies of career advancement and personal development channeled individuals to follow either an adaptive or an exploratory identity work pathway. These pathways featured different strategies, interpretations of the institution, and use of its resources. Both, however, allowed individuals to craft portable identities, that is, dynamic and agentic identities perceived as transferable between nations, organizations, and roles. By positioning them within the MBA and helping them navigate career choices, portable identities bolstered individuals' sense of direction in mobile and unpredictable careers.

Key words: identity work, portable identities, qualitative research, MBA, business schools

The dynamics underpinning the formation, consolidation, and alteration of individuals' identity—traditionally the province of clinical and developmental psychologists (Levinson, 1978; Erikson, 1980; Kegan, 1982)—are of growing interest in organization studies, largely because of the fluidity of contemporary work environments. Decreased job security, increased workforce diversity and mobility, and fast-paced technological change—as well as the emergence of itinerant careers that span occupational, organizational, and national boundaries (Pfeffer and Baron, 1988; Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Arthur, 2008; Mainiero and Sullivan, 2006)—render the work of crafting, upholding, and revising one's identity more necessary (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003) and problematic (Sennett, 1998, 2006; Alvesson and Wilmott, 2002) than in the past.

Unlike traditional careers, which featured institutionally codified transitions between a predictable sequence of roles within the same organization (Super, 1957), itinerant careers are characterized by discontinuities, such as noncodified transitions, that are often accompanied by extended periods of questioning, reorientation, and liminality (Hall and Mirvis, 1996; Ibarra, 2003, 2007; Tempest and Starkey, 2004). The processes through which individuals actively mold their identity in order to adapt to new professional roles (Ibarra, 1999; Pratt, Rockmann, and Kaufmann, 2006; Thornborrow & Brown, 2009), to exit roles (Ebaugh, 1988), to transition between roles (Ashforth, 2001; Nicholson, 1984), and/or to enter a new organization (Beyer and Hannah, 2002) are well researched. We know little, however, about the vicissitudes of identity in those extended transitions in which individuals do not have the strong reference point of a specific role they hold or are entering (Ibarra, 2007).

This paper builds theory in this area through a longitudinal, qualitative study of managers engaged in extended transitions within careers unfolding across national and organizational

boundaries. The study began following them as they left their work roles to begin a full-time international master in business administration (MBA)—with little certainty about what role they would hold afterward and where—and ended as they were about to enter new work roles. Our choice of setting was informed by observations that adult education in general, and management education in particular, provide a space in which individuals question and revise their identities during career transitions (Ibarra, 2003; Sturdy et al., 2006). Individuals expecting to work across more than one function, organization, and country over the span of their careers seek more than knowledge, skills, and access to job opportunities when attending management courses. They are also likely to use business schools as identity workspaces, that is, holding environments that facilitate consolidation and/or revision of their professional and personal identities (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010).

Within this setting—characterized by physical and social encapsulation; a novel, diverse community; multiple choices and possible future paths—individuals did not simply craft identities that would legitimize claims to work roles they aspired to in the immediate future. They endeavored, through different pathways, to develop and consolidate portable identities that would support them through the multiple roles and transitions they expected to face over their careers in the long-term. Portable identities—defined as dynamic and agentic identities perceived as transferable across nations, organizations and roles—served three purposes: positioning the individual within the MBA community; broadening his or her work opportunities and orienting choices among them; and providing a reference point for future transitions. By fulfilling these purposes, portable identities gave meaningful direction to individuals' endeavors in the context of uncertain, mobile, and discontinuous careers. By examining the emergence, consolidation, and aims of pathways that lead to the construction of identities suited to itinerant careers, our study puts forward a theory of how individuals

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engaged in these careers construct portable identities within institutions they rely on as identity workspaces.

We followed the admonition that research on identity dynamics needs to take an interactionist perspective that examines the constant interplay between individual and environment rather than privileging one or the other (Jones, 1983; Kreiner, Hollensbe and Sheep, 2006; Kuhn, 2006). We started from broad research questions: What kind(s) of identity work do individuals engage in throughout the MBA year? Toward what aims? How do various elements of the institution inform, support, or hinder identity work? As is customary in qualitative studies, our awareness of relevant literature grew during iterative cycles of data collection and analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Miles and Huberman, 1994). For clarity of reporting, however, we integrate below the sources that informed our research focus, setting, and design as well as those that informed our evolving understanding of the data.

IDENTITY WORK AND ITINERANT CAREER TRANSITIONS

Identity Work

Individuals' identities—that is, the meanings attached to a person by the self and others (Gecas, 1982)—derive from two broad sources: (1) social identities, which describe the meanings associated to individuals by virtue of their membership in social groups, such as gender, nationality, organization, and profession (Tajfel and Turner, 1986; Ashforth and Mael, 1989), and (2) personal identities, which describe the meanings associated to individuals by virtue of their personal history, characteristics, preferences, and aspirations (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). Social identities tend to assimilate individuals to shared definitions, whereas personal identities tend to differentiate and distinguish individuals (Brewer, 1991). These two streams of meanings inform the self-concept, an individual's

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overarching view of the self resulting from a working compromise between social and personal identities (Gecas, 1982). An individual's multiple identities are not necessarily stable or always coherent (Markus and Nurius, 1986), and they are constantly claimed and granted (or not) in social interactions (Mead, 1934; Goffman, 1958). In other words, constructing, refining, validating, sustaining, and modifying one's self-concept and constellation of identities requires ongoing work—within and between individuals (Kreiner, Hollensbe and Sheep, 2006).

The concept of identity work refers to the activities individuals engage in to form, strengthen, maintain, repair, or revise their identities (Snow and Anderson, 1987; Svenningson and Alvesson, 2003). The impulse for engaging in such work comes from individuals striving to attain or restore coherence among conflicting identities within the self-concept (Ashforth, Kreiner and Fugate, 2000; Kreiner, Hollensbe and Sheep, 2006); between a desired identity and the version of the self that is socially validated (Snow and Anderson, 1987; Van Maanen, 1998; Ibarra, 1999; Thornborrow and Brown, 2009); between a desired identity and the identity implied by one's current behavior (Elsbach, 2009; Pratt, Rockmann and Kaufmann, 2006); or between past history, present experiences, and future aspirations (McAdams, 1993, 1996; Ibarra, 2003; Carlsen, 2006). Successful identity work grants individuals "comfort, meaning and integration and some correspondence between a self-definition and work situation" (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003:1188). It also grants a balance between satisfying needs for uniqueness and inclusion, which, in turn, "reduces stress and conflict and increases well-being and satisfaction" (Kreiner, Hollensbe and Sheep, 2006: 1033). Morerover, successful identity work is associated with feelings of perceived competence (Pratt, Rockmann and Kaufmann, 2006) and with the ability to deploy oneself credibly with,

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and to be acknowledged by, referent others in one's profession or occupation (Van Maanen, 1998; Ibarra, 1999; Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010; DeRue and Ashford, 2010a).

Because identity work is most intensely and consciously undertaken during specific junctures and transitions (Van Maanen, 1998; McAdams, 1999), researchers aiming to study it have typically selected settings in which individuals' identities are brought into question by entering, adapting to, managing, customizing, or leaving specific roles with strong attendant display rules (Sutton, 1991) conveyed by role models, colleagues, clients, and the public. Examples include professional role transitions (Ibarra, 1999; Pratt, Rockmann and Kaufmann, 2006), micro role transitions (Ashforth, Kreiner and Fugate, 2000), demanding occupations (Kreiner, Hollensbe and Sheep, 2006), occupations carrying social stigma (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Wresnieski, Dutton and Debebe, 2003), transitions into new organizations (Pratt, 2000; Beyer and Hannah, 2002), and role exits (Ebaugh, 1988). While we know a good deal about identity work that is directly related to one specific role individuals hold or are about to enter, we know less about identity work that is aimed at pursuing or revising self-definitions congruent with one's expected development and imagined future (Giddens, 1991; Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007). This has led scholars to call for more research on the unfolding of identity over longer periods of time rather than on "snapshot images of identification" (Ashforth, Harrison and Corley, 2008: 340) and in settings in which role or institutional demands are less clear and individuals have higher discretion in self-definition (Pratt, Rockmann, and Kaufmann, 2006). Such settings provide a microcosm of contemporary social contexts in which individuals are "continually confronted with high levels of choice over fundamental matters of personal meaning" (Cote and Levine, 2002: 1) and whose identities are often intertwined with their careers (Grey, 1994).

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Transitions in Itinerant Careers

The last two decades have witnessed a shift in the psychological contract between organizations and their employees, with a progressive dissolution of the former's obligation to provide security in exchange for the latter's loyalty (Robinson, Kraatz and Russeau, 1994; Rousseau, 1990). The assumption that individuals move out of one role and into the next following an institutionalized career blueprint within a single organization (Super, 1957) no longer applies to a growing segment of the workforce. This is especially true for employees in the middle ranks of knowledge-intensive organizations, many of whom have the opportunity or necessity of reinventing themselves several times in the course of their work lives (Alvesson, 2001; Thomas and Linstead, 2002; Sennett, 2006).

A body of scholarship spurred by this shift suggests that while the fading of institutionalized career templates generates more uncertainty, it also frees individuals to redefine the meaning and goals of their own careers and to exercise more agency in them (for a review, see Sullivan and Baruch, 2010). Scholars have proposed a variety of constructs to describe these novel forms and meanings of careers, for example, boundaryless careers (Arthur and Russeau, 1996), protean careers (Hall, 2002), kaleidoscope careers (Mainero and Sullivan, 2006), and post-corporate careers (Peiperl and Baruch, 1997). All point to itinerant careers that involve frequent crossings of organizational, occupational, and national boundaries; high degrees of uncertainty; and significant individual agency (Arthur, 2008). While individuals engaged in such careers may still represent a minority of the total workforce (Rodrigues and Guest, 2010), it is a minority worthy of study because it "exerts a profound moral and normative force as a cutting-edge standard for how the larger economy should evolve" (Sennett, 2006: 10).

Scholars have argued that the uncertainty, mobility, and fragmentation of itinerant careers—that unfold in external, rather than organizational, labor markets—make matters of identity more salient and problematic (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Cote and Levine, 2002; Gergen, 1991; Mirvis and Hall, 1994; Sennett, 1998). Extant empirical research, however, has primarily examined how individuals develop skills and relationships that make such careers viable. Researchers have investigated, for example, whether itinerant professionals truly experience more flexibility (Barley and Kunda, 2004), how they acquire skills and experiences that help them navigate career progression (O'Mahony and Bechky, 2006), how opportunities to develop and deploy professional skills orient moves across organizations (Bidwell and Briscoe, 2010), and how exceptional individual performance is affected by these moves (Groysberg, Lee and Nanda, 2008). The paucity of empirical work on the ways individuals craft their identities within the context of increasingly discontinuous careers (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010) has generated calls for more research on the psychological aspects of career mobility (Sullivan and Baruch, 2010) and on "how career identities are retrospectively and progressively constructed" (Ashforth, Harrison and Corley, 2008: 351) amid a fragmented and turbulent organizational world (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003).

Answering these questions requires studying individuals whose careers feature moves across organizational and/or national boundaries in a setting in which they are actively and consciously engaged in shaping, stabilizing, and/or revising their identity. Scholars have argued that identities are encoded as narratives that encompass past history, current experiences, and future aspirations; are developed in social interactions; incorporate elements from local discourses; and give coherence and meaning to individuals' actions and pursuits (Ricoeur, 1988; Josselson, 1993; McAdams, 1993,1996; Ezzy, 1998; Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010). Our subjects of interest, by definition, move between physical and social spaces.

Hence, addressing the question of how they construct and sustain their identity despite the mobility and fragmentation of their careers requires tackling the question of where they are likely to do so.

Identity Workspaces

Introducing the concept of identity workspaces—that is, institutions that individuals experience as a holding environment for their identity work—Petriglieri and Petriglieri (2010) provided a platform for investigating the "how" question by tackling the issue of "where." They argued that the erosion of traditional psychological contracts has made it harder for employing organizations to be trusted as identity workspaces, especially by employees who expect their careers to unfold across organizations. As a result, these individuals increasingly rely on business school courses—especially long, intensive ones such as residential MBAs—as settings for identity work aimed at either consolidation or change of professional, as well as personal, identities.

Scholars have noted that occupational institutions providing credentials, training, and links to employment opportunities are a significant source of support for individuals engaged in itinerant professionalism (Barley and Kunda, 2004) and that individuals use management education to engage in intense identity work during voluntary career transitions (Ibarra, 2003; Sturdy *et al*, 2006; Kelan and Dunkley Jones, 2009). The conceptualization of business schools as identity workspaces for individuals engaged in itinerant careers is in line with these observations and with sociological accounts of business schools as sources of institutional templates and narratives that individuals use as reference points for constructing their identities as managers (Khurana, 2007). It also suggests that the more the idea that managers' careers should unfold across different countries and organizations becomes

culturally widespread, the more influential business schools become in shaping managers' identities and the more important it is to research the process through which they do so.

A number of leading organizational scholars have raised questions and concerns about the purpose (Bennis & O'Toole, 2005; Khurana, 2007), values (Gioia, 2002), theories, and methods (Mintzberg, 2004; Goshal, 2005; Starkey and Tempest, 2009) of business schools as well as about their impact on graduates' careers and society in general (Pfeffer and Fong, 2002; Podolny, 2009). Central to this authoritative criticism is the idea that business schools are powerful shapers of managers' identities, which, in turn, influence their sensemaking and motivate their actions. While their institutional evolution as sources of management templates and discourses has been thoroughly examined (Khurana, 2007), a rigorous empirical investigation of the ways business school experiences affect the identities of individual managers is lacking. Our study of how individuals crafted and revised their identity during a prolonged, voluntary career transition in the context of an intensive MBA program, therefore, not only addresses a research question of increasing theoretical importance but also casts a light on an underexamined research setting of significant contemporary practical relevance.

METHODS

Sample and Context

The context of this study was the full-time MBA program of a top-tier business school, which we refer to here as Blue. The 11-month-long program was recognized as high pressured and selective. It recruited a single cohort of 90 participants per year, with no overlap between classes. At the time of this research, Blue had, for three years in a row, appeared at the top of a global MBA ranking based on corporate recruiters' opinions.

The average age of participants in the class studied was 31, the average work experience was 7.5 years, and the vast majority had management experience. Forty-five nationalities were represented in the class, with none comprising more than five percent of the cohort. Twenty percent of the participants were women. During the year of study, all but five participants had formally resigned from their previous employer, had no guaranteed job to which to return, and were financially self-sponsored. No participants were local residents, although two were nationals. They all arrived in town a week or two before the course began, rented apartments close to campus, and spent the first six months in the same classroom and underground meeting rooms, mostly working as a class of 90 or in small groups. Group projects accounted for fifty percent or more of the grades in most courses. Participants changed groups once during the first six months and after the summer break were assigned to a third group working on a consulting project for three months with the assistance of a faculty advisor. Job search and recruitment activities also took place in these three months. All groups were formed by the administration with the criterion of maximizing diversity. Elective courses occupied the last month of the program.

The program was reputed to have a general management rather than a functional perspective. It emphasized career advancement and personal development under the overarching banner of leadership development. In addition to course brochures, alumni testimonials, and accounts in the press, these emphases were reflected in the MBA curriculum. Alongside courses in functional business disciplines, participants took part in a leadership stream throughout the year. This involved an integrated combination of classroom sessions, a week of experiential activities in the first month of the program, and subsequent individual coaching sessions. Participants were required to write an autobiography prior to entering the program and to revise it during the year. They also wrote reflective papers on their groups' development, on

their role in groups, and on their consulting projects. At the end of each group, participants completed a peer review—that is, a 180-degree feedback process—on their group members. Finally, they had the option of taking 20 individual sessions with a psychotherapist in lieu of an elective credit.

Our choice of research setting followed a theoretical logic (Miles and Huberman, 1994). First, all participants had worked in multiple organizations and/or countries and, prior to the start of the MBA, had left their employer and country. Most of them did not expect to return to that employer and had little certainty of what their future held. Second, participants' professional and personal identity was made salient prior to joining the program by the requirement to write two distinct essays: one for admission purposes that invited them to reflect on their career trajectory to date and future ambitions and the other an autobiography that encouraged them to articulate a personal life narrative comprised of past history, present situation, and future aspirations. This focus on identity continued through the year with a number of course assignments and activities that stimulated participants to consciously question, reflect on, and revise their personal and professional identities. Unlike previously studied identity transforming organizations (Greil and Rudi, 1985; Pratt, 2000) and total institutions (Goffman, 1961), however, Blue was not implicitly or explicitly geared to changing an individual's identity in a set direction. On the contrary, it explicitly emphasized the need for participants to be self-directed and to use the program as an opportunity to learn how to work with people from different cultures and backgrounds while at the same time pursuing their individual career goals.[1] Third, participants entered a new environment in

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[1] Undoubtedly, for maintaining its own standing in the crowded and competitive MBA market, Blue relied on producing successful alumni with careers in prestigious private and public organizations. Hence, individuals' identity work was not unconstrained. It was, however, neither overprescribed nor channeled within a narrow set

which they had only a virtual acquaintance, at best, and little shared cultural understanding with others in the program. During the year, participants were constantly engaged with each other at work and in social activities and received extensive formal and informal feedback, both on their work and on how others perceived them. In summary, all of these elements made the Blue MBA an extreme setting (Eisenhardt, 1989; Pettigrew, 1990) favorable to our research aims: the investigation of identity work conducted by individuals engaged in an itinerant career, during a prolonged transition, and in a context featuring discretion in self-definition, a diverse community, and multiple possible outcomes.

Data Collection and Management

Our longitudinal study followed 55 individuals through their MBA year at Blue. Participants were recruited for the study via an email sent to all 90 prospective MBAs upon registration. The purpose of the study was phrased broadly, and in line with the language of course preparation material, as to "research both the personal and professional development process of individuals during their MBA year." All participants who signaled their interest were included in the study; the sample of 55 represents 61 percent of the total population for that year.[2] When compared to the demographics of the full cohort, it was representative along the lines of age, work experience, nationality, and gender (see Table 1).

— Insert Table 1 here —

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of directions. After all, Blue also relied on its reputation for supporting the unique aspirations of each member of its small and diverse MBA class. On leaving, one participant captured this feature of the institution as follows: "I really think that Blue is like a canvas. You have the framework to work in, the size that Blue gives you, but you still have the opportunity to paint whatever you want. You are the commander of the brushes, but you can't go really on the walls and on to everything around you" (15iii).

[2] Two individuals in our sample were sponsored by their employer and considered returning to it. However, neither had agreed to a potential future role or location. In addition, both viewed these as a "back-up option" and expressed the intention to go on the job market during the MBA. As one of them put it, "My expectation is to not go back, because it would defeat the purpose of why I am leaving in the first place. For me [being sponsored] is a good thing, I am keeping it as security" (42i). Both eventually went on the job market. For these reasons, we included them in our sample.

The primary data was collected through in-depth, semistructured interviews at three points in time: during the month prior to the MBA (wave 1), at the midpoint of the program (wave 2), and in the final two weeks prior to graduation (wave 3). Quotes from these interviews that appear in this article are identified by numbers, which refer to each research participant, and *i, ii, or iii,* which refers to the first, second, or third interview. Longitudinal designs employing semistructured interviews as a primary data collection method are customary in identity-work research (Beyer and Hannah, 2002; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Pratt, Rockmann and Kaufmann, 2006). While interviews cannot be expected to reveal objective psychological or social realities, they do stimulate and record individuals' unfolding sensemaking (Beyer and Hannah, 2002; Kreiner, Hollensbe, and Sheep, 2006), identity work, and articulation of their cultural context (Alvesson, 2003).

To maximize consistency, all three interviews for each participant were conducted by the second author: the first interview via telephone and the second and third in person. The first interview was split into two sections: The first took the form of a life-history interview (Atkinson, 1998), and the second focused on the individual's rationale and motivations for embarking on the MBA, his or her general expectations for the year, anticipated identity transitions (both personal and professional), and expectations for the future post-MBA. Thus, the first interview provided both biographical data and a benchmark of each participant's state as he or she approached the program. The wave 2 and wave 3 interviews shared a common set of questions regarding participants' perceptions of their personal and professional identities and if/how these were changing, the MBA environment and how they made sense of its impact on them, and their future life path. All interviews included questions about how participants were feeling in addition to how they were reflecting on and making sense of their experience. While the second and third interviews shared many elements, they

also became progressively more focused to capitalize on themes that emerged during our analysis (Spradley, 1979).

All three interviews covered material of both a professional and personal nature. The interviewer reviewed prior transcripts immediately before each individual's subsequent interview in order to follow up on specific points. Interviews lasted between 40 and 90 minutes (50 minutes was the average). All were tape recorded with permission and professionally transcribed.[3] Secondary data sources included notes from informal conversations with faculty, administrators, coaches, and psychotherapists working with the class as well as written documentation (i.e., syllabi, web pages, and participants' web blogs).

In anticipation of the large amount of primary data that would be collected, we set up a meticulous system to manage our data and analysis from the outset. We used ATLAS5, a qualitative data management software, to organize both our primary data (which comprised over 1500 pages of text) and our field notes, contact summary forms, and documents used as secondary data sources. In addition, we kept a detailed journal of the multiple steps of our analysis to track the numerous iterations between the data, our emerging theoretical model, and existing literature that became relevant as the analysis progressed.

Data Analysis

We employed grounded theory techniques (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990) for our data analysis. This involved inductively analyzing the data as we collected it, iteratively moving back and forth between our growing body of data and our emerging theoretical framework. During these iterations we rigorously employed techniques of

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[3] Technical problems with the recording equipment were experienced in 7 of the 165 interviews. In these cases the interviewer took detailed notes and transcribed them within 24 hours.

constant comparison, which enabled the identification of both patterns and variations between them. We used such patterns and variations, as they emerged, to shape the protocols of later waves of interviews; hence data collection and analysis developed in parallel (Spradley, 1979). Our analysis comprised four phases. We repeated the first two after each wave of data collection, while the final two took place once all interviews were completed.

Phase 1. Following each wave of data collection, the first two authors conducted an intensive week-long session of analysis. During this time we conducted line-by-line analysis of small batches of interview transcripts. We typically worked through 20 transcripts over the week, with the goal of identifying common statements and grouping them into first-order codes and tentative categories. During this phase of open coding, we used in vivo codes (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) where possible and descriptive codes when no suitable in vivo codes could be identified. The process was highly iterative and involved many rounds of grouping codes, testing these groups to determine their fit against the data, and regrouping until we finally arrived at tentative categories. For example, during the analysis of the first data wave, there were a number of statements in the data relating to participants' wish that spending a year at Blue would allow them to "take a step back and reassess their life so far." This eventually led us to the category of Blue as a retreat. We concluded this analytic step by recording the tentative categories and first-order codes and agreeing on a preliminary coding scheme to move forward to the second analytic phase.

Phase 2. Immediately following phase one, the first two authors systematically reviewed each of the 55 transcripts to document the first-order codes and tentative categories in the data; this was recorded via a contact summary form (Miles and Huberman, 1994) to assist in keeping track of the analysis. Although we generally found that the structure of codes and

categories identified in phase one fit the remaining transcripts, we had regular discussions concerning variations and changes to the shape of the first-order codes and categories, and during this phase we made a few alterations to the structure after each wave of data collection.

Phase 3. On completion of data collection and the first two phases of analysis, we had, for each research participant, three coded interview transcripts and one contact summary form. During phase three we moved to a stage of axial coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990); that is, we consolidated categories into higher levels of abstraction and began the process of searching for relationships and variations between them as well as higher-order themes under which they could be grouped. This allowed us to compare across waves of data and to assess the evolution within categories; it also allowed us to determine how categories related to each other over time. For example, during this phase we noticed that whereas half the research participants entering the MBA with an achievement identity work orientation settled on the adaptive identity work pathway, the other half pursued the exploratory pathway. This led us back to the data and to the literature on surprise and sensemaking (Louis, 1980). To understand why individuals pursued an identity work pathway discordant with their initial orientation, we conducted a comparative analysis between the subset of participants who entered with an achievement orientation and conducted exploratory identity work and the subset that entered with an achievement orientation and pursued adaptive identity work. From this analysis emerged both a more finely tuned understanding of the function of identity ownership in moderating the interaction between orientations and identity challenges as well as the realization that individuals' portable identities bolstered their sense of dynamism and agency. The culmination of this phase was a set of theoretical categories, reported in the data structure in Figure 1. To establish coding reliability, the first two authors independently

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coded the entire sample of transcripts to categorize each participant, with very high (94%) intercoder agreement.

— Insert Figure 1 here —

Phase 4. The final phase of data analysis, which involved all three authors, focused on the building and ratification of an overarching theoretical framework. We spent time going back and forth between the data and the emerging framework to ensure that the way in which our theoretical categories fit together accurately represented the data (Locke, 2001). While developing a theoretical model grounded on the data concluded the analytic process, in the presentation of findings that follows we reverse the order and introduce the model first—outlining the key constructs that emerged from the data and their relationships. Our aim in doing so is to orient the reader as we progress through the description of each element.

FINDINGS

Overview

We set off, as described earlier, to develop a grounded theoretical model that would account for the process and aims of identity work conducted by individuals engaged in itinerant careers, during a prolonged transition within a setting featuring relative discretion in self-definition, a diverse community, and multiple possible outcomes. The model, depicted in Figure 2, explains why, how, and with what aims individuals craft portable identities within institutions they rely on as identity workspaces.

— Insert Figure 2 here —

The two main theoretical constructs depicted in the model are identity work pathways and portable identities. Identity work pathways are defined as coherent sets of interpretive frameworks and strategies that organize individuals' efforts to craft valued identities. We identified two distinct pathways that we labeled adaptive and exploratory. The aim of the

adaptive pathway was to refine and consolidate a broad social identity, such as "international business leader," while the aim of the exploratory pathway was to clarify and strengthen a sharp personal identity describing "who I truly am." These identities were highly valued among managers engaged in itinerant careers because they held currency both within and beyond the institution. We termed them portable identities, defined as dynamic and agentic identities perceived to be transferrable across national, organizational and role boundaries.

The model begins by elucidating the emergence of identity work pathways. While participants had little certainty about their future at the outset of the transition, we found systematic differences in the identity work they anticipated conducting. Some approached Blue with an orientation toward *achievement* of a desired identity. These individuals had high future identity clarity, that is, they could articulate a clear answer to the question "Who do I want to become?" Others had low future identity clarity and approached Blue with an orientation toward *discovery* of answers to that question.

All participants faced challenges to their identity conceptions and were under pressure to conduct identity work. Those oriented toward achievement were usually unsettled by challenges to their competence and credibility and were likely to pursue the adaptive identity work pathway. In contrast, those oriented toward discovery were usually unsettled by challenges to their motives and purpose and were likely to pursue exploratory identity work. While in general individuals who entered Blue with an achievement orientation pursued adaptive identity work, and those holding a discovery orientation pursued exploratory identity work, numerous participants who had an achievement orientation pursued exploratory identity work. Those who did so had low ownership of their identities, that is, on encountering challenges to their motives and purpose, they could not provide agentic

accounts for who they had become and why they were pursuing their desired aims. These individuals became progressively unsure about whether their accomplishments and aspirations were truly their own and began pursuing exploratory identity work with the aim of finding out. In short, the interaction between individuals' orientation to identity work at the outset of the transition, and the challenges to their identities presented by practices associated with Blue's ideologies of career advancement and personal development, determined which identity work pathway an individual pursued. This interaction, from which pathways emerged, was moderated by individuals' degree of ownership of their identity.

The second part of the model examines the consolidation of the two pathways. This occurred through two mutually reinforcing processes: individuals' enactment of identity work strategies and incorporation of interpretive frameworks grounded in one of the two ideologies mentioned earlier. The two identity work pathways featured contrasting strategies and interpretations of the institution and its dominant discourses. Adaptive identity work strategies encompassed repeated cycles of experimentation with desired identity claims and evaluative self-reflection on the basis of feedback from others within and outside Blue. Conversely, exploratory identity work strategies centered on assisted and solitary introspection. The adaptive pathway featured an understanding of the self as an object that could be molded through active development efforts and a perception of Blue as a training ground where such work could be conducted faster and more safely than in the "real world." In contrast, the exploratory pathway featured an understanding of the self as a mystery that could never truly be solved but whose essence could be discovered by distancing oneself from social pressures and demands. Concordant with this view was a perception of Blue as an exposing magnifying glass that facilitated such discovery by removing one from the demands and distractions of everyday life.

Finally, the model examines the content and value of the portable identities toward which the two pathways led. During the year at Blue, the pursuit of either a broad social identity ("international business manager" or "leader") through the adaptive pathway or of a sharp personal identity ("this is who I truly am") through the exploratory one, allowed individuals to make sense and make use of various features of Blue and to gain social validation as a legitimate member of the community. Moreover, both portable identities promised to create opportunities, orient choices, and organize a discontinuous series of roles in the future. Therefore, besides crafting such identities, individuals strove to build resources for maintaining them in the future. These portable identities and resources, in turn, sustained the individual's experience of dynamism and agency in what could otherwise be confusing, unpredictable, and fragmented careers.

Each section of our findings, below, expands the three portions of the model just outlined. We examine the emergence of the two identity work pathways, the strategies and interpretive frameworks involved in their consolidation, and the content and value of the portable identities to which they led. In all three sections, descriptions of each element are interwoven with quotes from participants supplemented by additional evidence in data tables.

The Emergence of Identity work Pathways: Between Orientations and Ideologies

Unsurprisingly, a month before the MBA began participants had given it much thought. Everyone expressed the intention to make a career transition. They expected that in a year's time they would work in a different role, function, company, sector, and/or country than the one they were about to leave. No one, however, knew for certain what those would be. One participant, who had already worked in two different industries prior to the MBA, noted, "I

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have always been very fluid. Depending on where the market is heading, and the trends we see in business, I am very open to different things. I never feel locked into a specific industry or function. I always think of myself as acquiring skills, not necessarily taking a job. Hopefully, in my skill gathering I will be able to get everything I need to take on whatever job comes my way" (53i). This attitude was widespread within our sample. As another participant succinctly summarized, "A career change is what I am looking for" (12i). Similarly, participants expected that they would be personally affected by the program. As one put it, "I know people who have gone through Blue, and I have been very impressed with the little transformation they went through, not only in terms of their ability to go out and get a good job, but also as people" (2i). Within these broad descriptions, analysis of the first round of interviews revealed systematic differences in participants' accounts of their future aspirations, which varied specifically in their degree of future identity clarity.

Future identity clarity describes the extent to which an individual approaching the MBA could articulate a desired future identity. Individuals with high clarity typically premised their hopes for the MBA by the words "I want to become...." For example, "I want to become a generalist rather than a specialist. So I thought of doing the MBA so that I can move into a completely different side of running a company" (19i). On the other end of the spectrum, those with low clarity were more likely to articulate unknowns, such as, "One reason why I am doing [the MBA] is that I don't know what I want. I suddenly woke up at 33 years old, thinking, what is it I want?" (35i). We found that participants' future identity clarity aligned with one of two identity work orientations that, in turn, influenced how they would perceive, and deal with, the challenges and opportunities they encountered on entering Blue.

Identity work orientations. Identity work orientation describes the aim for pursuing identity work and the belief in how the institution will facilitate it. We identified two orientations: one toward achievement and the other toward discovery. The former was typical of individuals with higher future identity clarity and the latter of those with lower clarity at the outset of the transition.

Individuals oriented toward *achievement* aimed to bridge a perceived gap between their current and desired future identities. While the degrees of specificity of the desired future identity X, and confidence in one's ability to accomplish it, varied within the category, the achievement orientation was expressed through the overarching questions "Can I become X? And how?" that underpinned these individuals' aims for the year. Some participants saw the MBA as a test that would prove (or disprove) their fitness and capacity to achieve their aims. In the words of one, "[The MBA] will help me understand whether I will be able to realize myself at a senior position in a global organization, because there are doubts I face" (31i). Others expected the course to equip them with knowledge and skills that would make desired identity claims more readily granted. One participant used a business metaphor to clarify that this entailed more than just managing the impression he made on others. He saw the MBA as "not just a marketing campaign, but you actually get the abilities to sell as well. So I will have a broader experience that will be very useful for me in looking for different sorts of jobs" (43i). Still others viewed the MBA degree as a key legitimizing factor in their desired identity claims. A former consultant who aspired to transition to the IT industry noted that "most of these executives who run Microsoft have MBAs. So if you want to be in that league, if you want to gel with them, to have their respect, having a graduate education from a very established institution gives you a lot more credibility" (29i).

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Accompanying these aims was a set of beliefs relating to how the MBA would facilitate their achievement. Accounts of choosing Blue among other schools, and expectations for what would happen during the year, often centered on how various MBA elements—such as specific courses, classmates, Blue's reputation and ranking—would legitimize desired identity claims. An engineer who aspired to become a general manager in industry noted that "Blue is very well known in industry, and it is very important to have an MBA that is well recognized in the sector where I want to continue my career" (26i). Another participant, for whom internationalism was a key feature of his desired identity, reported that he expected the diversity of the Blue MBA class to "teach me to work with different cultures in the future, because I do intend to work all over the world" (39i). On entering the institution, individuals with an achievement orientation conceptualized Blue as a stepping stone, "a step in a progression" (24i). In short, they had a desired future identity and saw the MBA as instrumental in realizing their aspiration.

In contrast, individuals oriented toward *discovery* were looking for inspiration. Their aim was to gain clarity about their current and future identities. While the degree of focus on current versus future identities and of uncertainty varied within the category, the orientation toward discovery was expressed through the overarching questions "Who am I? And who do I want to become?" that underpinned these individuals' aims for the year. For some individuals in this category, the purpose of doing an MBA was interwoven with the hope of exploring and resolving a specific identity dilemma, such as, "I am quite uncertain whether my happy life is to go into top management, which is what it will be going into my family business. I am quite sure that I will get some of those answers next year" (22i). For many, the year represented an opportunity to clarify both their current and desirable future identities. As one participant put it, "I would like to get to know myself and where my interests fall. And most important

personally and professionally, I'd like to find a job that will bring me satisfaction day to day. I want the MBA not to give it, but to help me discover it" (18i).

In articulating their expectations, individuals with a discovery orientation were unlikely to describe specific MBA elements as instruments to legitimize identity claims. Rather, they viewed the MBA as a setting that would be conducive to addressing dilemmas and questions that could not be tackled in the context of everyday life. Accounts of choosing Blue from among other schools often centered on the process of reflection and discovery it would afford. Some focused on how the novelty and diversity of the class would allow them to clarify their current and/or future identity, such as this participant pondering a move from the public to the private sector: "I am most expecting to be surprised. Maybe I will meet someone there who is doing something that I could never imagine doing right now. I think this would potentially send me in a direction that I do not or cannot imagine today. It could also happen that I will decide to stay on the general path that I am on now" (3i). Others highlighted time and space, focusing on how being removed from their familiar contexts for an extended period promised the opportunity to pause and revisit the trajectory of their professional and/or personal life. As one participant put it, "I am glad I'm here for 10 months, away from everyone. It gives me a lot of time for soul searching" (48i). It was common for individuals with a discovery orientation to conceptualize Blue as a retreat. In short, they had questions about current and future identity and viewed the MBA as a place where these might be addressed.

One community, two ideologies. On entering the program, the ideologies of career advancement and personal development—which suffused the program and had been anticipated by brochures, testimonials, and preparatory work—served as organizing

principles for most activities throughout the year.[4] The ideology of *career advancement* centered on delivering performance, understood as the capacities to achieve contracted goals and to act credibly and competently in a role. Effective performance was seen as dependent on sound technical and behavioral skills. Hence, acquiring these skills was central to the project of self-definition because they determined whether one would achieve one's desired aims. The ideology of *personal development* centered on finding meaning, understood as the ability both to make sense of one's own behavior and social context and to lead a life grounded in a set of values and infused with a sense of purpose. Understanding oneself and others was central to the project of self-definition because it determined whether one would be able to find and pursue a meaningful purpose.

At the programmatic level, both the career advancement and the personal development ideologies were integrated within a discourse of *leadership development*, which was described as the overall focus of the Blue MBA. In a white paper on the program, the MBA Dean, who spearheaded curriculum design efforts that resulted in the current format for the program, described the Blue MBA as providing opportunities "for participants to apply their leadership skills in real-world situations" and also "to deepen their self-understanding that will allow them to become more effective leaders." Thus, under the umbrella of leadership development, career advancement and personal development, as well as performance and meaning, were presented as equally important, highly complementary, and mutually enhancing. In most program components, however—such as classes, consulting projects, career counseling, or personal coaching—one ideology strongly prevailed over the other.

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[4] We follow Beyer's definition of ideology as a "relatively coherent sets of beliefs that bind some people together and that explain their worlds [to them] in terms of cause-and-effect relations" (1981, p.166, quoted in Trice & Beyer, 1984).

Authority figures within Blue, such as faculty members, career counselors, and coaches, offered guidance in different directions based on interpretation systems consistent with the dominant ideology of their courses. For the first four months, everyone attended the same mandatory activities associated with both ideologies, and, as a result, individuals, groups, and the class as a whole were under equally intense and constant pressure to perform—that is, to study and produce deliverables—and to scrutinize their experience to consider its underlying meaning. As one participant put it, "There was such high pressure and yet there was a parallel force asking, why did that happen?" (20iii)

In both formal activities and informal interactions, individuals were presented with various challenges to their identities. These challenges aligned with the two ideologies and were heightened by the novelty, diversity, and social and physical encapsulation of the community, which destabilized individuals' identity conceptions. One set of identity challenges, aligned with the career advancement ideology, targeted individuals' competence and credibility, bringing into question participants' ability to perform. One participant recalled experiencing such challenges as follows: "If you think you are a top performer in your old job, then you come here and you are in the group, and you give what you think is a brilliant idea, and others go 'yeah, whatever.' In my previous job I would sit and think, 'Yeah, I'm the man.' But here you realize you're not" (23ii). Another set of challenges, aligned with the personal development ideology, targeted individuals' motives and purpose, bringing into question the underlying reasons for their behavior. One participant reported that at Blue, "We are constantly being asked, and I started to ask myself much more frequently, why did you react that way? Why did you behave that way? Why do you think he behaved that way? I am being reminded to always ask why" (12iii).

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As the weeks passed, participants began progressively espousing one ideology while taking distance from the other. Each ideology offered both an interpretive lens for their experience in the institution and guidance in how to craft a valued identity within it. Participants espoused the ideology that promised to help address their most salient identity challenges. Those who were most affected by challenges to their competence and credibility relied primarily on the career advancement ideology, focused on performance. Those who were most affected by challenges to their motives and purpose relied primarily on the personal development ideology, focused on meaning. Internalization of the career advancement or personal development ideologies guided the pursuit of one of two identity work pathways, which, in turn, shaped their understanding of, behavior in, identification with, and relationships within Blue. The adaptive pathway centered on social experimentation within the context of an interpretation of Blue as a feedback-intensive training ground. The exploratory pathway centered on personal introspection within the context of an interpretation of Blue as an exposing magnifying glass.

From orientations to pathways. Because their initial aim was to actualize a desired future identity, we expected individuals with an achievement orientation to be most sensitive to competence and credibility challenges and to pursue adaptive identity work as a result. Conversely, we thought that individuals with a discovery orientation, who aimed to address open questions about current and future identities, would be most sensitive to motives and purpose challenges and to pursue exploratory identity work. While this pattern did occur, half of the individuals who entered with an achievement orientation pursued exploratory identity work, a pathway that seemed inconsistent with their orientation. A key factor in these switches was identity ownership.

Identity ownership describes the extent to which an individual gave agentic accounts of their current and desired identities. This was most evident in descriptions of key self-defining experiences, such as how they had chosen their fields of study, their line of work, the places they had lived, and the reasons for doing an MBA. Individuals with high ownership would give accounts featuring personal choice that often defied social pressure. This is how one participant, for example, reported resolving the doubt between accepting an admission offer to law school and a position in a multinational following her undergraduate studies: "I remember this like yesterday. I was sitting in my room, and my dad came down and said, 'What are you doing?' I said, 'Well, sitting here thinking about what to do.' And he said to me, 'You have to go to law school,' and I just knew that he can't tell me what to do. So I didn't go to law school simply because he told me that I had to" (34i).

On the other end of the spectrum, individuals with low ownership gave accounts that featured succumbing to pressure from families, teachers, or cultures when making key choices. As an example, consider this participant's account of how he chose to study engineering and later got his first job: "In my [home country], when you are at school and do not know what exactly to do, you do engineering. I started engineering without having a clear intention of what I wanted to do afterward. [My first job] was an opportunity that presented itself. The company was very interesting. One of the founders was a professor at the university where I did my PhD. They wanted to enter a new field, and that was the topic of my PhD" (8i).

Identity ownership affected which pathway people in the achievement orientation would pursue. Once identities were in play at the beginning of the MBA, individuals were constantly questioned by reflective course activities and by their peers as to the motives behind their aspirations and behavior. Among individuals with an achievement orientation,

those who could meet such scrutiny with agentic accounts of their identities—that is, they were relatively clear on their path and they considered it their own—pursued adaptive identity work. Those who could not give agentic accounts of their identities became progressively unsure of whose aspirations they really held. As a result, they were likely to begin paying more attention to the personal development ideology, which resulted in an experience of surprise (Louis, 1980) as demonstrated in the following quote: "I didn't expect the amount of introspection, the amount of below-the-table kind of stuff that you need to really think about, and talk about" (39iii). Such surprise led to a process of sensemaking followed by reorientation toward exploratory identity work. This process of sensemaking and reorientation was usually relational and featured another person within Blue—a classmate, a coach, a psychotherapist—who encouraged the individual toward pursuing exploratory identity work that would allow clarifying an identity that was felt as the participant's own.

Once individuals embarked on an identity work pathway, movement between pathways was infrequent. Participants' commitment to an identity work pathway reinforced their identification with the supportive ideology for that pathway and led them to discount the alternative one, which was progressively felt as less present. While in the first interview we could discern elements of both ideologies percolating in participants' talk, in the second and third interviews there was an increasing prevalence of one over the other, which, in the few cases when it was not ignored, was discounted or even denigrated. As time progressed, people in the two pathways began enacting different identity work strategies and developing different conceptions of Blue as an institution.

— Insert Table 2 here —

The Consolidation of Identity Work Pathways: Strategies and Interpretive Frameworks

Consolidation of each pathway occurred through two mutually reinforcing processes: individuals' enactment of the identity work strategies and incorporation of interpretive frameworks grounded in one of the two ideologies described earlier. While everyone was exposed to the same institutional discourses, had access to the same resources, and was subject to the same requirements, individuals' interpretations of these, and their corresponding use of them, varied according to the pathway they pursued.

Adaptive identity work strategies. The key strategy employed by individuals engaged in adaptive identity work was to undertake recursive cycles of social observation, experimentation, and evaluative self-reflection. This was geared toward acquiring and enacting scripts that were congruent with a desired identity and relinquishing those that were not. It involved constantly interpreting the social environment in an effort to identify appropriate scripts, colloquially referred to as "the rules of the game," and to test their enactment with others who provided a key source of validation or lack thereof. One participant described this process as follows: "I realized that leadership is somehow connected with respect, and respect in the class is commanded by people who have humanity and the ability to listen. It was a great discovery for me. Before, I thought that the more you talk, the more populist you are and the more people vote for you. But I realized that it is not like that; silence actually sometimes is better and it pays off. It was very unnatural for me, especially at the beginning; it brought stress and anxiety to suppress my natural inclination, but I think it was very good" (31ii).

Underlying these identity work efforts was an understanding of the self as an object that could and should be molded with the help of others' feedback. As one participant put it, "I

can change my personality if I want to, but I have to decide whether I want to change" (2ii). Few participants described these strategies as chameleon like, acting, or faking it. Instead, they viewed them as genuine development, as they interpreted the term—that is, shaping, refining, or polishing the selves they wanted to be. For example, one participant said, "A classmate said to me, 'Well [Name], you are at the core like a stone, like a diamond. What you can do here at Blue is to put nice cuts to it, so it is shiny and people will like it more. Somehow I have a feeling that there is truth to it" (10ii).

Exploratory identity work strategies. In contrast to adaptive identity work, the strategy employed by individuals who conducted exploratory identity work was to engage in ongoing introspection, both by themselves and assisted by others. This was geared toward examining the scripts they habitually used, as these manifested within the Blue context, and involved seeking to understand how past experience, personal idiosyncrasies, relational demands, and collective pressures shaped their habitual patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving. One participant described this process as follows: "I discovered a whole thing about where I come from, and how this all impacted my development, my thinking; it is much clearer in many ways. It is very interesting because nothing has changed. My family hasn't changed, my past hasn't changed, I am not somebody else. But a lot of things have become much clearer" (14ii).

Underlying this identity work pathway lay an understanding of the self as a mystery, one that might never be completely solved but that it was imperative to tackle. As one participant put it, "Basically this is a matter of discovery, discovery of self, to know where everything is coming from" (13iii). Individuals spent time examining inner states and social interactions for clues that might elucidate the origins, manifestations, and consequences of the self—to

reveal the person's essence, which, in turn, had to be accepted and confirmed by removing obstacles to its expression. This is what development meant for them. Participants undertaking exploratory identity work often reported undergoing a liberating, if tortuous, process of letting go of previous ideals and distancing from social pressures. One participant said, "I know that for me it's the right thing now to stay in [country X], but to take the best job option would mean to go elsewhere. And I know that many people around me don't understand that, but it doesn't bother me anymore. That does give you a certain degree of freedom" (47iii). To describe this process, participants often used terms such as "consciousness," "growth," and "maturation," often in combination, as in this example: "I think that I'm much more conscious about myself and about the place that I'm taking my life. And I think that I have changed and grown more mature as a person" (36iii).

Adaptive interpretation of the institution. Individuals undertaking adaptive identity work tended to conceptualize and experience Blue as distinct from, even if comparable to, their previous or future work contexts. They viewed it as a safer training ground, one in which they could experiment freely and prepare for the challenges of the real world. One participant articulated this conceptualization of the institution as follows: "Blue will always be a launching pad of sorts, and a way to really test yourself, and your thoughts, and what you've learned in a way that is forgiving, whereas the real world is less forgiving" (15iii). Holding an understanding of the institution as a training ground—that is, as more forgiving, yet with features and challenges similar to those of future work environments—was instrumental to sustaining the belief that successful adaptation in the Blue social context would yield an identity that had value beyond it. This belief, in turn, justified the effort of seeking and listening to feedback and working to take it on board.

Accordingly, the doubts of individuals conducting adaptive identity work usually focused on whether Blue was comparable enough to the work environments to which they aspired. Contrast the views of the following two individuals, both on the adaptive pathway, describing their study group experiences. One had found them valuable because "the Blue groups are probably more representative of who I will be working with in a corporate environment, whether it is a mining company or a bank. So it has been pretty useful for my own development to learn how to work in those situations, which are very different to what I was used to before" (43ii). The other had not found the groups valuable because "those groups with no hierarchy, no structure, may exist in some other industries, but I don't expect to find them in mine. I didn't feel comfortable in them. I felt it was a very artificial situation imposed on us, and I am not sure how useful it was really" (21iii). While coming to different conclusions, they both assessed learning opportunities and experiences on the basis of their "relevance"—a word often used to describe the perceived fit between Blue and future work contexts.

Exploratory interpretation of the institution. Whereas individuals undertaking adaptive identity work experienced Blue as removed from the real world, participants on the exploratory pathway tended to experience it as hyperreal, a magnifying glass of everyday experience. They found it to be more confronting and to grant fewer opportunities to avoid self-exploration. As much as adaptive identity workers experienced the temporary lack of a professional role as free and safe, exploratory ones experienced it as exposing. One participant compared Blue to her previous role with this metaphor: "When I became a project leader, that's when I realize that I got into a shell. Doing the MBA here helped me get out of that shell" (19iii). Holding an understanding of the institution as an exposing magnifying glass—distinct from a work environment because of its intensity and focus on personal

exploration—was instrumental in sustaining the belief that one's personal identity would be more easily revealed and could be more closely examined in the Blue social context. This belief, in turn, justified the efforts at self-reflection and self-expression because they would clarify and strengthen a personal identity that could then be held on to beyond Blue.

Accordingly, the doubts of individuals conducting exploratory identity work usually focused on whether the clarity and resolve they were gaining at Blue would fade in the fast-paced and activity-oriented world to which they would eventually return. In the language of participants, these questions centered on whether the learning and experiences acquired at Blue could be applied and how freely they would be able to continue expressing their personal identity, particularly in situations and relationships relating to their pre-MBA life. As one participant described this concern, "I learned how to operate better and avoid [past mistakes], but it is still in this environment here. Can I also avoid my mistakes and exercise everything I've learned in an environment where people are not helping me do that?" (11iii)

Adaptive interpretation of dominant discourses. The language of feedback and self-awareness was ubiquitous in our interviews, but we found systematic differences in what these words meant to participants on the two pathways. Individuals conducting adaptive identity work placed a high value on ongoing feedback from their peers. As one participant put it, "[My learning] has been mostly from the groups, the interactions with the people I talk to, the classmates, and the feedback that I have had over and over again" (29iii). Feedback was interpreted as a source of information about the gap between the person's current and desired identity. Self-reflection, both alone and with others, was oriented toward actions necessary to close the gap and centered on the questions "Is this feedback important to me?" and if so, "What do I need to do about it?" These are evident in the way this participant

described the value of receiving feedback from group members: "People tell you to your face what they think about you, and I didn't have this experience before. This is difficult to hear, surprisingly, because you are not objective in thinking about yourself. But you analyze it afterward to try to change something which is wrong, or if it is not wrong in your personal opinion, you don't change it" (6ii). Although reflexively answering these questions was an important step in their identity-construction process, participants in this group tended in their accounts to favor insights gained through social interaction rather than introspection.

The value of self-awareness lay in the possibility of discerning how one's behavior would affect other people and the consequences it may have for social relations. It was often characterized as the ability to assess one's strengths and weaknesses accurately, that is, similarly to how others would describe them. One participant articulated this view as "the more you understand people you lead, the better a leader you are. And what I realized is that the better you understand yourself, the better you actually understand others" (25ii). In short, in these participants' accounts, self-awareness was a tool for better performance of their roles.

Exploratory interpretation of dominant discourses. For individuals on in the exploratory pathway, receiving feedback from others featured less frequently as a salient experience than it did for individuals on the adaptive pathway. As one participant put it, "Nobody can point out what I did wrong, or in which respect I need to improve. It's very hard, and it's also hard for me to figure it out. You just try to figure out what you really like to do in your life to connect with your personality and your philosophy of life" (27ii). When mentioned, feedback was interpreted as someone else's perception, a piece of information about the self to reflect on rather than as a piece of information about an identity gap to act on. Individuals on this

pathway often saw others as sounding boards for discussing hypotheses about the self, sources of emotional support, and, at times, irritants to stand up against. Rather than experimenting with different scripts to test others' responses in social interactions, these individuals often attempted to behave similarly with different people in order to test their own ability to portray a consistent identity and to experience reactions from different interaction partners. They aspired, as one participant put it, "to deliver who I am in a single way to everybody" (30iii) and were frustrated when they could not. The value of self-awareness lay in the possibility of being able to understand one's values, attitudes, thoughts, feelings, and behaviors and others' influence on them. In these participants' accounts, self-awareness was an instrument that allowed them to be authentic in their role. As one put it, "I am more clear-cut about what I want and clearly define why I do things. I believe I know better myself and I clearly know what I can do, what my style is, where and when I feel more comfortable and what type of person I feel more comfortable with" (32ii).

— Insert Table 3 here —

The Aim of Identity Work Pathways: Portable Identities

While employing different strategies and holding different conceptualizations of the institution and what development and success entailed, participants engaged in both identity work pathways shared common ground. They directed their identity work efforts toward constructing and validating identities that held value within and beyond Blue. These portable identities promised to be valued within (at least a subset of) the Blue community, to help accomplish or direct participants' immediate career transitions, and to hold value beyond in the contexts in which participants expected and aspired to continue their life and careers after the MBA. The portable identity that individuals valued and aimed to craft, refine, and consolidate was different for each of the two pathways.

Portable identity content. Individuals who conducted adaptive identity work shared the aim of achieving and receiving validation for a desired social identity. Rather than being linked to becoming more suited for a specific role, organization, or sector, such as "to get into M&A in investment banking" (42ii), most often it was broader. Labels frequently used to describe it were "international," "manager," and "leader." One participant, who had worried at the beginning of the MBA that he might not have the characteristics or skills to claim such an identity, described as his most valuable realization that "I am not that different from other people who will be the leaders tomorrow. So I can also be a leader tomorrow" (41ii).

Individuals who conducted exploratory identity work shared the aim of gaining a finer understanding of and stronger grounding in their personal identity. In discussing how she had benefited from the MBA, one participant reported that it had surpassed her expectations because "something happened that I never thought would: I emerged as a new, not exactly a new self, but more conscious about myself and with a clear definition" (34iii). Both the broad social identity and the sharply defined personal identity held value within and beyond Blue.

The value of portable identities: Direction, support in future transitions, dynamism, and agency. On leaving Blue, both portable identities held the promise of generating opportunities and orienting choices of work roles and environments in ways that provided participants with a widely reported sense of confidence about the future. For participants engaged in adaptive identity work, such confidence was related to feeling flexible enough to gain entry into and to adapt to a broad range of roles and work environments, as the following quote illustrates: "My motivation to get an MBA was always to balance the background and the skill that I had in a way that would position me to be more versatile, to be more

international, and to be able to really go after anything" (15iii). Accordingly, the number and breadth of job offers was seen as a key validating factor of one's portable identity and of the value of the MBA. As one participant put it, "I wanted basically to get the highest number of [job] offers in the year. But it wasn't an explicit goal. It was an implicit goal that I wanted to make sure that I could find a job at will, and that's something I've been able to do" (2iii).

For participants engaged in exploratory identity work, confidence was related to feeling clear and resolute enough to select and gain entry into roles and work environments that would allow them to express their personal identity: "I certainly have a picture of myself. It is clear that I am more comfortable being balanced in private life and work life. It is also my very true vision. So I am talking to [company name]; the culture seems to be quite attractive" (14ii). Accordingly, the resolve to pursue only jobs with a high fit was seen as a key validating factor of participants' accomplishments during the MBA. As one participant who had set on a specific job target as a result of exploratory work put it, "I had several companies email me with pretty interesting positions, and I declined all those invitations. I may live to regret it, but it's the decision I wanted to make. I've really been consciously trying to paint myself into the corner, and making sure that I don't get those kinds of easy options, because they're just sometimes too tempting" (51iii).

In the long term, both portable identities could be used as a bridge between a discontinuous series of roles in the mobile and fragmented careers in which participants expected to remain engaged. Both the international business leader social identity and the sharply defined personal identity held the promise of organizing career trajectories and providing long-term stability and continuity. Reflecting on how he had changed over the year, one participant noted that "before I thought I was more tied to people and to places and to organizations, and

now I think that I can go anywhere" (8iii). We posit that holding a portable identity allows such a thought to be sustained and makes it possible for it to be desirable because such identities immunized individuals, at least partially, against the frequent identity challenges of the itinerant careers in which they were involved.

Overall, in providing them with legitimacy within Blue, opportunities and orientation on leaving it, and potential to bridge discontinuities in the long term, portable identities bolstered individuals' perceptions of dynamism and agency. One participant captured this combination metaphorically in comparing his career to a bicycle: "I left parental help before, but probably I was in between. I was riding the bicycle with the small stabilizers on the back wheels. And now I am riding the bicycle without them. I am ready just to go and explore things on my own" (36iii). This comment captures the underlylying factor that motivated the pursuit of either identity work pathway with its corresponding portable identity: the possibility of crafting a dynamic and agentic identity. Given their prior experiences, current identities, and future aspirations, individuals pursued the pathway that afforded them the strongest experience of dynamism and agency in their career unfolding. That gave them the feeling, so to speak, of being in charge of who they were becoming. Those whose past, current, and desired future identities felt grounded in personal choices and were crafted by the self experienced the international business leader identity as enhancing their already agentic identities. Those whose current and future identities were either unclear or felt ascribed by others experienced the need to work on a sharper personal identity in order to enhance the agency of their identity. As one participant put it, "I don't want that my life will not belong to me" (13iii). Whereas the former strove to fulfill their desire, the latter worked to recover it, or to discover it anew.

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We found further evidence for the claim that the purpose of individuals' identity work was to craft a portable identity that sustained a conception of the self as dynamic and agentic. This evidence was in the accounts of the few individuals on both pathways who did not report feeling confident on leaving Blue but were, instead, concerned or disappointed. For participants who had pursued adaptive identity work, disappointment was linked to the perception that existing ascribed identities were incongruent with the international business leader identity and hence diminished their perceived legitimacy in claiming it. For example, one participant focused his concerns on his nationality and how the international status of his country reflected negatively on his credibility: "Lots of people are looking at you in relation to the country where you come from, and sometimes my opinions were not heard because I am from a country which is not so important" (6ii). For participants who had pursued exploratory identity work, disappointment was linked to the perception that dependence on a constricting social setting would limit their ability to express their personal identity. One participant who had to return home after the MBA to support the family business in unforeseen circumstances noted bitterly, "I know that very soon I'll be just a damn suit with a smile on my face and fitting a mold" (17iii). In both cases, existing identities limited participants' agency in crafting and claiming who they were and who they could become.

Resources to sustain portable identities. Besides crafting and consolidating portable identities that would hold currency in more than one setting and could act as a reference point for identity work in itinerant careers, participants also used their Blue experience to acquire resources that would allow them to sustain these identities in the future. Just as the understanding of Blue—as either a training ground or a magnifying glass—varied between pathways in a way that was instrumental to the crafting of either portable identity, the interpretation of skills and relationships gained during the year varied in a way that was

instrumental to the maintenance of those identities. For example, individuals pursuing an international business leader portable identity saw the ability to understand the covert psychological dynamics at play in social systems, gained through the MBA's experiential learning modules, as a tool that enhanced their flexibility by allowing them to quickly grasp the culture and dynamics of new social systems and to act appropriately within them. As one participant said, "I considered myself an adaptable and flexible person before coming here, but now I realize that, no way. Yes, I traveled a lot and I interacted in different functional areas of my former companies and I have lived in different cities for nine years, but that doesn't mean anything. Now, when in another environment, you see the new dynamics, and then you realize what is behind everything, and what is behind you, and how you can impact it" (28ii).

Conversely, individuals pursuing the consistent expression of their personal identity viewed the same ability as a tool that enhanced their identity's strength by allowing them to engage in different social systems without being unduly affected by them. One participant summarized how this learning would help him to hold on to his personal identity after Blue, saying that "things haven't changed in [home country], but a lot of things have changed in me. The challenge will be to position myself in a different way than I was before with the same people, who have some perception of me . It will be a little difficult not to go back on the same track. But I think I will be able to do it. I feel today much stronger in that sense. I can understand the movements in my reactions to what people expect, so I can work a little better in that sense" (8iii). Relationships with fellow classmates were also expected to sustain a participant's portable identity in the long term, as a potential source of either opportunities, support, or both. Individuals commonly felt that they belonged "to a community to which you

have access anywhere in the world, a more global community" (39iii) and would have "a support structure of people who will understand what I am talking about" (19iii).

— Insert Table 4 here —

DISCUSSION

This paper bridges and makes several contributions to the literature on identity dynamics in and across organizations and to the practice of management education.

Contributions to Theory

Our first contribution to the identity literature is in describing different orientations to identity work at the outset of transitional periods. Our study suggests that individuals do not approach social systems that will require identity work as blank slates. They bring with them past experiences and future aspirations that shape provisional aims for their identity work and expected strategies for undertaking it. This is consistent with scholarly work that rejects the view of individuals as passive recipients of socialization tactics enacted by established organizational members and recognizes their active involvement in shaping activities and relationships in the roles they aspire to and take up (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979; Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001). Participants in our study reflected on and experimented with their personal and professional self-conceptions within and at the boundaries of Blue. They also took advantage of the leeway provided by Blue's dual ideologies to construct the institution and the educational process in a way that sustained the identity work pathway that afforded them the strongest experience of agency. Besides crafting activities and relationships, they developed conceptions of the institution that were consistent with and supportive of their identity work. This finding expands an emerging research stream on the coevolution of individual and organizational identities (Carlsen, 2006) by suggesting that

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organizational ideologies and identities may be shaped, enacted, and reinforced by organizational members not simply because this provides security and belonging, but because it sustains individual unfolding identities.

Our second contribution is the articulation of alternative pathways of identity work, with different aims, strategies, experiences of the institution, and underlying conceptualizations of the self. The efforts of individuals undertaking adaptive identity work in our study mirror existing research on identity work in adaptation to professional roles (Ibarra, 1999). Unlike many of the professionals undertaking role transitions in Ibarra's (1999) study, social experimentation for participants in our study did not involve imitating senior role models but rather was heavily influenced by feedback received from peers, a finding that mirrors what Pratt, Rockmann, and Kaufmann (2006) found in their study of medical residents. Nearly half of our sample, however, while also actively and consciously engaged in working on their self-conceptions, did so in a strikingly different fashion. The identity work conducted by individuals pursuing the exploratory pathway echoes the "soliloquies" that Athens (1994) argued to be characteristic of individuals during significant life experiences and times of personal change. For these individuals, the primary referent other of the identity work was not the social other, but the internal other. Much of their work seemed to be aimed at surfacing, and coming to new terms with, the "phantom community" (Athens, 1994) of internalized significant others.

The finding that individuals focused on developing identities that would open things up as much as making them fit reinforces an emerging view that identity work is not always geared toward settling scores with the past or feeling more comfortable in the present. Individuals craft work identities as much to position themselves in their current organization as to infuse

their work life with meaning, and "their motives range from needs for retrospective coherence and unity in lived experience to more prospective qualities of purpose, challenge, unpredictability, and hope" (Carlsen, 2006: 134). In elucidating different pathways through which individuals craft identities that allow them to fulfill both retrospective and progressive needs, we bring further granularity to this insight and advance conceptual work on different routes to the construction of valued identities (Dutton, Morgan Roberts and Bednar 2010). In addition, our study reveals the role of agency not only as a means to an end in identity construction, but as an end in itself.

Third, our study contributes to a burgeoning body of scholarship examining the ways organizations support the crafting and enacting of individual's desired identities (Bandura, 1982; Pratt, 2000; Anteby, 2008; Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010). Scholars have acknowledged that identity work can be ignited either by the social environment or by the individual (Kreiner, Hollensbe and Sheep, 2006). However, research on the dynamic unfolding of individuals' identities has privileged the ways individuals protect or change their self-conceptions in response to constraints posed by their social context in general and by specific roles in particular (Kunda, 1992; Van Maanen, 1998; Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007). This work commonly portrays individuals and social settings in a constant state of tension— the former attempting to craft or regain a degree of individuality in response to the latter's pull toward conformity. Less attention to date has been paid to "the notion that organizations might shape identities in a direction desired by members" (Anteby, 2008: 203). Specifically, our study highlighted the role of dual institutional ideologies as an opportunity for individuals to pursue the pathways that infused their identity with the strongest sense of dynamism and agency.

Our fourth contribution to identity scholarship is to expand a body of work that, until now, has focused on individuals entering or holding new roles in settings with highly codified display rules (Sutton, 1991). Existing research has elucidated how individuals bridge the gap between their current identity and activities and a desired new role (Ibarra, 1999; Pratt, Rockmann and Kaufmann, 2006) or organization (Beyer and Hannah, 2002; Pratt, 2000); maintain a desired personal identity while occupying a demanding (Kreiner, Hollensbe, and Sheep, 2006; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003) or stigmatized (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Snow and Anderson, 1987) social or occupational role; or leave behind a social, occupational, or professional role (Ebaugh, 1988). Our investigation of managers engaged in itinerant career transitions within the setting of an international MBA program explores a starkly different predicament and setting from those just mentioned. Without the clear reference point of a role they held or were about to enter, and in a social context featuring a novel diverse community, dual ideologies, and multiple possible outcomes, individuals faced the challenge of fluid social dynamics rather than rigid social constraints.

This study embraced the perspective that identity scholars need "to look at the whole lives of *people who do managerial work* rather than at the so-called 'managerial identities' of organizational managers" (Watson, 2009: 426-427, italics in original). Our focus and findings help address the broader question of "how can a human being develop a narrative of identity and life history in a society composed of episodes and fragments?" (Sennett, 1998: 26). We suggest that individuals engaged in itinerant careers deal with increased requirements for identity work and loose organizational identification by co-opting institutions such as business schools not only to facilitate transitions to new work domains but also to develop and legitimize portable identities for the longer term. These, in turn, confer a degree of stability while also bolstering a sense of dynamism and agency. In our study, these portable

identities took the form of either a social identity as an international business leader or a clear personal identity. Independent of national, occupational, or organizational context, such identities reduce the strain posed by the frequent discontinuities and lack of institutionalized transitions characteristic of itinerant careers and have the potential to function as "antidotes to the 'external' turbulence and fragmentation of the organizational world" (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003: 1189).

Scholars studying careers in external labor markets have already examined the opportunities and constraints posed by broad versus sharper work identities. Zuckerman, Kim, Ukanwa and von Rittman (2003) suggested that the former confer an advantage in accessing job opportunities only if the individual already has legitimacy as having the requisite expertise for the position. Such legitimacy, they argued, is more likely to be gained through the claiming of a narrower, sharper identity. Our study complements this work by looking at the processes involved in the development of either broad or sharply defined identities.

Finally, this paper enriches a burgeoning stream of research that focuses on learning as becoming within a social context (Carlsen, 2006; Lave and Wenger, 1991) and examines the processual, existential, and emotional aspects of management learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Willmott, 1997; Thomas and Linstead, 2002) and education (Sturdy et al., 2006). Specifically, our investigation of identity construction in the context of itinerant careers complements recent scholarship focused on the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and expertise within these careers (Barley and Kunda, 2004; O'Mahony and Bechky, 2006) and enriches theoretical claims that "the more fluid the corporate environment, the more management education and learning become closely related to, and potentially overlaps with, managers' identity work" (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010: 55). We suggest that our insights

may be generalizable beyond business schools to other transitional settings, for example, military training camps, seminaries, junior cohorts in consulting firms, sabbaticals, summer camps, and so on.

In the last decade, leading management scholars have engaged in significant debate about the purpose, values, methods, and social function of business schools (Gioia, 2002; Pfeffer and Fong, 2002; Ghoshal, 2005; Khurana, 2007; Podolny, 2009; Starkey and Tempest, 2009). In light of these concerns, understanding students' identity dynamics within management education is a research imperative of significant theoretical importance and practical relevance. Taking up the exhortation to "turn our research expertise on our own teaching methods and the institutions that employ us" (Cummings, 2007: 358), our study is, to our knowledge, the first to address rigorously and longitudinally participants' identity work within an international MBA. In doing so, it fills a gap in the literature between identity studies in management education that use exit interviews and questionnaires (e.g. Ballou et al., 1999; Sturdy et al., 2006) or cross-sectional designs (Kelan and Dunkley Jones, 2009), and longitudinal studies that focus on identity work in relation to gaining, holding, or exiting specific roles (e.g. Ebaugh, 1988; Ibarra, 1999; Kreiner, Hollensbe and Sheep, 2006; Pratt, Rockmann and Kaufmann, 2006).

Contributions to Practice

This paper makes several contributions to practice, especially in the domains of management development. First, our findings challenge the stereotypical view of management students, and MBAs in particular, as single mindedly focused on career advancement. While accelerating progress and smoothing transitions in highly mobile, international careers was a prevalent aim in our cohort, a sizeable number of students engaged in the process with the

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overt primary aim of discovering a career and life path infused with a sense of purpose. Views of the year at Blue as a fast track to highly coveted positions existed side by side with views of it as an inner journey toward a clearer, more grounded sense of self. Wishes for the MBA to help connect the dots—whether of one's career or one's broader life path—may well be, at least in part, the results of the fragmented careers and lifestyles participants were engaged in. Hence, this research helps cast new light on the identity challenges and aspirations of individuals engaged in itinerant careers.

The Blue MBA was the research setting, rather than the research focus, of this study. Therefore, we cannot draw any conclusions about the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of specific educational designs and pedagogies. However, our findings suggest that faculty and administrators of management education might find it useful to challenge the assumption that there may be a uniform answer to the question of "what management students want." Taking into account the diversity of purposes, concerns, and identity-work pathways presented here may allow us to better support the development of all students. For example, our study may help explain common misunderstandings and conflicts between management faculty and students and why different students appear to find some courses more interesting and relevant than others. These may not only be due to the quality of course materials and instruction or to their potential applicability to an individual's coveted job but also to the fact that the institutional ideology underlying a course may be inconsistent with the identity work pathway students are engaged in, leading those students to discount or "not get" the course.

This study highlights a paradox that may apply as much to MBA programs as to long general management programs: how to support both students who are engaged in adaptive identity work and those who are engaged in exploratory identity work. Individuals may find it

confusing when a faculty member attempts to mix the ideologies of career advancement and personal development in their approach. On the other hand, courses and faculty that too strongly embrace one or the other risk systematically sustaining the development of a portion of the class while alienating another portion. Managing this paradox represents a complex challenge in course design and delivery. For example, it may be possible for classroom instructors to carefully craft and deliver balanced courses that incorporate both ideologies, perhaps by highlighting the applicability of their material to specific managerial challenges as well as to personal development. However, balancing both ideologies without confusing or disappointing students may prove harder for instructors who work in more intimate settings, such as group or individual coaching or career counseling. It may be most helpful for these instructors not to try to be everything to everyone but to state clearly a philosophy and orientation so as to allow individuals to choose whether and how to use them. Administrators, then, may be better served by inviting core-course faculty to frame their courses in ways that sustain both identity work pathways while providing a good mix of elective courses and coaching opportunities that are geared toward one or the other.

Finally, our study highlights an important and timely challenge for management education. Hosting, sustaining, and legitimizing individuals' development of portable identities may help immunize them against the challenges, confusion, and fragmentation of itinerant careers. However, it also risks unmooring highly skilled employees further from organizational identifications and providing an escape from the organizational communities in which they exercise their managerial responsibilities. In addition, as exceptional work performance is not always portable across organizations (Groysberg, Lee, and Nanda, 2008), holding portable identities that enhance individuals' mobility may, paradoxically, expose them to career risks. This resonates with the criticism directed at traditional MBA pedagogy in particular (Golsling

and Mintzberg, 2004). Our study results show that the content of both types of portable identities were heavily influenced by the discursive resources available within the institution. This suggests that it is important to pay attention to the content of courses, pedagogical material, and instructors' talks as sources of raw material for students' identity construction.

Limitations and Future Research

Building theory from accounts of a single year in one MBA program exposes our study to generalizability challenges common to inductive research. Our findings may be viewed as idiosyncratic of that particular setting. The large size of our sample (55 students interviewed three times) contributes to strengthening the validity of the findings, although future research could usefully test it in other settings. Researchers interested in identity work within management education might investigate the influence on the process we outlined of different job market conditions (during the year of our study, most students had several attractive job offers), MBA program duration (one versus two years), students' average age and work experience, course structure (full-time versus part-time), and class internationalism (presence versus absence of a dominant national culture). While most MBA programs contain elements of both ideologies described here, the relative influence of these ideologies varies. Studies comparing programs with different balances may yield useful insights.

Researchers interested in identity work within itinerant careers might want to compare our findings with samples of individuals attempting transitions outside of educational environments. While amenable to theoretical generalization, our study did not intend to focus on pedagogical effectiveness, popularity, or the long-term impact of a particular management education approach, design, or mix of pedagogies. Scholars of management education might take the findings presented in this paper forward by examining how specific courses or

approaches affect students' self-definitions alongside their knowledge and skill acquisition. They could also examine whether and how pathways affect identification with one's alma mater in the long term. Other promising research avenues involve the potential influence of individual factors, such as personality, learning orientations (Dweck, 1986), or stages of adult development (Kegan, 1982) on the identity work pathways outlined here. While we found that individuals conducted either adaptive or exploratory identity work, probably due to the one-year time frame and the intensity of the Blue environment, studies with a longer time frame might reveal if and how individuals use both pathways at different points in their lives.

To elucidate identity dynamics in prolonged transitions, this study focused on the space between role exit and role entry. Future research might investigate how the circumstances of the former affect identity work orientations and how the identity work conducted within this space affects individuals' entry into their next professional role. The concept of portable identities, in particular, may provide rich ground for future investigations in this area. One promising avenue would be to explore how either portable identity affects role entry (Nicholson, 1984; Ashforth, 2001) and adaptation processes (Ibarra, 1999; Pratt, Rockmann and Kaufmann, 2006). In providing both continuity and agency, portable identities are likely to motivate and filter the process of crafting and experimenting with provisional selves. It would be interesting to consider whether individuals privileging a sharp personal identity attempt to bring more of their personal experience into new roles (Beyer and Hannah, 2002), or are more likely to experience their work as a 'calling' (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). Another question is whether individuals who embrace the broad identity of international business leader experiment with a broader range of provisional selves during role adaptation. Addition questions concern whether internalizing a portable leader identity increases individuals' motivation to lead (Chan and Drasgow, 2001) and makes them more likely to emerge as

leaders in different social systems and more able to discern how to claim leadership in those systems (DeRue and Ashford, 2010a). In addition, scholars might study how each portable identity affects the ways people approach, reflect on, and learn from experiences in future roles (DeRue and Ashford, 2010b).

Finally, our epistemology and methods are rooted in the interpretive tradition, and we focused on "the process by which actors construct meaning out of intersubjective experience" (Suddaby, 2006:.634). Future research employing methods such as discourse analysis, or perhaps ethnography, might interpret those meanings from a different perspective. Such a perspective might discern, for example, to what extent portable identities represent venues for subtle forms of control (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Anteby, 2008) by fostering compliance with idealized versions of the self shaped by dominant social discourses or to what extent their development provides anchors for microemancipation by encouraging students to examine critically the micro and macro social influences that shape their experience and future ambitions. Such research might also clarify the contingencies in which identity work processes and venues such as those described here could be harnessed for the purpose of conformity or resistance to insecurity-provoking social structures and discourses (Collinson, 2003; Gagnon, 2008).

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TABLE 1
Characteristics of the Sample (N=55)

Average age (range)	30.8 (27-35)
Nationalities in the sample	37
Average years of work experience (range)	7.4 (2.5-12)
Average number of employers (range)	2.2 (1-6)
Average number of countries worked in (range)	1.8 (1-5)
Percent with direct management experience	86%
Percent women	23% ($n = 13$

FIGURE 1
Data Structure

First-Order Codes **Theoretical Categories** **Aggregate Theoretical Dimensions**

- Accounts of major life decisions based on personal choice in defiance of external constraints
- Accounts of major life decisions in accordance with what was expected / suggested by others or culture

→ Identity Ownership

- Statements articulating a desired future identity
- Statements expressing doubts or lack of vision about future direction

→ Desired Identity Clarity

→ Identity History & Aspirations

- Questions about ability and to achieve future identity, "Can I become X?" and "How?"
- Statements linking Blue features to desired identity
- Referring to MBA as a "stepping stone"

→ Achievement

- Statements about identity dilemmas, "Do I want to be X?"
- Questions about current and future identity, "Who am I?" and "Who do I want to become?""
- Statements about Blue as a setting for self-discovery
- Referring to MBA as a "retreat"

→ Discovery

→ Identity Work Orientations

- Descriptions of pressure to perform competently
- Statements about challenges to one's credibility
- Statements about acquiring knowledge and skills to perform

→ Competence Challenges

- Descriptions of pressure to answer "why" questions
- Statements about challenges to one's motives
- Statements about using MBA opportunities to make sense of one's behavior and/or find meaningful work

→ Meaning Challenges

→ Identity Challenges

- Statements about finding out the "rules of the game"
- Statements about practicing scripts to achieve desired identity
- Statements about "self-awareness" and "feedback" as means to more effective performance
- Statements about "smoothing rough edges"
- Descriptions of Blue as a training ground / safe space
- Concerns about "relevance" of learning

→ Adaptive

- Statements about trying to understand "how I function"
- Statements about clarifying scripts underlying one's behavior
- Statements about "self-awareness" as means to remain authentic and "feedback" as others' perception
- Statements about "discovering" the self
- Descriptions of Blue as exposing / magnifying glass
- Concerns about whether learning will "stick"

→ Exploratory

→ Identity Work Pathways

- Statements about becoming an "international" "manager," and/or "leader" in business
- Expressed confidence linked to variety of job opportunities or concerns if not available
- Statements about "fast tracking" one's career
- Statements about MBA learning and relationships valued to sustain momentum in future

→ Broad Social Identity

- Statements about having clear sense of self
- Expressed confidence linked to ability to express "who I am," concerns if not possible
- Statements about undergoing an "inner journey"
- Statements about MBA learning and relationships valued to sustain self-expression in future

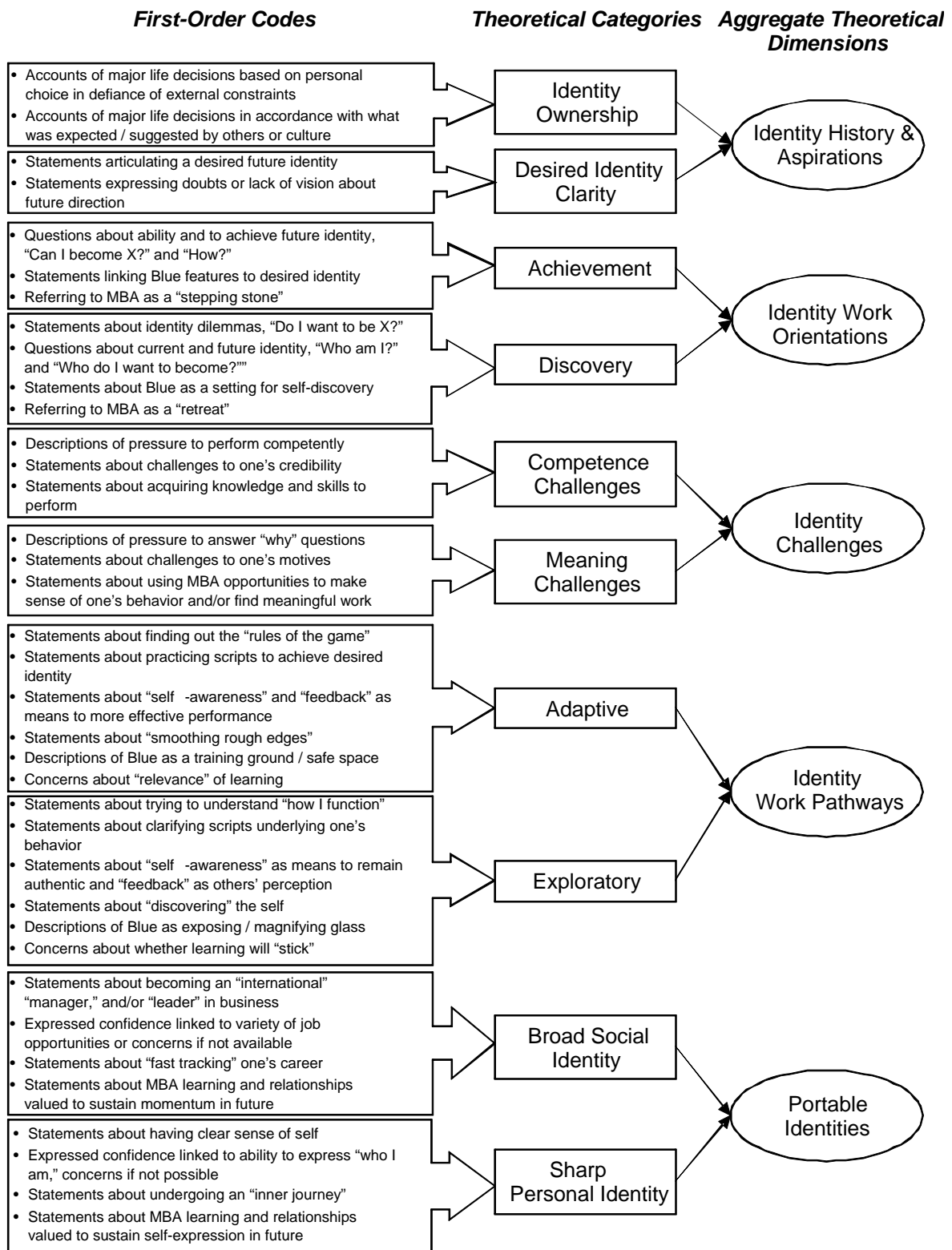→ Sharp Personal Identity

→ Portable Identities

FIGURE 2
A Process Model of Adaptive and Exploratory Identity Work

65

TABLE 2
Evidence of Achievement and Discovery Identity Work Orientations

	Illustrations	
	Achievement	**Discovery**
Aim	*To bridge gap between current and desired identity* "I really want to become a general manager who has in his backpack the MBA of a good and famous school. During my time as a consultant, I admired those people who had an MBA from a good school, so I wanted to do it myself." (25i) "I definitively don't want to be stuck in the world of middle management. I want to lead, I want to be a [Managing Director], and not just a low-level MD. I want to head an entire finance department, a global department in a big corporation." (23i)	*To clarify current and future identities* "What I am looking for is, to be really honest, is that people have asked me 'So what do you want to do?' and my answer is 'I don't know.' Maybe I will find out at the end of the year." (12i) "I am hoping Blue will take me a step further. I don't know what that step further is. I like to think there is a whole new way of thinking of myself, of thinking of my life, of thinking how I am going to be facing work. And that is not just overcoming my weaknesses; it is something that I am not seeing right now and I will see after Blue." (18i)
Overarching Questions	*Can I become X? How?* "One of my ideas or goals in the long term is to start up my own [type X] company. All the entrepreneurial aspects of the program will be helpful to at least realizing if it is a good idea and it is worth continuing." (9i) "I would really like to become not only a CEO, but to lead really, an important financial firm… I hope that Blue will give me more credibility, make it easier to have an important position in a big company." (41i)	*Who am I? Who do I want to become?* "Well, to be honest, the future is really open. I will end this course by knowing myself much more, and that's one thing that is sure for me. I could realize that I am not the person who leads 10,000 people in a company, and that's fine for me. . . . I think that is the most valuable thing that I want to get from the MBA program: to explore a totally new life." (27i) "What I want from this experience is to realize what I really want, not what I can really excel in. These are like two separate issues. What I can do well is different from what I really want and feel comfortable in." (17i)
Expectations of MBA Contribution to Identity Work	*MBA elements as means to specific ends* "If I want to end up as a future leader it gets more important that I understand the intricacies of financing. If you can't keep score, you can't really tell if you are winning or not." (24i)	*MBA as a setting to address dilemmas and questions* "One motivation for this course is to step back a little bit from my career development to date and think if that is really what I want to do for the rest of my life." (11i)

	"I am aiming for a change of country, culture, language, and potentially industry, which is an almost insurmountable list of barriers to overcome in one go. I want to get a good job without having to reprove everything I have already proved in London. So I need a qualification, if you like, which would carry with it a certain amount of status, which says, 'These are the things this person has achieved, because otherwise we wouldn't have let him in, and, by the way, we have now taught him all these other things as well.' " (54i)	"I have very strong values, and if there are certain facets of my life where I am still quite immature, or haven't grown a lot, or conservative, I would want to see myself exposed to the opposite side. And I want to make a decision: Do I want to change that facet or am I comfortable remaining with my defaults? It's really exposing my being to things that I have never been exposed to and have the option to decide." (55i)
Salient Identity Challenges	"I was very proud of everything I had done in my work and my credentials, but then when I came here, I met other people and realized that what I did is nothing, it doesn't look anything special to me now." (46ii)

"Others have a lot of self-confidence and sometimes that threatened me. It threatened me because I thought before I came here that I was confident enough to compete against them, in such a competitive environment, but sometimes my colleagues are much superior to me in specific areas." (37ii) | "I've never just sat back and said, you know, 'What do I want to do with my life?' I've never said that to myself before. . . . This whole notion of kind of pushing pause on your career and thinking about that has been really, really good here. It's given me the opportunity to reflect on options but also to consider the voices in my head as well." (51iii)

"I started pretty open, like a white sheet of paper, eager to absorb everything. Then I passed through quite a critical moment questioning the why of everything." (32ii) |

TABLE 3
Evidence of Adaptive and Exploratory Identity Work

| | Illustrations | |
	Adaptive	**Exploratory**
Strategy	*Cycles of social observation, experimentation, and self-reflection* "During the program I've realized that sometimes you need to show your presence even earlier. Once you say something good, people listen to you better later, but if you don't say anything for too long or if you are too passive it is more difficult also to be assertive later." (41iii) "In the second group I took a very different approach [from the first group]. Rather than caring too much about whether it was going to be nice or not, I said what I really thought and expressed myself more freely and everything changed; my role was very different in this second group than in my first group." (46ii)	*Ongoing introspection, social distancing and support* "I don't have the feeling that I had enough time to let it sink in yet, but I feel that in the last five to six months I have had more material to think about myself than I had in my whole life before. I have never been so deep into myself as I have in the last months." (11ii) "There is an inward focus in trying to understand who you are, what you really want. When I am unhappy doing something which I chose to do, then I try to think back that, is this really what I want or did I force that thing on myself because that's the thing to do?" (39iii)
View of Blue as an Institution	*Not quite the real world, a safe training ground* "Although it is more real-life-oriented than most of the other programs, it is still a little cocoon in the middle of reality, so you feel safe and quiet and protected here. You know you'll have to go and fight in the real life soon." (9iii) "This is a one-year dress rehearsal; if you don't get to try things out here, then it's a wasted year. It's expensive enough here, so I may as well work hard" (50ii)	*More exposing than everyday life, a magnifying glass* "It's the pressure, the constant interaction with everyone. There's no place to hide mainly. That's the thing, you're going to deal with things whether you like it or not." (40iii) "The great thing about here is the pressure that they put us through, the immense pressure. And once you experience the pressure more, then you know your weakness much better. Before, during work, you hide it, in Blue you are totally exposed. … You have nothing but yourself here, that's the way I see it." (17ii)
Interpretation of Discourses	*Feedback: Information about gap between current and desired identity* "Some of the feedback I got early on, especially in the first group, was that I can be more forceful and push my own argument and experiment more with that behavior, and that has been important for me because I think throughout my time at [previous employer], I was rewarded for not shaking things up." (3iii)	*Feedback: Another's perception to reflect on* "I think it is important to kind of step back and look at yourself in absence of all of [your roles] and really understand who you are. … Getting feedback about your performance at work is great, but what does that tell you about your personal life? Is there a link?" (51ii)

	Self-awareness: Awareness of others' perception of self	*Self-awareness: Understand self and others' influence on it*
	"I think you have to act differently if you know what's going on; you have foresight of where the group dynamics are going. If you have that foresight, you can change what's going to happen by the way you act and the way you interact." (15iii)	"When I do not know someone, at the beginning I am very cold. I don't try to talk too much, but when I break the ice, it is my real self, because I know who I am. And I related that kind of behavior to the one that was also happening when I was a child. For example, because the family of my father is extremely aristocratic, and I was one of the youngest in the family, I was sometimes the butt of jokes. And it is not only that I developed this kind of shame thing, but also this 'Do not try to talk too much because they are going to laugh about you' kind of thing." (13ii)

TABLE 4
Evidence of Portable Identities

	Illustrations	
	Broad social identity	**Sharply defined personal identity**
Content of Portable Identities	"[My goal for the MBA] is to be an international manager." (5ii) "I am completely committed to being a global manager in the future, so I have to really maintain my marketability while having a kid and family and all that sort of thing." (44iii)	"I am developing a completely new way of seeing myself and seeing how others interact with me. So this is, I think, a process that can be done only by me and that has to be continuous. I mean I have to work on it, nobody will do it for me." (32ii) "I became more proud of who I am, this is me and this is how I feel and this is how I behave." (17iii)
The Value of Portable Identities	*Facilitate immediate transition:Flexibility* "I did the MBA to reinforce my profile as a general manager and to validate the fact that I am not a pure engineer. The company I am interviewing with now is in an industry where I have no previous experience, and it looks like this company is indeed seeing me in the light I wanted to be seen in." (21iii). *Support in future transitions* "I have a generally positive feeling that I could do anything that I was excited about… .I don't like to be the deep kind of guy, I like to be the broad kind of guy." (24ii) *Dynamism and agency* "I do feel different; I feel more in control of myself and things that are happening around me and inherently it makes you more confident, more optimistic, more, I don't know, exuberant." (15iii)	*Facilitate immediate transition: Resolve* "I am really trying to stay out of the job search mass hysteria, trying not to get sucked into it, which is very difficult. For example, because I did consulting , all the consultancies approached me. It was difficult to say no without having any alternative. It's good but it wasn't easy. (14iii) *Support in future transitions* "I feel more mature. I feel definitely more humble. In my life in general, I recognize that I am moving to the next stage, and I am giving myself time to say 'Okay, why am I doing this, and why is this important?' " That perspective, I think, is wiser in some ways; Before I was just doing." (52iii) *Dynamism and agency* "I've done everything that I can possibly do to be in a position to sort of have control of my life and where to go." (44iii)
Resources to Sustain Portable Identities	*Skills and relationships* "To have that systemic view gives you lot of benefits in management, in leadership. If you understand every single person around you in all	*Skills and relationships* "Now I understand how my past influences my present. I know it sounds corny, but it is very true. I learned how we project things into

regards, it gives you a lot of power and influence and you can use what I call the art of persuasion. And to maintain that is great." (38iii)

"You can make a life running your own business, and I will have a lot of support from the institution, the network, and my classmates." (28ii)

other people, how we work in groups, but perhaps I also learned to observe for once. I don't think I was ever observing other people. I was just doing my thing. I was so concentrated on executing that I never really felt it was important to look at—who are the other people around me? What are their motivations? How are they behaving and what does that mean?" (34iii)

"I was able to connect with people throughout the world and that will give me a sensation I can always count on somebody to help me out." (18iii)

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