IJMR-15-0340.R3 - Individual-level foci of identification at work: A systematic review of the literature

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a systematic literature review of individual-level targets (or foci) of identification, that is, the bases by which one derives a sense of self as a unique being in the context of work. We reviewed 253 articles from over 30 top management journals between 2005 and 2016. In examining foci types, definitions, underpinning theoretical and philosophical assumptions, we catalogue nine categories of individual-level identification foci (manager, leader, follower, team, organization, occupation-specific, professional, career and work), finding a dominance of functionalist meta-theoretical orientations (comprising over half the sample, with interpretivist approaches comprising about a third of studies). Further, we enhance construct clarity in the field; we identify conceptual challenges with extant definitions of key foci, and offer integrative definitions by specifying scope conditions for each identity focus and semantic relationships between various identity foci. We contextualize our discussion of construct clarity to different research orientations in the field and offer possibilities for theoretical developments therein. Third, we offer an integrative framework for positioning work in the field by scope of interest (identity content or context) and identity construction assumptions (stable or evolving), suggesting directions for future research.

Key words: identification, identity, individual, work, occupation, profession, systematic literature review

INTRODUCTION

'Identity' is an individual's self-definition (Ashforth and Schinoff 2016) and answer to the question 'who am I?' (Cerulo 1997). 'Identification' is commonly used to denote the process through which individuals come to define who they are, through identifying with a target. Bases for identification include occupation (Ashforth *et al*. 2013), profession (Bolton *et al*. 2011), career (McArdle *et al*. 2007), and leadership role (Petriglieri and Stein 2012). Identification can also mean the state of being identified; it is thus conceived as both a verb and a noun (Ashforth *et al*. 2008; Ashforth and Schinoff 2016). Thus, one develops a sense of oneself as a professional (i.e. professional identity) as one progressively identifies with the profession (i.e. identification with the profession). In both cases, 'profession' is the identity target.

Studies of individual-level identities and identification in organizations utilize a multitude of constructs that are variably defined and implemented (Alvesson *et al*. 2008; Brown 2015). While concept proliferation adds rich empirical insights to the field, this can lead to missed opportunities to identify how different foci conceptually relate to each other. For example, Ladge *et al*. (2012) apply the term 'professional identity' to the work-related identities of an entrepreneur, a manager and a consultant without explaining how these three different roles can be categorized together under this term. Arguably, lack of construct clarity hinders theory development and precludes dialogue across different meta-theoretical perspectives and research streams (Alvesson *et al*. 2008). Different research designs and theoretical perspectives can lead to richer and deeper understanding in the field, but only if there is shared meaning, which results from clear concept definitions (Suddaby 2010).

To advance construct clarity within the field, this paper provides a systematic literature review (SLR) of the management literature on work-related individual identity targets. Specifically, we examine individual-level foci of identification; that is, the bases by which one derives a sense of self as a unique being in the work context.

We categorize the labels and terms used to explore the myriad targets – referred to as 'individual-level foci of identification' and 'individual-level identity foci' (dependent on term used) - by which individuals conceive of themselves at work. This includes relational and collective identity targets (e.g. follower and team) where researchers position these as bases for constructing an individual's sense of self at work. The following questions informed our SLR: (1) Which individual-level identity foci related to work are investigated in management and organization studies and how are these defined? (2) What are the underpinning meta-theoretical, theoretical and philosophical assumptions of studies examining individual-level identity foci? (3) Which methodologies are used to research these identity foci?

Our contribution is three-fold. First, we categorize extant research into nine individual-level identification foci within the work context. In cataloguing definitions and underpinning theoretical/philosophical assumptions, we update work by Alvesson *et al*. (2008) and Brown (2015). Second, we discuss construct clarity in relation to various meta-theoretical traditions in identity studies and offer integrative definitions, by drawing on Suddaby's (2010) criteria for construct clarity: clear and parsimonious definitions, scope conditions (when and where does an identity focus apply?), and semantic relationships with other related constructs (how does the focus relate logically to other foci?). Third, we offer an integrative framework to map the field through overt attention to the scope of interest and underlying assumptions. This framework informs future research agendas by enabling researchers to conceptually and

empirically position work in the field with greater precision and by identifying prospective theoretical or methodological challenges therein.

This paper's structure is as follows. We present the SLR methodology, before examining the individual-level identity foci in the context of work, from narrow scope (e.g. leader) to broad (e.g. career); and then identifying approaches to studying the foci in terms of meta-theoretical perspectives suggested by our review. Our discussion offers integrative definitions to enhance concept clarity for key identity foci. Finally, we propose an integrative framework for positioning and informing future research agendas on focal identities before concluding the paper with limitations and directions for further study.

METHODOLOGY

A systematic review enables us to locate, select, evaluate and synthesize extant studies in a rigorous and replicable manner, leading to clear conclusions about what is known and not known in the field (Denyer and Tranfield 2009). This methodical and transparent process is ideally suited for analyzing and cataloguing the vast and heterogeneous organizational literature on identity. The process is outlined in Figure 1.
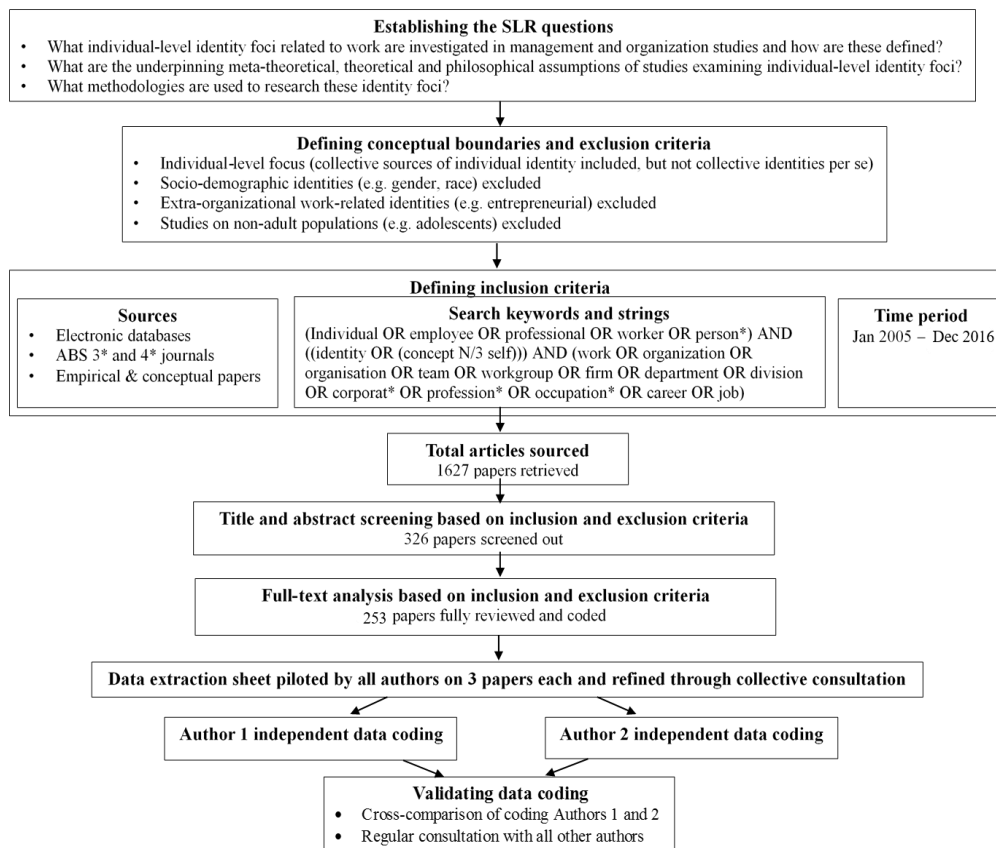
Establishing the SLR questions
• What individual-level identity foci related to work are investigated in management and organization studies and how are these defined?
• What are the underpinning meta-theoretical, theoretical and philosophical assumptions of studies examining individual-level identity foci?
• What methodologies are used to research these identity foci?

Defining conceptual boundaries and exclusion criteria
• Individual-level focus (collective sources of individual identity included, but not collective identities per se)
• Socio-demographic identities (e.g. gender, race) excluded
• Extra-organizational work-related identities (e.g. entrepreneurial) excluded
• Studies on non-adult populations (e.g. adolescents) excluded

Defining inclusion criteria

Sources	Search keywords and strings	Time period
• Electronic databases • ABS 3* and 4* journals • Empirical & conceptual papers	(Individual OR employee OR professional OR worker OR person*) AND ((identity OR (concept N/3 self))) AND (work OR organization OR organisation OR team OR workgroup OR firm OR department OR division OR corporat* OR profession* OR occupation* OR career OR job)	Jan 2005 – Dec 2016

Total articles sourced
1627 papers retrieved

Title and abstract screening based on inclusion and exclusion criteria
326 papers screened out

Full-text analysis based on inclusion and exclusion criteria
253 papers fully reviewed and coded

Data extraction sheet piloted by all authors on 3 papers each and refined through collective consultation

Author 1 independent data coding	Author 2 independent data coding

Validating data coding
• Cross-comparison of coding Authors 1 and 2
• Regular consultation with all other authors

Figure 1: An overview of the SLR process (adapted based on Nolan and Garavan 2016)

Conceptual boundaries and data collection

As recommended by McWilliams *et al.* (2005) our search strategy focused on peer-reviewed papers identified through electronic searches in major academic databases, specifically, ABI, Ebsco and PsycINFO, organizational/general psychology and management databases. To set review boundaries on a vast and quickly expanding literature (Denyer and Tranfield 2009), we limited our search to peer-reviewed articles published over the last 12 years (January 2005 – December 2016). This captures the time following a period of growing popularity of research on individual identities at work (Kirpal, 2004). We limited our search to studies in peer-reviewed journals ranked 3 or 4 in the ABS 2015 journals list as focusing on top-tier journals remains a frequently used method for capturing research trends and scholarly debates in a field while conducting literature reviews (e.g. Radaelli and Sitton-Kent 2016). To locate terms used

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by researchers to describe how individuals identify themselves in the context of their work, we utilized the key words "individual," "identity," and "work". This identified 1914 journal articles, decreasing to 1627 articles after duplicates were removed. We then moved to examine the conceptual terms being used.

Cornelissen and colleagues (2007) differentiate identity research in the organizational domain as individual (relating to people's personal sense of self within the organization), group (relating to the shared identity of teams and sections within an organization), organizational (relating to the identity of the organization as a whole) and cultural (relating to commonalities in identity across organizations and within a society). Our individual-level focus excludes conceptualizations of identity as a system of shared meaning and organizational-level phenomenon, but includes examinations of how an individual's sense of self might be derived from a collective sense of organizational identity. We also recognize the importance of identities such as gender and ethnicity to individuals' work-related experiences (e.g. Atewologun *et al.* 2016). However, we excluded papers that focus solely on socio-demographic (i.e. 'nonwork' identities, Ramarajan and Reid, 2013) to maintain coherent and manageable boundaries. Nevertheless, studies that primarily examined work-related identities (e.g. the identities of journalists and engineers) using a sociodemographically-marked sample (e.g. African Americans; women) were included (e.g. Slay and Smith 2011; Hatmaker 2013). Finally, we excluded studies with adolescent participants, and identities construed primarily outside organizations (e.g. entrepreneurial identity, Navis and Glynn 2011). We included conceptual papers on the basis that they help us answer the review questions (as suggested by Boaz and Ashby 2003). After screening titles and abstracts following our inclusion and exclusion criteria, 326 studies proceeded to the full paper screening stage. Following full paper screening, a final 253 papers were selected for this review.

Analysis

We engaged in several inductive and deductive coding rounds. We used Excel spreadsheets to extract inductively from each paper the identity or identification focus, definitions, philosophical perspectives (explicit and inferred), research design and data collection methods, samples and findings. Then, we compared and contrasted definitions, approaches and other features across papers and foci. We also categorized research orientations using Alvesson *et al.*'s (2008) and Brown's (2015) typologies. Alvesson *et al.* (2008) outlined three meta-theoretical orientations, classifying identity studies along a spectrum of functionalist, interpretivist and critical dimensions. Brown (2015) proposed corresponding categories (social cognitive, symbolic interaction, post-structuralism and power), as well as a fourth, psychoanalytic. While we recognize the breadth within these traditions, these labels facilitate synthesis and comparison within the field. For rigour, the data extraction form was initially piloted by all authors on three different papers each, and subsequently refined after collective discussions. Mirroring other SLR approaches (e.g. Nolan and Garavan 2016; Wang and Chugh 2013), the first two authors led the data extraction and descriptive analysis, regularly discussing differences in their interpretations, and sense-checking regularly with the other authors. The nine foci emerged from this combined deductive and inductive analytical process.

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Table 1 displays the foci distribution in the data. Some studies examine multiple foci simultaneously (e.g. Horstmeier*, et al* 2016 study foci relating to team, supervisor, and profession); however, in the main, studies focused on single levels and foci. We first discuss narrow, organizationally-situated foci (e.g. leader and team), then occupation-based foci, and finally, general, broad foci related to work (i.e. work and career).

Table 1: Main categories of foci in research on individual-level identity and identification

Category	N	% of review papers
Organizationally-situated individual foci:		
Manager as identity focus	13	6%
Leader as identity focus	17	8%
Follower as identity focus	7	3%
Team as identity focus (including workgroup and collective identity)	21	10%
Organization as identity focus	65	30%
Occupation-based individual foci:		
Occupation-specific foci	23	11%
Occupation as identity focus	8	4%
Profession as identity focus	42	19%
General foci related to work:		
Work as identity focus	17	8%
Career as identity focus	5	2%

Organizationally-situated individual foci

Organizationally-situated identities are concerned with individuals constructing a sense of self that relates to performing a role or a job, in relation to others, within the organizational structure. This cluster, comprising over half of the retrieved papers, is the narrowest in scope and includes manager, leader and follower foci, as well as teams and organizations as individual identity and identification targets.

Manager as identity focus

With interpretivist and critical orientations prevailing, ambiguity and flux in managerial identity construction are central themes in this sub-cluster (we found no functionalist studies of managerial identities). A typical perspective describes managerial identities as "*constantly emerging*" and "*processual, relational and situational*" (Andersson 2010; p167 and 169). Developing a managerial identity is often examined by unpacking inherent tensions especially with regards to how agency is restricted through organizational control (e.g. Harding *et al*. 2014). Managerial identities are examined using a range of methods including interviews (Thomas and Davies 2005), case studies (Watson 2008; 2009), observation (Down and Reveley 2009), secondary data and questionnaires (Askehave and Zethsen 2014). Typically, these studies focus exclusively on the manager target without exploring how this may emerge from, or into, other organizationally-situated foci, such as leader or follower. The critical slant of managerial identity foci studies means acquiring a sense of self as a 'manager' job holder bears some overlap with conceptualizations of occupation-based identities, especially those in precarious positions (discussed later in the paper).

Leader as identity focus

The dominant formulation of leader identity is a functionalist one, referring to the identity of an individual holding a supervisory position within an organization (e.g. Day and Harrison 2007; Johnson *et al*. 2012). Although Alvesson *et al*. (2008) challenge the idea of 'measuring' identity, this practice is prevalent in this sub-cluster. Leader identity is the individual's understanding of oneself as someone who can guide others' work; leadership identity includes having that sense, and receiving acknowledgement of that ability from those one guides, as well as the organization (e.g. DeRue and Ashford 2010). Kark (2011) suggests a nested relationship between leader identity and leadership identity, in which leader identity

is one component (i.e. individual internalization) of leadership identity. Researchers also examine aspects of individual identity relative to securing followers, such as relational self-concept (Chang and Johnson 2010) and servant identity, the extent to which individuals think of themselves as servants and engage in servant behaviours (Sun 2013). DeRue and Ashford (2010) emphasize the interrelatedness of leaders and followers, defining leadership identity as comprising individual internalization, relational recognition, and collective endorsement. Furthermore, research in this domain suggests that developing a leadership identity can be prompted by others recognizing one as a leader (Humphreys *et al*. 2015). Thus, leadership as identity focus occurs in the context of an individual developing a sense of oneself as a leader of others and the recognition of that identity by others. What remains under-examined in the literature is the relationship between 'manager' and 'leader' identity foci, despite the strong association between these in individuals' conceptualizations and lived experiences (Carroll and Levy 2008).

Interpretivist and critical approaches in this sub-cluster examine the disconnect between individuals' understandings of themselves in their supervisory capacities, relative to their expectations. Such studies focus on the individual's effort in aspiring to leadership (Koning and Waistell 2012; Petriglieri and Stein 2012), suggesting ideals are elusive (Carroll and Levy 2008) and imaginary (Driver 2013). Carroll and Levy (2008) offer managerial identity as a useful foil to a sometimes elusive leader identity, advocating developing leadership that encourages individuals to choose mindfully between leader and management behaviours.

Follower as identity focus

This sub-cluster concerns individuals' identification with their leaders, considering how this influences the organization (e.g. follower organizational citizenship behaviour, Zhang and

Chen 2013). Functionalist approaches to follower as focal identity generally centre on the extent to which an individual defines oneself in terms of one's leader, denoted by terms such as '*personal identification with the leader*' (e.g. Zhu *et al.* 2013) and '*supervisor identification*' (Zhang and Chen 2013).

Follower identity (understanding of oneself as a follower) is also conceptualized as complementary to leadership identity (DeRue and Ashford 2010). Thus, followers' behaviours contribute to both leadership and follower foci (Collinson 2006, DeRue and Ashford 2010). It is possible to think of oneself as a follower even in the absence of a leader (DeRue and Ashford 2010). Mostly, however, the literature ties follower identity to leader identity; therefore, current understanding of a follower identity is directly relational to leader/leadership identities.

Team as identity focus

Studies of team as an individual identity target predominantly focus on the process through which individuals come to see themselves as part of a predefined collective, variously described as a team or work unit. Team identification is the process by which individuals define themselves in terms of values, goals, attitudes, and behaviours shared with team members (e.g. Janssen and Huang 2008; Dietz *et al.* 2015). Despite the use of the term 'identification' suggesting a processual focus, the predominant approach taken by authors is functionalist and quantitative, with surveys and questionnaires (e.g. Janssen and Huang 2008; Liao *et al.* 2015; Millward *et al.* 2007). Social identity theory is the dominant theoretical approach. All ten team identification studies approached this from a functionalist orientation, typically using surveys to establish mediating and moderating relationships involving the target (one study, Millward *et al.* 2007, applied mixed methods). A typical example is Dietz *et al.* 2015's demonstration of the moderating effect of shared team identification on directing 'performance-prove' goal

orientation to team level or individual level performance. Similarly, Janssen and Huang (2008) find that citizenship behaviour mediates the relationship between team identification and individuals' effectiveness as team members.

Another sub-cluster comprises studies of identification with work group (Blader and Tyler 2009) and co-workers (Farmer *et al.* 2015), or 'group identity' (in reference to management and IT teams, in Schwarz and Watson 2005). These papers commonly conceive of a loosely defined set of co-workers being a source of felt inclusion, belonging and self-definition for the focal individuals. An anomaly in this cluster is Brown and Humphreys' (2006) critical analysis of the working environment ('place') as one discursive resource for competing groups to make sense of their positions within a newly formed organization. We only found two studies examining the relationship between team identification and targets other than 'organizational identification'. Liao and colleagues (2015) demonstrated how high levels of professional identification compensated for low team identification in predicting shared division of cognitive labour in diverse specialists teams. And, Mitchell and colleagues (2011) demonstrate that inter-professional openness (motivation to use team members' expertise for the team's task) strengthens team identification and reduces professional identity threat.

Another sub-cluster here is collective identity (Grohsjean et al. 2016; Johnson and Chang 2006), seen as a propensity to assimilate or see oneself as part of a group. These studies position the immediate community around a focal individual in the workplace as the identity target, without pre-specifying the work group or unit. A closer examination of these papers suggests they may be more closely aligned with work unit (e.g. Yu and Cable 2011) or occupation-specific (Grohsjean *et al.* 2016) themes.

Organization as identity focus

These studies feature the organization as target of individual-level sense-making, comprising nearly a third of all located papers. There is much consistency in the use of organizational identification (OID), typically as an individual-level construct based on Ashforth and Mael's (1989), and Mael and Ashforth's (1992) definition of 'perception of oneness with or belongingness to the organization'. This definition comprises both cognitive and relational aspects of identification. Authors variously emphasize a sense of belonging (e.g. Karanika-Murray *et al*. 2015), cognitive bonding (e.g. Glavas and Godwin 2013), and self-referential elements (e.g. Garcia-Falières and Herrbach 2015), or a combination of all of these (e.g. Besharov 2014). Organizational identification is occasionally examined with workgroup identification. Organizational identity (OI) is used less frequently, to refer to self-definition and belongingness to the organization (e.g. Yu *et al.* 2016). A useful addition to this sub-cluster is Kreiner and colleagues' (2006) attempt to bridge OI and OID terms by examining boundary dynamics negotiated at the interface of individual and organizational identities.

Two studies in this sub-cluster adopt 'employee identification' as an overarching concept to capture various organizationally-bound identity targets, including coworker, workgroup (Cooper and Thatcher, 2010) team, supervisor, or profession (Horstmeier *et al.* 2016). A unique, extra-organizational, perspective on identity foci is employee-customer identity, 'the extent to which employees self-define and construct their identities in terms of their role relationships with customers' (Anaza 2015, p.927). This is an area for further examination as there is limited research on organizational-related targets that cross organizational boundaries (e.g. foci stemming from cross-institutional collaborations).

Occupation-based individual foci

Occupation-based foci (comprising approximately 33% of our dataset) are concerned with individual understandings of identity related to a particular form of work and, often, the training required to do it; such foci incorporate a particular job or occupation (including specified professions), as well as 'being professional'. Although these identities can be inhabited and enacted within organisational structures, the focus of identification is in the meanings associated with the occupation itself (whether a profession, or other form of work).

Occupation-specific foci

Authors conceptualize 'occupational identity' as a sense of oneself as a job holder in an identified role across various contexts including administrative service work, management consultancy, medicine and engineering (e.g. Bain 2005; Kitay and Wright 2007; Anteby 2008; Karlsson 2011). These studies span functionalist, interpretivist and critical approaches.

Examining occupation as a focal identity also reveals how individuals construct identities in precarious occupational positions. For example, pilots forced to take a leave of absence due to adverse economic conditions retain strong occupational identities as pilots, despite not being able to perform the desired job (Fraher and Gabriel 2014). Similarly, professional visual artists develop criteria, such as 'showing work,' to distinguish themselves from amateur artists, thus incorporating the important aspect of being in a paid occupation, rather than engaging in an activity as a pastime (Bain 2005).

In addition to the handful of studies explicitly applying the 'occupational identity' term, 17 further studies examine individuals' sense of self as a job holder in a named form of employment, categorized here as 'occupation-specific' focal identities. These studies examine foci including academic, public service, military, creative and engineering identities and are

largely conducted through critical lenses. Examples include investigations of behavioural expectations and controls on academics (e.g. Araújo 2009; Knights and Clarke 2014), to creatives' experiences of corporate environments (e.g. Brown *et al*. 2010; Costas and Fleming 2009).

A further cluster of occupation-specific focal identities uses the term 'professional identity'. In our assessment, this cluster reflects identity studies relating to a subset of occupational identities known as professions, comprising "closed, collegial, self-regulating expert occupations" with "an exclusive identity developed through qualifications, training and socialization" (McGivern *et al.* 2015, p.312). Commonly accepted professions are medicine, law, accounting, engineering, and academia (e.g. Elsbach 2009; Dobrow and Tosti-Kharas 2011; Reid 2015). In these studies, authors are concerned with individuals' sense of self as a job holder in a specified professional job role. For example, Croft *et al.* (2015a), McGivern *et al.* (2015) and Spyridonidis *et al.* (2015) point to the rising significance of the hybrid manager-physician professional identities due to prevailing political and economic trends. The process through which individuals manage different competing occupational identities against this context is of practical and theoretical interest. This usage is distinct from our next category of studies, which examines the professional ideal as identity target.

'The Professional' as identity focus

We found two uses of professional identity which we disentangle. On the basis of authors' labels, professional identity constitutes one of the largest clusters retrieved (second to organizational foci), reflecting the prevalent use of the lay term 'professional' in the field (Watson 2002). However, we separate 'profession as occupational role' (previous cluster) from 'identification with the professionalism ideal' (this cluster). Such distinction unmasks specific

insights to enhance understanding of the identification dynamics and tensions associated with the professionalism ideal. For example, Croft and colleagues (2015b) and Cascón-Pereira and Hallier (2012) both nominally examine medical 'professional identities'. Cascón-Pereira and Hallier (2012) examine doctors' professional i.e. occupational roles (previous cluster). However, Croft *et al.'s* (2015b) work on nurses reveals how individuals in lower status occupational roles may face more challenges living up to the professionalism ideal in hybrid roles. Of the 49 papers nominally studying professional identity, 16 examine the professionalism ideal.

General foci related to work

Having considered the relatively narrow categories of organizationally-situated identities (individuals' sense of self that relates to performing a role / job in relation to others within the organizational structure), and occupational and professional identities (individuals' sense of self that relates to a particular form of work or a profession), we turn to more general categorizations found in the literature.

Identities and identification related to work and the worker are concerned with individual self-understandings in the general work domain. Within this broad cluster, we identify two sub-themes - '*career*' and '*work*' focal identities. This cluster comprises 10% of all papers, three-quarters of these pertaining to work as focus.

Career as identity focus

Despite constituting a relatively small cluster, the career identity literature retrieved comprised the range of functionalist (Ng and Feldman 2007; Hoekstra 2011), interpretivist (Bosley et al. 2009) and critical (LaPointe 2010) orientations. Researchers use 'career identity' to describe an individual's understanding of the pattern of their past, present and future work

experiences. Thus, a time dimension is included, as in Hoekstra (2011), and Bosley *et al.'s* (2009) 'career self-concept' emphasizing the sequencing of career roles. The dominant usage reflects a cognitive perspective of self over an extended period. Although LaPointe (2010) maintains the sequential aspect of career identity, uniquely, she presents career identity as an ongoing process that integrates others' feedback. Two additional studies use 'career identity', that, following our analyses, may be better described using a more specific and bounded identity focus. Strauss *et al*.'s (2012) and Millward and Haslam's (2013) use of career identity suggests they are examining the extent to which individuals identify with their current occupation. For example, Strauss *et al.* (2012, p. 584) measure '*Having a career in my field is an important part of who I am*'.

A single paper in our review used the term 'vocational identity', which was conceptualized similarly to career identity. Vocational identity '*refers to individuals' self-perceptions of their enduring skills, abilities, and needs across jobs over the course of a career*' Ng and Feldman (2007, p.117). Their focus on school leavers' transition to work suggests that the low incidence of vocational identity in our review likely results from our inclusion criteria specifying adults.

Work as identity focus

This final subcluster constitutes the broadest and least specific references to individuals' understandings of themselves in a general work domain. We distinguish three different uses of work as an identity focus: 1) a fairly stable understanding of the work one does based on individual traits and beliefs; 2) the centrality and salience of work to one's sense of self, and 3) a general term, sometimes simultaneously referring to multiple identification foci (e.g. occupation, organization and career).

The first two uses encapsulate a small number of papers using the terms in a narrow sense and adopting predominantly functionalist approaches (e.g. Farmer and Van Dyne 2010 and Lai *et al.* 2013 (p. 1660) who define work identity as '*the central, distinctive and enduring characteristic that typifies the line of work an employee performs*'). Another usage is Greenhaus *et al.*'s (2012) assessment of the salience of work to an individual's self-concept in their usage of work identity. This is similar to Ng and Feldman's (2007) emphasis on 'salience' of, and an individual's 'commitment' to, work.

Thirteen papers apply 'work identity' or 'working identity' as a general term to refer to various individual identities related to the work domain (e.g. Wayne *et al.* 2006; Clarke *et al.* 2009; Wright 2009; Sealy and Singh 2010). The primary utility of work identity here is to juxtapose work and nonwork domains. For example, the experiences of bike messengers (Fincham 2008) and gamers (Lee and Lin 2011) challenge notions of separated domains. Similarly, unemployed older workers' struggles to maintain a positive sense of a 'worker' self, highlights the significance of being in work as a focus of identification (Riach and Loretto 2009).

The terms 'working identity' and 'work-related identity' (e.g. Dutton *et al.* 2010; Conroy and O'Leary-Kelly 2014; Gaunt and Scott 2014; Meister *et al.* 2014) are similarly used, referring simultaneously to multiple identities including organizational, occupational and career foci. References to work-related identity consistently draw on Dutton *et al.*'s conceptualization, '*the aspects of identity and self-definition that are tied to participation in the activities of work (i.e., a job) or membership in work-related groups, organizations, occupations, or professions*' (2010, p. 266). Work-related identity appears to be a contemporary term deemed useful for incorporating multiple individual, relational and

collective identification foci simultaneously. For instance, Lai and colleagues (2013) position work identification in the context of occupational and organizational disidentification. While this practice may be beneficial at the outset of exploratory research, we recommend that authors specify the focus of identification most relevant to the phenomena examined. Such specificity may add clarity to the identity target most impacted by the issues under enquiry. For example, Clarke *et al.*'s (2009) study of the discourses drawn upon by managers in an engineering company could inform understandings of managerial identity; Empson's (2013) discussion of bridging the academic-practice divide reflects tensions experienced by management academics, as an occupational identity. We discuss additional benefits of increased specification of identity foci later in this paper.

Summary

Thus, work as identity focus encompasses other individual-level identity targets. Although adopting such a broad, non-specific term is useful for investigating competing and contradicting facets of identification (e.g. occupational vs organizational targets), scholars could consider increasing foci specificity in other cases. For example, career as focal identity offers a basis for making sense of one's pattern of work-related experiences, and can encompass occupation-specific or organizationally-situated foci dependent on researcher interest. Leader and follower identity foci are not necessarily confined to the organization and can shape an individual's overall sense of self whereas managerial identity foci are generally nested within one or more organizations.

While functionalist or interpretivist orientations dominate leader/follower identity studies, research on managerial identities is predominantly critical and utilizes non-US samples. Managerial identity is often viewed as a contested identity, positioning the individual

as a company officer, amidst organizational and social discourses concerning what managers do and what they are like. This is akin to some conceptualizations of occupation-based identities, such as those in precarious positions. This suggests possibilities for examining managerial identity construction as an occupation-specific identity. This will be helpful for highlighting, for example, the liminal experiences of hybrid manager-physicians (e.g. Spyridonidis *et al.* 2015). This also includes examining how training and socialization may facilitate entry into management ranks and how enduring this target may be in comparison to other occupation-specific foci. We note, however, the under-examination of the relational aspect of managerial work and, of the relationship between 'manager' and 'leader' identity foci. This is despite the experiential overlap between leader and manager identities in workers' everyday practice.

We join Watson (2002) in discouraging the use of 'professional identity' in a way that conflates identification processes engaged in managing professionalism ideals with experiences relating to specific professions (i.e. occupational roles). We also advocate distinguishing 'profession as occupational role' (more likely to be organizationally-situated) from 'identification with the professionalism ideal' (less likely to be organizationally-situated).

Having commented briefly on meta-theoretical patterns observed within the categories of foci, we provide a brief summary by orientation next.

Meta-theoretical perspectives in literature on individual-level identity and identification foci

Like other authors (Alvesson *et al.* 2008; Brown 2015; Miscenko and Day 2015), we find that meta-theoretical orientations and studies' underlying assumptions remain implicit in many published papers. Whilst most authors proffered their definition of identity, or approach

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to identification referencing a body of work to signal a certain tradition (see Figure 2), few explicitly stated their underlying assumptions.
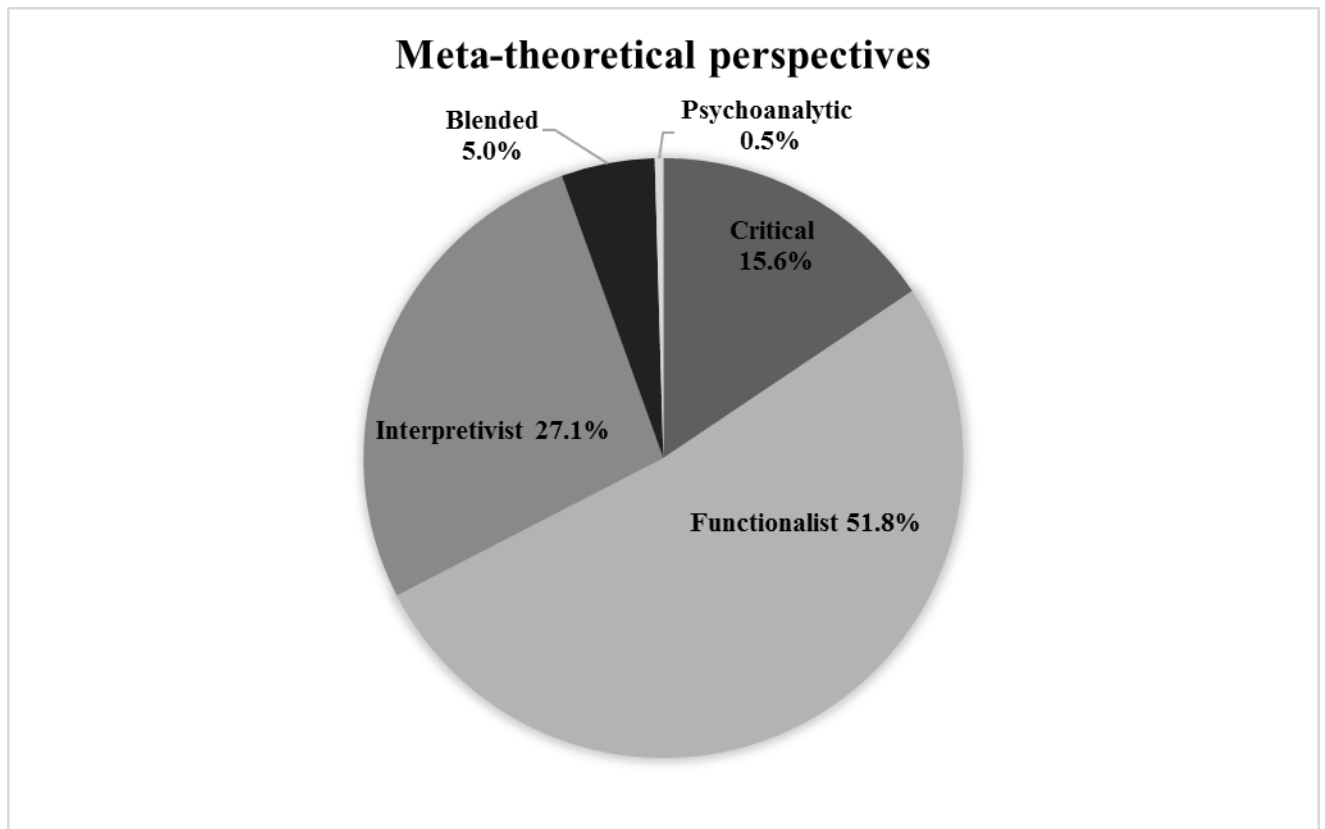

Figure 2: Meta-theoretical perspectives adopted by individual-level identity foci studies (2005 – 2016)

Functionalist approaches conceive identity as relatively stable, often emphasizing Tajfel and Turner's (1986) social identity theory (Alvesson *et al.* 2008). Here, identity is generally conceived as a social cognitive construct (Brown 2015) with prevalent cause and effect concerns, investigating associations between identity-related phenomena and organizational outcomes. In contrast, interpretivists (including symbolic interactionists, Brown 2015) have a descriptive, socially-derived meaning-centred focus of inquiry exploring the "complex, unfolding and dynamic relationship between self, work and organization" (Alvesson

et al. 2008, pp. 8-9); interpretivists typically view identity as in flux and occasionally interrupted or intensified in crises. A critical orientation (see Brown's (2015) power/post-structuralism theme) focuses on power relations to demonstrate how identity projects constitute a modern exemplification of the tensions between control and resistance. Brown's (2015) fourth, psychoanalytic category, refers to studies examining how the subconscious (e.g. imagination, Driver 2009; intrapsychic dynamics, Petriglieri and Stein 2012) influences personal meaning-making and behaviour at work. These different paradigmatic communities tend to publish in isolation, as is the case with organizational studies more broadly (Buchanan and Bryman, 2009).

Our SLR revealed that functionalist approaches were adopted in over half of the empirical studies reviewed, and applied from broad (work) to narrow identity foci (occupation-specific, leader, follower). Functionalist approaches dominated team and organizational targets. The prevalent term 'organizational identification' belies the emphasis on organization-related self-definition as a mediator, moderator or outcome variable measured by a questionnaire and statistically associated with performance and other behavioural and organizational factors.

Interpretivist approaches dominate the academic discussion concerning individual-level identity foci relating to manager, leader, follower, occupation and especially professional status. Descriptive, meaning-centred approaches and the 'evolving understanding of self amid social situations' (Alvesson *et al*, 2008, p. 16) were evident in studies examining how individuals craft and modify their 'professional' (i.e. occupational) identities (e.g. Gendron and Spira 2010; Brown and Lewis 2011) and how the professionalism ideal influences individuals' occupational identities (e.g. Currie *et al*. 2010; Pritchard and Fear 2015).

Critical and psychodynamic orientations challenge normative assumptions about professional, managerial and leader foci, prevalent in studies demonstrating how part-time work (Dick 2015), gender (e.g. Haynes 2008; Haynes 2012), sexuality (Rumens and Kerfoot 2009) and ethnicity (Srinivas 2013) disrupt professional norms. Future individual-level identification research could do more to centre the interplay between work and nonwork domains for more innovative understanding of self-understandings in the workplace (as recommended by Ramarajan and Reid, 2013).

Next, we turn our discussion to (a) advancing construct clarity based on identified inconsistencies and opportunities by identity foci, rather than by approaches and (b) an integrative framework to position current and future research agendas in the field.

FOCI CONSTRUCT CLARITY FOR FUTURE THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENT

The field's ability to establish construct clarity is arguably key to the field's development. In this section, we draw on construct clarity criteria to position various identity foci in relation to each other, reassessing their usage and proposing suggestions to enhance construct clarity in the field. According to Suddaby (2010), construct clarity requires good *definitions* that capture the main properties of the phenomenon examined, avoid tautology and are parsimonious. Our review indicated that scholars utilize different definitions with varying degrees of parsimony to designate the same identity foci; thus, greater focal consistency would benefit the field. Second, construct clarity requires that we specify *scope conditions.* Spatial (i.e. contextual) and temporal boundaries are particularly pertinent to construct clarification in identity foci scholarship. Our findings highlight that the scope of the identity foci located in extant literature ranges from general (e.g. work identity) to specific (e.g. leader identity); and, spatial boundaries between foci exist within and outside organizations. Additionally, time is a

key definitional element for certain identity foci (e.g. career), but remains underspecified for other foci (e.g. transition from manager to leader).

Additionally, Suddaby (2010) claims that construct clarity entails spelling out the *semantic relationships* between related constructs, as theoretical constructs do not exist in isolation, but are "suspended in a complex web of references to and relationships with other constructs" (Suddaby 2010, p. 350). This review catalogued myriad constructs denoting identity foci, including inconsistencies within conceptualizations of specific foci (i.e. same construct label used to denote different concepts, such as organizational identity), and across conceptualizations of different foci (i.e. different construct labels used to denote overlapping concepts, such as profession and occupation). A key step for advancing the field is to further specify the semantic relationships between various identity foci constructs, in conjunction with clarifying the definitions and scope conditions for each construct. Thus, our second contribution entails considerations for enhancing construct clarity of key individual level identity foci at work, offering an agenda for future research. Below we contextualize our construct clarity discussion to the identity foci reviewed. In Table 2 we summarize their conceptualization in extant literature, including limitations; we propose scope conditions necessary in defining these foci, specify semantic relationships to other related concepts/foci and, finally, offer integrative definitions for each target.

Table 2: Considerations for enhancing construct clarity of individual level identity foci

Construct labels	Conceptualization in extant literature	Scope conditions	Semantic relationships with other foci	Proposed integrative definition
Managerial identity	Interpretivist and critical perspectives prevailing, with emphasis on emergent subjectivities (processual, relational, situational/ contextual aspects) rather than fixed definitions.	Space: Organizationally-bound Time: Mid-career experiences	Managerial identities can occur prior to and simultaneously with leader identities, an under-examined relationship. The relationship between manager and managed / follower is underspecified.	An individual's sense of self in the context of doing managerial work that is influenced by organizational and social discourses concerning what managers do and how they behave.
Leader identity	Relatively consistent usage in the literature, with functionalist perspectives	Space: Typically, organizationally bound but could also be community based	Relative to follower identity, a link explored in extant	An individual's sense of self as someone who can guide others' work and

	prevailing. Defined as identity of an individual holding a supervisory position within an organization. Interrelatedness with follower identity emphasized. (Rare) interpretivist and critical approaches explore elusive or unrealistic leadership ideals.	and linked to other forms of organizing Time: Mid to late career experiences	literature; relatively independent of other identities. Career identity development can encapsulate leader identity development, but the relationship between these foci is underspecified.	who receives acknowledgement of that ability from those one guides as well as the organization.

Follower identity	Relatively clear definitions, functionalist perspectives prevailing and defining focus as personal identification with the leader. Interrelatedness with leader identity emphasized.	Space: Typically, organizationally bound but could also be community based and linked to other forms of organizing Time: Mostly bound to leader/manager relationship, thus shifting and dynamic, likely to develop or diminish over time	Relational/relative identity to leader, independent of other identities Possible links to team identity underexplored (e.g. are follower identities stronger in certain teams?)	An individual's sense of self as someone who is guided by others in their work and who provides acknowledgement to those who guide.
Team identity	Relatively clear / consistent usage in the literature, functionalist perspectives prevailing, examining what	Space: Typically, organizationally bound but could also be community based and linked to other forms of	Team identities can be nested in broader organizational identities – links currently explored.	An individual's sense of self in the context of the beliefs they share with a collection of workers and a

	team membership means to the individual.	organizing (e.g. partnerships and collaborations across institutions)

Time: Likely to evolve over time – across the lifecycle of a team, and across individuals' career/work experience | Team identities could also be examined in conjunction with managerial, leader and follower identities – links currently under-explored. | sense of belonging (within and outside an organization). |
| **Organizational identification** | Relatively clear / consistent usage in the literature, functionalist perspectives prevailing, examining what it means and the extent to which an individual | Space: Organizationally-bound (in contrast to the meso level organizational identity concept which may extend to market/industry/stakeholder boundaries) | Organizational identification can partially overlap with occupational or professional targets; career can also encapsulate several organizational identity foci (if one has several employers). | An individual's sense of self as a person who is working for /employed by an organization. |

	perceives themselves as a member of the organization.	Time: Identity transitions into and outside organizations under-explored	These links are currently under-explored, as extant literature focuses on intra-organizational rather than extra-organizational boundaries with other foci.	
Occupation-specific identities	Covers an almost limitless number of foci, studies span functionalist, interpretivist and critical perspectives. Studies often examine sense of oneself as a job holder in a precarious role.	Space: Expands beyond organizational boundaries into communities of practice. Time: Medium term, episodic, relative to career; likely to evolve into career identity over time.	Narrower and potentially shorter-term than career identity. How occupational identities feed into career identities over time remains underexplored. Professions are a sub-category of occupations, thus	An individual's sense of self as a job holder in an identified role.

| | | | occupational identities subsume professional ones.

Some occupational foci remain under-examined (e.g. scientist, low-skilled occupations).

The most likely alternative to work identity. | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Professional identity** | Varied and inconsistent usage, studies span functionalist, interpretivist and critical perspectives, generally examining identification with an ideal of professionalism. | Space: Can be organizationally-bound (e.g. professional services firms) or not; likely to vary within members of a professional community | Similar to occupations as identity foci; a career could comprise a long-term series of experiences of aspiring to a professionalism ideal. Such embeddedness and temporal | An individual's sense of self in the context of doing professional work that is influenced by social discourses concerning what professionals do and how they behave. |

	Scope for greater insight into professional identity content and context with increased processual focus on professionalization rather than occupational experiences within specific professions.	Likely to be similar across national/cultural boundaries, compared to other foci Time: Aspiring towards being a professional likely to occur over time	dynamics are currently underexplored. Professional identities could clash with managerial identities (e.g. studies of doctors as managers).	
Career identity	Relatively clearly and consistently constructed, occasional association with identification with work;	Space: Likely to span organizational and occupational boundaries Time: Critical dimension	Subsumes occupation-specific or professional identities over time, but such embeddedness and temporal dynamics are currently underexplored.	An individual's understanding of past, present, future work experiences that incorporates longer-term occupational experiences.

	studies span functionalist, interpretivist and critical perspectives.

Emphasis on the individual's understanding of the work they do, historically, presently and in the future. | | Could nest leadership identity development, but relationship between these foci remains underexplored. | |
| **Work identity** | Lacks parsimony, used with different meanings; studies span functionalist, interpretivist and critical perspectives. | Time: Assumed to be stable but depending on usage could entail different timescales

Space: Spans organizational and occupational boundaries | Subsumes all other foci | Use an alternative above. |

Overall, we found the organizationally-located foci (*manager, leader, follower, team, organizational*), the narrowest in scope and most consistently defined. These foci have close semantic links, yet to be fully explored. Regarding time, generally, manager and leader as focal identities are more likely to be pertinent from mid-career experiences onwards. Integrative definitions would be relational, conceiving a leader focal identity as an individual's sense of self as someone who guides others' work and receives acknowledgement of that ability from those one guides, as well as the organization. Similarly, follower as focal identity would entail an individual's sense of self as someone who is guided by others in their work and who provides acknowledgement to those who guide. Regarding manager as individual identity focus, the dominant critical orientation in the literature meant definitions of this target were generally eschewed in favour of emergent understandings of managers' subjective experiences. A recommended integrative definition would encapsulate an individual's sense of self in the context of doing managerial work that is influenced by organizational and social discourses concerning what managers do and what they are like. This perspective also leaves open the opportunity for examinations of this focal identity as an occupation-specific identity.

Team as an identity focus is consistently, if narrowly, studied from mostly positivist and functionalist perspectives. Studies tend to focus on team identification as an outcome. Content measures of team identification are often used to indicate levels of felt belongingness and shared perceptions with an identified sub-unit within the organization. Typically, studies are organizationally/institutionally bound (e.g. interprofessional health teams, Mitchell *et al.* 2011); however, current trends in new forms of organizing and working (Salvato *et al.* 2017) suggest that future research should consider how individuals come to see themselves as members of work units collaborating across institutions in multidisciplinary units.

Additionally, as team identification will vary across the team lifecycle, and across an individual's career/work experience, these underexplored time conditions are also areas for future research. Finally, our review did not reveal many studies of team identities in conjunction with other specific foci such as managerial and leader identities (although there were several studies in conjunction with organizational identification). A recommended integrative definition would encapsulate an individual's sense of self in the context of the beliefs they share with a collection of workers and a sense of belonging to a work group not necessarily bound by the confines of an organization, or shared background/experiences.

With regards to organizational identification, in our review, we considered this target to be organizationally-bound (in contrast to the common usage of OI as a meso-level concept, which may extend to market/industry/stakeholder boundaries). Concerning time, transitions into and outside organizations (e.g. identification as part of newcomer socialization and disidentification as potential retirees transition out) comprise additional areas for future focus on individual level identification targets. Additionally, several sequential organizational identification foci can offer the building blocks for constructing longer-term identities such as professional and careers. These foci could be coherently nested over time or could reveal the fractured and inconsistent nature of organizational identification (Brown, 2017).

Examining occupations, the identity focus is likely to be more medium term and episodic relative to career as focus. Over time, it is likely that occupation-specific identities crystalize into a career focal identity. Such temporal transitions could be captured with processual longitudinal research designs. Further, occupation-specific identities expand beyond organizational boundaries as occupations are defined and sustained in larger communities of practice. As discussed, this concept is narrower than career identity as it can

only be meaningfully applied to specific jobs, whilst a career identity can encompass several jobs and occupations through the life-course. As professions ("a paid occupation, especially one that involves prolonged training and a formal qualification", Oxford English Dictionary) comprise a sub-category of occupations, we propose that specific professional identities be examined as occupations. As a likely alternative to 'work identity', an integrative definition of occupational identity focus would incorporate an individual's self-understanding as a job holder in an identified role.

As previously discussed, there is an indeterminate use of the term 'professional'. With regards to time, future attention could turn to individual meaning making with regards to aspiring towards professional status and living up to these ideals. This identity focus is not typically organizationally-bound. However, contexts such as professional services firms offer boundary conditions for examination. Similar to occupations as identity foci, a career could comprise a long-term series of experiences of aspiring to a professionalism ideal. Thus, an integrative definition of professionalism as identity focus would describe an individual's sense of self in the context of doing professional work that is influenced by social discourses concerning what professionals do and what they are like.

Career as identity focus is a relatively clear concept in the literature. However, definitions associating it with work-related identification are overly broad and lack parsimony. Time is the most salient scope condition as career is a particularly time-sensitive identity focus. With regards to space, career as a focal identity is likely to span organizational boundaries as individuals change employers. Occasionally, career as identity focus will span occupational boundaries as people reorient themselves professionally or change trajectories. Career as identity focus subsumes occupation-specific foci due to its long-term holistic nature (in a career

life span, one can hold different occupations; career identity results from the cumulative synthetic effect of these more local, organizationally-bound and more time-defined foci). An integrative definition of career as identity focus would incorporate an understanding of one's past, present, future work experiences that incorporates longer-term occupational experiences.

As discussed, work is the widest identity focus subsuming all the other foci we examined, while presenting conceptual overlaps between work-related identity and other concepts. With regards to scope conditions, there is often an assumption that work identity remains stable (especially within functionalist orientations). However, even within this tradition, scholars can examine how experience and knowledge accumulate over time or on changing occupations, with the potential for a changing work identity in both cases. In its current usage, the concept spans organizational and occupational boundaries and seems to lack clear spatial boundaries. Thus, for enhanced precision and clarity, we recommend researchers use other terms, selecting from one of the alternatives above.

The above considerations for construct clarity accommodate diverse theoretical and methodological perspectives in the field and we expect would be contextualized. Constructs are 'carefully articulated abstractions' (Suddaby 2010, p. 353), conceptual frames that enable us to capture a phenomenon and compare it with others. Construct clarity can assist empirical analyses even when meaning standards and construct use diverges across research traditions and epistemological perspectives (Suddaby, 2010). For positivists, construct clarity can help compare and contrast results, as well-defined constructs are easier to operationalize and test. For constructivists and interpretivists, construct clarity helps in capturing and communicating individuals' subjective meanings and interpretations of an abstraction grounded in actors' meaning-in-use, rather than a priori constructs imposed by researchers (Gephart, in Suddaby,

2010). We recognize that identity foci underpinned by clear constructs will be investigated differently across meta-theoretical traditions. For instance, functionalist studies of organizational identification will emphasize its importance for employee attrition or performance (e.g. Liao *et al.* 2015); interpretivist studies will focus on individuals' meaning-making and the self-construction in relation to the organization (e.g. Gendron and Spira 2010), and critical studies will expose the power of hegemonic organizational norms in shaping subjectivities (e.g. Brown and Humphreys 2006). Thus, in providing integrative definitions and construct clarity guidelines, our intent is not to stifle theoretical and methodological diversity, but rather to provide common ground for conversations that might overcome paradigmatic 'cold wars' and silos (Buchanan and Bryman 2009; Yanow and Ybema, 2009). To facilitate cross-paradigmatic discussion, we conceptualise an integrative framework for current and future individual-level identity foci research as discussed within the following section.

AN INTEGRATIVE FRAMEWORK FOR CURRENT AND FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDAS

Our SLR indicated research on individual-level identity foci uses a multitude of concepts across various perspectives. We offer an integrative framework that organizes existent studies around four broad constellations, allowing researchers to position current and future work with greater precision. These clusters do not represent rigid boundaries, but lenses for discerning current trends and future possibilities for the field, including drawing attention to underutilized methodologies within each cluster.

The dimensions were identified as we sought to interpret and interrogate the literature on individual-level foci, iteratively going between the selected articles and other identity

literature reviews (e.g. Ashforth *et al.* 2008; Alvesson 2010; Brown 2015; Miscenko and Day, 2015). We adopt a 2x2 matrix for simplicity, acknowledging that this is just one of many alternative sensitizing devices for making sense of a messy field.

Our reading of the selected papers indicates that two dimensions appear key to orientating individual-level identity research in the work context. First, conceptualizing identities as stable or fluid generally reflects one's meta-theoretical perspective on the identity research project undertaken (Ashforth *et al.* 2008; Brown 2015). A process perspective of identification rather than a variance approach to identities is a central difference in the literature. These approaches, typically associated with personal meaning-making dynamics being more *stable* or more *evolving,* are denoted by the horizontal axis in Figure 3. The key question here is whether researchers are primarily interested in what it takes to inhabit a pre-specified focus, or, in the (ongoing or developmental) dynamics entailed in attaining this focus.

The vertical axis in Figure 3 indicates scope of interest. This second dimension relates to whether interest is directed towards the *content* of the identity focus (e.g. what it means to the individual to be a doctor) or towards the *context* or situational factors shaping that identity focus (e.g. enabling factors that shape one's occupational identity as a doctor). Identity content signifies the meaning of the identity focus in question and associated prescribed modes of behaviour (Livingstone and Haslam 2008); and comprises values, goals, beliefs, stereotypic traits, knowledge, skills and abilities associated with that identity (Ashforth *et al.* 2008). When there is incongruence between the content of two or more identities, identity conflicts arise (e.g. Gotsi *et al*. 2010). Identity content also includes formal and informal rules, relational comparisons with other social categories and cognitive models (Abdelal *et al.* 2006). In contrast, identity context refers to settings, social and historical factors that impact the

development or performance of a target identity. For example, Brown and Humphreys (2006) analyze the role of geographical sites in the construction of team identities. And Spyridonidis *et al.'s* (2015) study of hybrid manager-physician professional identities reveals the role of institutional, political and economic pressures on the enactment of certain occupation-specific roles. Though related to context, identity content operates independently of context (Livingstone and Haslam 2008). The question for this axis is whether researchers are primarily concerned with the identity focus itself (content) or with the focus *in situ* (context i.e. the relationships, situations or narratives in which a focal identity becomes salient and evolves). The decision to focus on context is also largely influenced by the empirical context of the research (Haslam *et al.* 2017), such as a concern for how individuals conceptualise leaders (content) in comparison to how changes within an organization may impact an individual's understanding of herself as a leader (context). Different triggers are likely to come into play. For example, identity conflict may be a cue for identity work focused on content (triggering congruence). On the other hand, identity salience is likely to be the trigger for identity work focused on context; here, context is situationally relevant and subjectively important (Ashforth *et al.* 2008). Although organizational researchers often engage with the debates regarding stability/fluidity of identity, we find less consideration of identity content versus context. Indeed, there is still much to learn about how organizational, national and cultural contexts affect identity foci (Brown 2015). However, as Brown (2017) notes in relation to agency / structure debates, identities are neither simply chosen by autonomous individuals unconstrained by context, nor merely allocated or imposed by context.

Thus, the constellations in Figure 3 are not rigid boundaries, as identities and identification are both stable and adaptive and changes in context affect changes in content

(e.g. as in the case of organizational prototypes, Hogg and Terry 2000). We distinguish between studies focussing on the stable content of identity foci, such as a particular occupation (Quadrant 1); the evolving content of identification foci, such as the changing meanings associated with acquiring 'professional status' occupational identities (Quadrant 2); the stable context of identity foci, such as a prevailing professionalism discourse (Quadrant 3); and the evolving context of identification foci, such as situational factors that control and enable the professionalization identity process (Quadrant 4).

Our intention is to emphasize the essence of, and contrast between, the four positions, rather than elaborate on the variations within them. Thus, the framework progresses dialogue on construct clarification in individual identity foci research by eliciting researchers' explicit assumptions relating to their identity target of study and by flagging up conceptual and methodological issues to be addressed by further research.
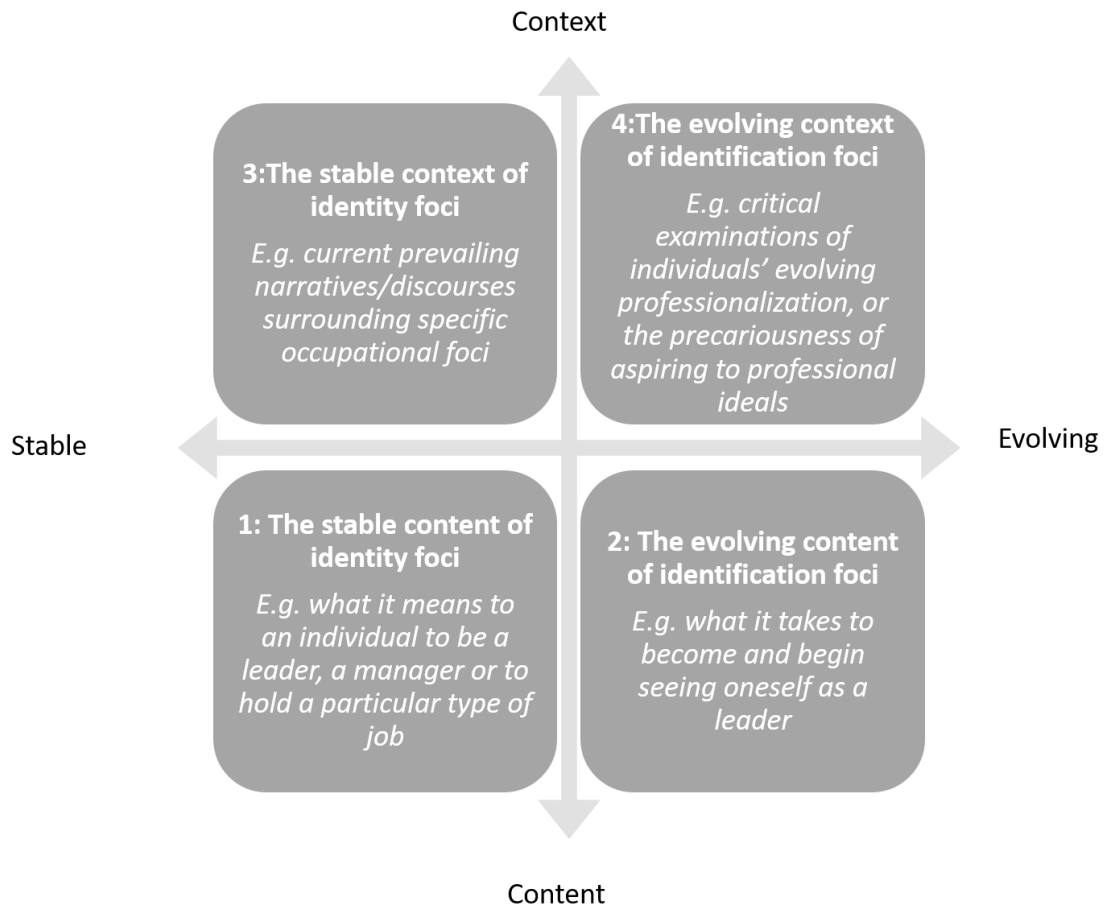
Context

3:The stable context of identity foci *E.g. current prevailing narratives/discourses surrounding specific occupational foci*	4:The evolving context of identification foci *E.g. critical examinations of individuals' evolving professionalization, or the precariousness of aspiring to professional ideals*
1: The stable content of identity foci *E.g. what it means to an individual to be a leader, a manager or to hold a particular type of job*	2: The evolving content of identification foci *E.g. what it takes to become and begin seeing oneself as a leader*

Stable → ← Evolving

Content

Figure 3: A positioning framework for individual-level identity foci related to work

The stable content of identity foci

Quadrant 1 represents conventional foci of individual-level identification at work, such as relatively fixed assumptions regarding what it means to an individual to be a leader, a manager or to hold a particular type of job (e.g. Day and Harrison 2007; Johnson *et al*. 2012). The interest here is typically the experiences, attributes or traits associated with inhabiting a given identity focus. This includes how individuals make sense of occupations or how they manage multiple occupations. Of course, underlying assumptions about the fluidity or stability of identity//identification content might be inherently different across theoretical perspectives

(e.g. Brown (2017) notes that psychologists tend to emphasize stability while postmodernists emphasize the fluid and fractured nature of identity content). Our review indicates that 'work', seen as a relatively stable and secure identity target, currently captures overly broad, sometimes vague, and multiple identity content. The review also indicates that there is more scope for examining meanings associated with rich, content-imbued foci such as 'professional occupation'. While certain professions are extensively examined (e.g. consultants, lawyers), others would benefit from further attention (e.g. scientists). Additionally, we notice an elitist bias in the literature, attending to high-status identification foci. Future research could expand the array of foci examined to include the personal meanings associated with holding low skill or low status jobs.

The evolving content of identification foci

The focus in Quadrant 2 is primarily on the evolving, individual sensemaking patterns associated with acquiring and developing a focal identity. Exemplar studies examine adaptive leader identification and leader identity development (e.g. Humphreys *et al*. 2015); research questions are variants of what it takes to become and begin seeing oneself as a leader. Although the primary interest is on the meanings attributed to constructing a given identity (over time), our review revealed that interpretivist researchers do demonstrate sensitivity to broader socio-structural and socio-historical factors affecting self-construction. For example, social stigma and occupational stereotypes inherent in enacting journalist and engineer occupations were identified in African-American journalists' (Slay and Smith 2011) and women engineers' (Hatmaker 2013) experiences. Future research could pay increased attention to how career identification content changes over time. Since advancement towards leadership is often nested within career transitions, future studies could also explore the overlap or disjuncture between

'career' and 'leadership' as identification foci. There is also a gap to be addressed in our understanding of individual sensemaking during different phases of establishing an occupational identity, such as the path from Associate, to Consultant, to Manager, to Partner in professional services firms, and routes to other 'elite' identities. Future research could also focus on understanding shifts between foci, such as how/whether there is a sequential development between follower, managerial and leader self-construal through time. Processes relating to identification remain underspecified in identity research generally (Brown 2015). Longitudinal examinations of sensemaking as an internal meaning making process (Weick 1995) could be a useful analytical tool here. Additionally, there is insufficient analytical use of time in identity studies (Brown 2015). Examining the evolving content of identification foci requires time-sensitive analyses of how behavioural norms linked to various foci evolve, morph into each other or relate to each other over time (such designs were rare in our data). Process studies and methodologies would be particularly useful in this respect (as demonstrated by Lutgen-Sandvik 2008; Howard-Grenville *et al.* 2013), either through longitudinal designs or retrospective interviews (Langley *et al.* 2013).

The stable context of identity foci

Quadrant 3 comprises studies of individual-level identification at work that are sensitive to relational and other contextual factors, including the narratives surrounding specific occupational foci. Exemplar studies from our review examine the relational dimensions of 'leader' as a focal identity (Sun 2013). Additionally, Brown and Humphreys (2006) take a different perspective on group/team identity (relative to other studies of this target) and demonstrate how 'place' (e.g. a college site) is a discursive resource on which groups draw in their efforts to author versions of their organization's identity. However, this

was the only example of examining a relatively stable context of team/workgroup identification.

In this quadrant, attention to the discourse surrounding 'the professional' can be fully explored. Examination of narratives attributed to certain 'professions', such as creativity, elitism and expertise are also categorized here. Researchers can further explore 'professionalism' as an identity focus by examining a range of (rather than single) occupations collectively labelled professions. For example, there is a gap in understanding the identity concerns shared across members of specific consulting organizations or public sector institutions (Brown 2015). This will advance understanding of broader factors beyond organizational boundaries that enable and hinder the manifestation of a relatively stable 'professional identity'. Additionally, investigating critical structural and contextual factors surrounding a wider range of identity foci (such as the 'migrant' or 'low skilled' worker) would prove insightful.

The evolving context of identification foci

We see the greatest potential for studying individual-level foci falling within Quadrant 4. The issues of interest here are the contextual factors influencing the process of identification with a target, which include relational, institutional, structural and historical aspects. A classic examination of the external/contextual factors that trigger identification include papers on organizational sensebreaking and sensegiving processes (e.g. Pratt 2000). In addition, Empson (2013) shows how colleagues can play the role of self-appointed "identity regulators". In this quadrant, we position critical examinations of individuals' evolving professionalization, as well as investigations of the precariousness of aspiring to professional ideals (e.g. Fraher and Gabriel 2014; Bain 2005).

Future research could examine adaptive follower identity development, for example, considering how the context of formal leader development programmes affects leader identification, compared to informal learning or mentoring processes. Further, leadership identification is context-dependent and professional services create unique contexts for leadership (Empson, 2013). Thus, examining how professionalism ideals shape leadership identification in professional services and the NHS (as earlier discussed) as contexts would prove insightful. Similarly, while there is significant understanding of the content of OID (e.g. in terms of measures), future research could seek rich context data, such as how different organizational forms and industries influence individual sensemaking. In short, within this quadrant, we see ample opportunity to investigate the "process of contestation," in which individuals strive to make sense of collective identities (Haslam et al. 2017).

Beyond organizational boundaries, what individual level identity foci become salient for working individuals across different national cultures? How do contemporary political movements and events, imbued with populist and anti-intellectual narratives, affect identification with professions where expertise is critical (e.g. scientist)? Does the apparent preoccupation with professionalism/professionalization, occupation and organization as bases for self-definition play out in non-Western contexts? Additionally, how does precarious employment (prevalent in today's Western economies) shape the development of occupational and career focal identities in the medium and long term? Such questions for future researchers would add depth to our understanding of the contextual conditions that shape the acquisition of various identity foci.

CONCLUSION

This paper's SLR provides a comprehensive synthesis of research regarding the bases by which one derives a sense of self in the context of work. We identified nine identity foci (manager, leader, follower, team, organization, occupation-specific, professional, career, work), spanning a range of functionalist and interpretivist meta-theoretical approaches, with slightly fewer critical perspectives. We offered recommendations to enhance construct clarity of these foci by specifying clearer conceptual boundaries for each focus and semantic relationships between foci, formulating specific suggestions to progress theoretical development in the field. We also proposed an integrative framework to map nuances in the terrain regarding scope of interest and assumptions of identity foci studies, highlighting themes within the four clusters identified, relationships across categories and future research agendas.

We acknowledge our part in shaping the conceptual boundaries we set for the SLR (e.g. individual focus). We also recognise that in utilising this methodology and focusing only on management and organizational studies (MOS) literature, we inherently treat identity and the autonomous self as unproblematic and risk perpetuating what Knights and Clarke (2017) refer to as a myopia endemic within the field. However, without wishing to disregard the value of insights from earlier multidisciplinary literature, we argue that highlighting differences in the ways in which scholars apply identity constructs within current MOS scholarship reveals both researcher assumptions and unexplored facets of organizational life. Furthermore, as scholars with organizational psychology backgrounds currently involved in social justice research agendas, and using qualitative methods within largely interpretivist perspectives, we demonstrate some 'scholarly empathy' with different communities of researchers in the field (positivists/functionalists, interpretivists, and critical scholars). As a research team, we

experienced this multiplicity as both a tension and a strength, allowing us to reflect the theoretical and methodological diversity in the field.

We acknowledge the richness and complexity of the field. Although we have sought rigour and transparency in presenting our methodology, decisions regarding keywords, search strings, inclusion and exclusion criteria may have inadvertently caused some papers to be excluded. For example, by focusing on adults, much (student-based) vocational identity research was excluded. Additionally, our focus on top-ranked ABS journals may privilege certain research traditions or methodologies. Another limitation concerns excluding sociodemographic identities as foci. Intersecting gender and ethnic identities are salient in minority ethnic individuals' experiences as organizational members (Atewologun *et al.* 2016). Future reviews could examine how such demographic identities influence the development and enactment of key foci we identified. Relatedly, the concepts examined are highly culturally sensitive. The vast majority of our studies are based on identity foci selected by European, North American and Australian scholars, suggesting further exploration of non-Western identity foci at work would be beneficial.

The integrative frameworks and definitions proposed are not exhaustive. Additionally, although we seek to improve construct clarity, the definitions offered are not fixed, unambiguous or mutually exclusive. Instead, we envision constellations and conditions around which identity targets may be usefully constructed and applied. Utilizing our frameworks and integrative definitions, scholars might justify future research agendas around particular combinations of foci and approaches. We advocate that individual-level identity scholars make explicit their primary scope of identity interest (foci content or context, or both), assumptions

of identity (stable or evolving), and consider the scope conditions in terms of time and space (including organizational boundaries) and the semantic relationships with other foci.

We note that Alvesson *et al's*. (2008) meta-theoretical perspectives are underpinned by divergent ontological and epistemological perspectives that ultimately shape identity scholars' occupational identities, work, publication strategies and career choices. We join other authors (e.g. Watson 2002) in acknowledging the potential political and professional consequences of violating implicit or explicit norms and trends in given fields of research. Prevailing under-specification in the field may be influenced by explicit or implicit academic pressures, such as real or imagined expectations from generalist management publications for lay and/or fashionable terms/foci that may be deemed more novel, generalizable or applicable. We hope however that our findings, the proposed integrative frameworks and future research directions will provide a more informed guide to making scholarly choices in the field.

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