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Narrative identity construction in times of career change:

Taking note of unconscious desires

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Abstract

Working at the intersection of narrative and psychoanalytic theory, we present in this paper an affective conceptualization of identity dynamics during times of career change, incorporating the notion of unconscious desires. We propose that frictions in career change narratives, such as the paradoxical co-existence of coherence and ambiguity, allude to unconscious subtexts that can become 'readable' in the narrative when applying a psychoanalytic framework. We point to the analysis of 30 life story interviews with former management consultants who report upon a past and/or anticipated career change for illustration. By linking three empirically derived narrative strategies for combining coherence and ambiguity (*ignoring the change, admitting the ambiguity and depicting a wishful future*) with three conceptually informed psychoanalytic ego-defenses (*denial, rationalization and sublimation*), we provide an analytic framework that helps to explain why workers in transition may try to preserve both coherence and ambiguity when constructing a sense of self through narrative. The analysis of unconscious subtexts reveals that, in times of career change, people's identity constructions are driven by conflicting unconscious desires for self-continuity on one hand and openness on the other.

Keywords

Narrative theory, psychoanalytic theory, identity construction, coherence, ambiguity, narrative strategy, ego-defenses, unconscious desires

Introduction

In their work context, people face myriad occupational choices and countless options for professional career development (Obodaru, 2012). Notions of the “boundaryless” (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996), “protean” (Hall, 1996) and “postcorporate” (Peiperl and Baruch, 1997) career suggest, moreover, that people are free to (re)invent themselves periodically by experimenting actively with diverse roles and occupational identities (Ashforth, 2001). This said, people may experience conflicting demands in what Fraher and Gabriel (2014: 938) refer to as “the limbo land” of employment. On one hand, the security of permanent employment is gone and workers are therefore expected to adapt smoothly to organizational flux and to new work situations without losing a sense of self. On the other hand, workers are expected to show loyalty to their employer and to identify strongly with an organization and its cultural scripts (Fraher and Gabriel, 2014). In light of these contradictory demands, it is not surprising that career moves often pose considerable identity threats to those who are in transition from one working context to another (Petriglieri, 2011).

Narrative identity theory is particularly apt for capturing the complexity of identity dynamics during career changes. It focuses on ambiguous and sometimes contradictory experiences and assumes that, especially in times of uncertainty, stories become important building blocks in individuals’ identity construction (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007). And yet, while narrative identity studies are helpful superficially for depicting identity dynamics during career change, Hoedemaekers (2010) has noted that current identity studies rarely address elements which unfold outside our awareness and so ignore underlying emotions, unconscious dynamics or interruptions in the narrative construction of identity. He therefore raises this concern: “If identity unfolds at least partly in an unconscious manner, if it is laced with affect, and if it is subject to interruptions and breakdowns in the narrative, the question must be raised how these elements can be conceptualized within organization studies” (Hoedemaekers, 2010: 380). Along those lines, scholars have criticized the narrative

understanding of identity for ignoring or not “accessing” people’s experience, their subjectivity and their unconscious.

In this paper, where we investigate the career change narratives of former management consultants, our goal is to delineate and conceptualize clearly these overlooked aspects in identity narratives. Following the idea that social phenomena are mediated, not only by discourses, but also by unconscious dynamics (Benwell and Stokoe, 2010; Hollway and Jefferson, 2005), we will weave a narrative understanding of identity together with a psychoanalytic reading of the unconscious desires that mold identity construction during career change. With the assumption that episodes of professional transition are often experienced as anxiety-producing ruptures in a continuous life story, we argue that, particularly during periods of career change, people may have conflicting desires. On one hand, they may want to create narrative “coherence” across different and changing work contexts; on the other hand, they may want to keep the narrative “ambiguous”, open and undefined. We propose that these conflicting desires for coherence and ambiguity may lead to tensions in the overall storyline which can make the unconscious subtext (Ninivaggi, 2010) – that is, a layer of meaning underneath the spoken word – become visible.

To investigate these tensions empirically, we have formulated the following research question: *How do former management consultants create both coherence and ambiguity in their self-narratives of transition and with which underlying unconscious desires?* In researching this question, we try to integrate a narrative understanding of *how* former management consultants achieve a co-existence between ambiguity and coherence linguistically with a psychoanalytic interpretation of *why* they might need to do so. The empirical analysis of this question instantiates three narrative strategies through which the former consultants simultaneously achieved coherence and ambiguity in their narrative accounts: i) *ignoring the change*, ii) *admitting the ambiguity* and iii) *depicting a wishful future*. In linking these narrative strategies, each in turn, to the psychoanalytic ego-defenses of

i) *denial*, ii) *rationalization* and iii) *sublimation*, and in making some of the underlying unconscious dynamics explicit, we contend that narrative identity construction is not always under conscious control. Moreover, by providing a case study of how unconscious subtexts can become readable through narrative analysis, we hope to pave the way for an affective theorizing of narrative identity construction.

In the following sections we will first provide a brief overview of the literature on identity dynamics during career change. Next, we will discuss narrative identity studies which often argue for either coherence or ambiguity. Lastly, we will delineate a psychoanalytic framework centered on ego-defenses which allows us to make inferences about why people in career transition may be motivated to preserve both coherence and ambiguity when constructing a sense of self.

Identity dynamics in times of career change

Traditional theories have conceptualized careers as bureaucratic, linear, hierarchical and rigid developments, with employees progressing through their work lives along a set of institutionally defined occupational stages within a single organization. This older norm, however, is increasingly supplemented by emerging concepts and practices of career as ever-evolving, dynamic, boundaryless and multi-directional, with employees changing career trajectories periodically (Ibarra, 2005; Louis, 1980a; Nentwich and Hoyer, 2013; Sullivan and Arthur 2006; Wise and Millward, 2005). A career change may be defined as non-institutionalized since it does not follow the logic of a recognized role progression or organizational career path, but, instead, marks a move into a new and sometimes considerably different line of work (Ibarra, 2005).

The impetus for career change may be a voluntary choice but career change can also be imposed, as in the case of job loss. Involuntary unemployment can pose considerable identity threats associated with downward financial mobility (Newman, 1999), loss of status

and prestige (Fraher and Gabriel, 2014), and even a loss of self-worth (Gabriel et al., 2010). But even voluntary career changes – which are more relevant to this paper’s argument – are often not experienced as smooth processes; non-institutionalized transitions are usually disorderly and disruptive (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010).

Moreover, it would be naïve to assume, even in instances of voluntary career change, that agents are entirely at liberty to choose a new profession and thus to reconstruct a new image of the professional self freely. As Mills (1940) noted, motives for career change derive from social interaction and are negotiated through a variety of relational resources (see also Conroy and O’Leary-Kelly, 2014; Maitlis, 2009; Petriglieri, 2011). Certain organizational environments are in fact rather directive in providing career scripts that influence people’s future career choices (Chreim, Williams and Hinings, 2007). In these scripts, only the succession of jobs that progress in salary, title, hierarchy and prestige are framed as socially desirable (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010). When career moves depart from this convention, however, individuals are expected to offer a ‘vocabulary of motives’ (Mills, 1940) or ‘accounts’ (Scott and Lyman, 1968) to justify the discontinuity in their career.

More generally, career changes are often associated with a difficult transition period (Louis, 1980b). Just as entering a new role may involve a long and arduous adjustment because of learning, internalizing and making sense of new skills and daily routines (Ashforth, 2001; Wise and Millward, 2005), so the process of exiting a role – that is, leaving an organization and giving up a professional identity – can be equally difficult (Ebaugh, 1988; Petriglieri, 2011). And indeed, most people, when changing careers, have to give up a valued position, a close work relationship, team membership or a cherished work location (Conroy and O’Leary-Kelly, 2014). These experienced ‘losses’ may trigger an interruption in the person’s existing identity concepts that force them to develop a new sense of self. Conroy and O’Leary-Kelly (2014: 67) therefore speak of “a liminal state between letting go of the old and moving on to a new identity” as part of a healing process.

This process, however, may induce identity conflicts, since some untested projections of a future self are often not able to keep up with well-grounded and historically defined self-images (Ibarra, 1999, 2005). When people are still intensely involved in their old work identity (although it may no longer be appealing), while they are already committed to, yet unsure about, what the future holds, how they construct a sense of self becomes interesting. In the following, we will delineate how narrative studies have tried to capture these identity dynamics during career change by focusing on notions of coherence and ambiguity in the narrative construction of identity.

Narrative identity construction as both coherent and ambiguous

Most narrative work in the field of organization studies is grounded in the social constructionist assumption that narratives do not simply describe reality, but instead, constitute it (Maitlis, 2012). Assuming that we live in a “storytelling society” (Benwell and Stokoe, 2010) where people make sense of their lives through processes of arranging characters and events in meaningful ways (Czarniawska, 1998; Kenny et al., 2011; Ricoeur, 1988), narrative scholars maintain that “it is through storytelling that people’s lives are experienced and made meaningful, and their identities constructed” (Stokoe and Edwards, 2006: 56). From a narrative perspective, identities are molded and fashioned through the local narratives which people tell about themselves, as well as through the broader cultural narratives referred to as “master narratives” (Somers, 1994). To take this point one step further, some theorists even suggest that narratives, in fact, *are* identities since “we become who we are through telling stories about our lives and living the stories we tell” (Bruner, 1994: 53). Within this framework, it is interesting to note that most narrative approaches to identity construction fall within two distinct research orientations, highlighting either notions of ‘coherence’ and ‘continuity’ (e.g., Pals, 2006; Singer, 2004), or notions of ‘ambiguity’ and ‘complexity’ (e.g., Fraher and Gabriel, 2014; LaPointe, 2010; Whittle et al., 2009).

The coherence argument is based on the notion that stories which are open-ended, confused and ambiguous become 'readable' in the format of a unified and meaningful life story which is told over many occasions (McAdams, 2001; Linde, 1993). Moreover it is assumed that people's life stories achieve narrative order through two major coherence principles: continuity and causality. While continuity is driven by a desire for stability in the self over time, causality permits the construction of a self whose past is relevant to its present, since past events are interpreted as triggering present states (Ashforth, 2001). With respect to 'coherence', people respond to change with sensemaking processes that provide a sense of plausibility and continuity across shifting contexts (Brown et al., 2009; Weick, 1995).

In contrast, studies that highlight notions of 'ambiguity' and 'complexity' in identity construction depict narratives as being constantly assembled, refined and embellished. Identity is thus reconceptualized as a potentially unstable, fragmented and precarious construct that is up for redefinition and revision repeatedly (e.g., Fraher and Gabriel, 2014; Hydén, 2010; Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010; LaPointe, 2010; Whittle et al., 2009). Rather than emphasizing notions of sensemaking during times of transition, studies with a focus on ambiguity explore notions of 'sensebreaking', 'senselosing' and 'sensegiving' as ways to deal with identity change, thereby pointing out that stories of the self may facilitate changes but also carry the potential for subverting or blocking them (Patriotta and Spedale, 2009).

In this paper, we draw on a more balanced view of narrative identity construction, favoring neither the arguments for coherence nor for ambiguity. Our view is based on the assumption that, particularly in times of career change, people engage with their often ambivalent transition experience by narrating themselves in both ambiguous yet coherent ways (see also Chreim, 2005; Clarke et al., 2009; Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003). This proposition is consistent with Steyaert's (2007) claim that storytelling is an enacted performance where the narrative construction of identity is effected by a continuous yet subtle 'balancing act' between complexity (ambiguity) and coherence. Ezzy also (1998)

acknowledged a need for preserving both ambiguity and coherence when he stated that “narrative identity is coherent but fluid and changeable, historically grounded but ‘fictively’ reinterpreted, constructed by an individual but constructed in interaction and dialogue with other people” (246).

In the following section, we will outline a psychoanalytic framework. This framework allows us not only to investigate the co-existence of coherence and ambiguity in the narrative construction of identity, but also to explain, considering the unconscious level of identity dynamics, why people may find it important to maintain this co-existence.

A psychoanalytic perspective: Ego-defenses and unconscious desires

As one of the great social theories of the twentieth century, psychoanalysis has informed ideas and methods for approaching social problems (Fotaki et al., 2012). Sigmund Freud (1913/1955) introduced psychoanalysis as a distinct body of knowledge not only about psychopathologies but also about the ‘normal’ functioning of the human psyche. Given the applicability of psychoanalysis to different domains of social life, including areas of art, culture, religion, and any science dealing with human civilization (Freud, 1910/ 1971), scholars have also acknowledged its potential to bring novel and startlingly original insights to organization studies (e.g. Arnaud, 2012; Fotaki et al., 2012; Gabriel and Carr, 2002). As a result, many approaches to management and organization in the twenty-first century have been transformed by intersecting with psychoanalysis (Fotaki et al., 2012).

The most distinguishing feature, and thus the signature concept of psychoanalysis, lies in the construct of ‘the unconscious’ and the related understanding that a substantial part of human motivation, energy and action is driven by desires that are frequently inaccessible to a person’s conscious mind (Antonacopoulou and Gabriel, 2001; Gabriel and Carr, 2002; Neumann and Hirschhorn, 1999). Instead of depicting the unconscious as a passive state of being, Freud (e.g. 1915/1957) described an active and dynamic unconscious, hiding thoughts

and desires from awareness. Freud's notion of the unconscious directly challenged a blind faith in rational control over the self, and thereby provided original insights into the world of complex human behaviors, desires and interactions, including those in all kinds of organizational contexts (Tsoukas et al., 2008). The psychoanalytic approach to organizations, then, does not consider organizational members as rational beings, but, rather, as distinct individuals driven by unconscious desires, emotions and fantasies (Gabriel and Carr, 2002).

A psychoanalytic perspective on the phenomenon of career change posits that periods of fundamental transitions are often marked by feelings of anxiety and loss. As Freud noted, individuals are generally slow to accept changes because "people never willingly abandon a libidinal position, not even, indeed, when a substitute is already beckoning to them" (Freud, 1917/ 1984: 253). Instead they may develop 'defensive responses', which he described as the mental operation of keeping unacceptable thoughts, impulses and desires out of awareness, often with the cost of modifying and distorting reality (Freud, 1894/1962). Freud's ideas about defenses varied over the years (e.g., 1915/1957, 1926/1959) and were never fully systematized. Others took up this task later, notably Anna Freud in her work *The ego and the mechanisms of defense* (1936/1946).

The concept of the ego, well-known today from Freud's (1933/ 1988) topographical model of the mind, represents that region of the mind responsible for balancing the needs of the id (instinctual responses and drives) with the demands of the superego (societal norms, morality, and expectations). When the ego, which is linked to a person's identity and self-concept, comes under threat (as in periods of career change) it may engage in a variety of defense mechanisms, through which emotional discomfort is repressed, rejected or reinterpreted, in most instances unconsciously; examples include repression, denial, reaction formation, rationalization, sublimation or projection (A. Freud, 1936). Generally, defense mechanisms have been framed as a common aspect of everyday behavior in the protection of one's sense of self (Vince and Broussine, 1996). However, when taken to one of two extremes

– either a complete lack of such ego-defenses, or over-functioning ego-defenses – people may lose their sense of balance when trying to construct their identity.

On the contrary, when a person is willing to engage with identity-threats – such as the ambiguity experienced during career shifts – in a balanced way, ego-defenses may help to reduce uncertainty while permitting space for complex phenomena and multiple interpretations (Brown and Starkey, 2000). In this paper, we argue that the analysis of ego-defenses and their underlying unconscious desires can help to explain certain dynamics – especially the co-existence of coherence and ambiguity – in the narrative construction of identity during career change.

Refined research questions

The literature surveyed has indicated that identity construction may be severely jeopardized during career change. As stated previously, while most narrative studies frame identity as constructed either through coherent or ambiguous storytelling, this study is based on the assumption that narrative identity construction draws on both coherence and ambiguity. With an interest in the underlying unconscious desires that drive people to simultaneously maintain coherence and ambiguity in their career change narratives, we have introduced a psychoanalytic framework around ego-defenses that can help to explain why this co-existence is a form of protection of the self against uncertainty, anxiety and related emotions during career change.

To steer the analysis process accordingly, we have refined our broad research question of “*How do former management consultants create both coherence and ambiguity in their self-narratives of transition and with what underlying unconscious desires?*” into the following, more nuanced, analytical questions:

1. *Through which narrative strategies do people achieve and maintain the co-existence of coherence and ambiguity? When do they draw on these narrative strategies, and what is the interplay between coherence and ambiguity in them?*
2. *When linking these narrative strategies to psychoanalytic concepts of ego-defenses, what can we infer about the unconscious desires that underlie people's narrative identity construction in times of career change?*
3. *How do people weave contradictory storylines together to maintain coherence in the overall unfolding of a life story, and how can a psychoanalytic framework help to take better note of unconscious dynamics in career change narratives?*

We will further discuss how these questions have guided the analysis process in our data analysis section.

Methods

Sample and data collection

The first author of this paper conducted 30 interviews with former consultants of big global management consultancies, mostly (but not exclusively) based in Switzerland and Germany. All of the consultancies, which are headquartered in the United States but operate internationally, are regarded as highly prestigious and elite companies. This prestige had an impact on how interviewees narrated their career transition. Often interviewees held on to an elite professional identity that was primarily grounded in their consulting past, even when constructing their self-image in their new environment.

While the group of interviewees had a similar background at a major global management consultancy, people were chosen from six different new work contexts: academia, NGO, industry, financial services, in-house consulting or their own start-ups. Other relevant parameters of variation among the interviewees were the time spent in consulting,

which ranged from (less than) 1 year to 10 years with an average of 3 years, and the number of years out of the consultancy at the time of the interview, which ranged from (less than) 1 year to 9 years, with an average of 2 years.

The interviewing process itself was inspired by McAdams' (2001) work on life story interviews. Interestingly, while a life story is told over many occasions, life story units often contain a set-up which is indicative of the larger story's overall construction. The interview, then may elicit a narrative that allows the researcher to study an important part of a person's life story without engaging with a lifetime's volume of talk (Linde, 1993). In this process, respondents were invited to narrate their life stories freely from the time they entered university to the current day by imagining that they would write a book about their life in a few years. The researcher was explicit about her interest in identity construction across changing organizational contexts; otherwise the interviews were minimally structured. Some probing questions were asked as the interviews unfolded, for instance around decisions concerning transitions and career shifts. The interviews lasted between 45 and 135 minutes.

Data analysis

After all interview recordings were fully transcribed, the data analysis was conducted in three separate steps. Table 1 provides a detailed overview of those steps, laying out the methodological procedure (e.g., inductive vs. conceptually derived), the researchers' a priori assumptions that shaped the analytical choices, the research questions that drove the details of the analysis, and the respective outcomes.

- Insert Table 1 here -

In the first step of the analysis, we investigated narrative strategies, that is, the narrative techniques and practices for achieving particular goals (see also Gabriel et al., 2010), through

which these former management consultants maintained both coherence and ambiguity as they reported episodes of professional transition. As stated, our particular interest was in exactly *how* interviewees achieved coherence and ambiguity without mitigating either one. We therefore focused on text passages that, despite featuring a theme of coherence (for example, claiming continuity, drawing causal links, mitigating disparate accounts), showed linguistic markers of ambiguity, such as inconsistencies, contradictions, either-or constructions and competing or incompatible interpretations. Similarly, we looked at text passages whose tone was mostly antagonistic and confusing while the overall story still came across as consistent (see also Clarke et al., 2009). Along with those linguistic markers, we identified three different narrative strategies: *ignoring the change*, *admitting the ambiguity*, and *depicting a wishful future*. In order to distinguish these strategies, we paid particular attention to the context in which they appeared (for example, when reporting upon a past career change or an anticipated future), assuming that reflections upon the past or the future always represent an evaluation of the present (Ybema, 2004). Moreover, for each narrative strategy we analyzed the specific interplay between markers of coherence and ambiguity which also allowed us to better describe and delineate each strategy.

In the second step of the analysis, we linked those three empirically derived narrative strategies – based on their specific characteristics in terms of occurrence and interplay – to the three conceptually informed psychoanalytic notions of ego-defenses: *denial*, *rationalization* and *sublimation*. For each ego-defense we moreover indicated the general unconscious desires ascribed to it in the literature. Linking the three narrative strategies with three ego-defenses and their underlying unconscious desires enabled us then to develop an analytic framework or scheme (see Table 2) that may be helpful for reading career change narratives and, especially, for making inferences about the unconscious dynamics that color people’s narrative identity construction in light of a career shift.

In the final step, we tried to provide an illustration for how this analytical scheme could serve as an interpretive guide for taking better note of these unconscious dynamics. In particular, we investigated how interviewees wove different and seemingly contradictory narrative moments into an overall coherent life story and how switching between different storylines helped them to accomplish this coherence. Here we provide an in-depth reading of one former management consultant's life story in order to offer as much detail as possible.

We hold that focusing on a single case, which might be problematic in other research contexts, is appropriate for a psychoanalytic reading of a particular issue. Freud's own and highly cited research method for studying unconscious patterns and interpreting a person's inner dynamics was the case study (see also Carr, 2001; Neumann and Hirschhorn, 1999). His famous case descriptions include Dora (1905), a case of hysteria in a young woman, Little Hans (1909), an analysis of phobia in a five-year-old boy, and the Wolf Man (1918), which describes an infantile neurosis analyzed around a nightmare. In psychoanalytic writings, the case method is the most typical approach; organizational scholars working with psychoanalytic theory have used it as well (see e.g. Costas and Fleming, 2009; Muhr and Kirkegaard, 2013). Because the single case method does not have the primary goal of generalizability, we hope to provide in this last part of the analysis a rich and detailed portrait which will lead to greater awareness of the unconscious dynamics in the narrative identity construction.

Results

'Ignoring the change' driven by unconscious dynamics of 'denial'

'Ignoring the change' was one of the narrative strategies used by former management consultants for maintaining coherence and ambiguity in their stories of career transition. It consisted of ignoring or minimizing any difficulties experienced when going through an important life change or transition period. Concerning the interplay between coherence and

ambiguity, interviewees were generally biased towards coherence, highlighting aspects of continuity, stability and similarity across different working contexts, and thereby claiming indirectly that ‘nothing has changed’. At the same time, some indicators of ambiguity were apparent in the form of little frictions and contradictions in the narrative. The former management consultants ignored their change, but not entirely.

This narrative strategy was most evident when interviewees reported upon their career move from the consultancy to a new work environment, thereby making comparisons between the past and the present:

And now to say, what are basically the big changes for me as consultant?

Well, in terms of the work it is actually quite similar. The things we do and how we do them in terms of the approach and stuff like that, we are basically like an internal consultancy, even though some people don't like to hear that at all or even oppose to that (John, In-house Consulting, Interview 2).

In this interview extract, the ex-consultant, who now works in the business development department of a large bank (which he refers to as the bank's in-house consultancy), eliminates all indicators of a potentially difficult career shift by depicting his previous and his new work environments as remarkably similar. He indicates some differences between the past and the present, and so makes space for ambiguity in the overall smooth framing of the career change, only when he mentions some objections to positioning his new department as an “internal consultancy”.

In this case, the move from external consultancy to in-house consulting-like work may not have been, in fact, a challenging career shift. However, this narrative strategy was also used by interviewees who experienced greater disparities between their past and their present

work contexts. When moving from a management consultancy to an NGO, for example, another interviewee made this claim:

I was not on a path of self-discovery. I did not want to go to Africa and become a teacher, that's not what I wanted. There are certainly people who have a change of mind like that, but I didn't have that. I was just looking for a more meaningful job (Lea, NGO, Interview 23).

By emphasizing that she did not have a "change of mind", the interviewee minimizes the change that she experienced between her past and her present job, and creates coherence in her overall life story. At the same time, by affirming that she was actively looking for a more meaningful job, she also acknowledges a clear difference between the consultancy and the NGO context, and so makes room for ambiguity alongside coherence.

We conceptually link this narrative strategy to the ego-defense of *denial* for a psychoanalytic interpretation. *Denial* is an unconscious process with the underlying desire of bridging the differences between one's actual and one's ideal self-image (Brown, 1997). Individuals entering a new working context which requires learning a set of new skills and behavioral norms may well feel that their self-image is exposed and vulnerable. As noted earlier, such transitions may induce painful anxiety, intolerable conflict and emotional distress. Coping with these emotions without ego-defenses would clearly be difficult. On the other hand, though, an over-functioning of denial and blindly subscribing to the claim that "nothing has changed" may lead to concealed feelings of discomfort and so to self-deception.

While denying change totally might help to eliminate identity threats, it would also represent a considerable break with the experienced reality of the transition and would remove the potential for new growth. A person might desire instead to maintain a degree of ambiguity that does not threaten a coherent sense of self. This more balanced approach of denying

feelings of insecurity partially could be achieved by holding on to a past identity that is familiar and comfortable (Brown and Starkey, 2000), while slowly re-orienting one's sense of self towards a new working context.

'Admitting the ambiguity' driven by unconscious dynamics of 'rationalization'

The interviewees also used the narrative strategy of 'admitting the ambiguity'. In this case, they gave precedence to ambiguity over coherence, and were explicit about being in an indeterminate state, torn between two positions that were equally embraced and rejected. And yet, by admitting the ambiguity, by addressing it proactively and, in some instances, even accepting it wholeheartedly, interviewees still achieved a sense of coherence in this narrative strategy with the implied claim that 'it's all under control'. It may be that interviewees admitted the ambiguity to make it more bearable.

The second strategy was most apparent when interviewees openly questioned their decision to leave the consultancy and move to a different work environment, which had brought them to their present state of ambiguity:

The question is whether career-wise I should have stayed a bit longer [in the consultancy]. Probably yes, but maybe I was not patient enough. On the other hand it was just not the right thing. I was just too lazy or too consequent and have then decided [to go]. Well, we will see whether this was wise or not. For the moment it's okay (Tom, Academia, Interview 7).

In this extract, the former consultant, now working in academia, admits his ambiguity as he frames his exit from the management consultancy in various and conflicting ways. On one hand, he supports his exit decision when he states that "it was just not the right thing" and that

leaving the consultancy was a matter of being consistent and “consequent”. On the other hand, a considerable degree of doubt remains as he depicts his career move as the result of being “too impatient” or “too lazy”. His questions of “whether career-wise he should have stayed longer in the consultancy”, or “whether his exit decision was wise or not” remain open and therefore ambiguous. By engaging reflectively and directly with these unsettling questions, weighing the pros and the cons, however, and in coming to the conclusion that “for the moment it’s okay”, he achieves a sense of control and coherence even in light of the ambiguity.

Another interviewee admitted his ambiguity by being transparent with his inability to let go of his continued identification with his consulting past:

That’s the tragedy. People are really wasting their time in consulting because they chase after an ideal image, something which they don’t really want to be. And still they are captured by this status thinking and wanting to prove that they belong to the best. [...] And there’s also that part inside of me that cannot let go. And I think that’s crazy because I finally arrived at a place where I feel good, where I enjoy the work, where I actually don’t need this. But I can tell that this part is still there (Karl, Social Entrepreneur, Interview 8).

The interviewee admits to being puzzled by his own observation that, even though he can distance himself rationally from the management consultancy and the “ideal” of wanting to “belong to the best”, he is still trapped emotionally by this ideal. Making this ambiguity explicit, however, puts him in command of the situation again; he can say with confidence that he has arrived at a place where he “feels good” and “enjoys the work”. In this way, the

overall sense of ambiguity is countered by a coherent storyline of having moved in the right direction.

We associate this narrative strategy of ‘admitting the ambiguity’ with the ego-defensive processes of *rationalization*. Rationalization refers to an unconscious desire of justifying seemingly unacceptable feelings, motives or behaviors in a way that make them appear plausible and creditable, thereby reducing dissonance (Brown, 1997; Brown and Starkey, 2000). Especially during the difficult times of career-related identity transitions, individuals may feel that they become more emotionally expressive about ambiguity than is socially accepted. With a complete lack of ego-defenses, such emotional expressiveness may put a person’s stable sense of identity in danger. Rationalization, however, can help people disguise psychologically draining and overwhelming emotions by producing more rational responses to the experience of ambiguity. At the same time, over-functioning rationalization mechanisms can eliminate all expressions of emotional experience; a person might feel strongly alienated from his or her actual feelings and thus search for more openness, that is, for the ambiguity loopholes that would allow for a better balance between ambiguity and coherence.

‘Depicting a wishful future’ driven by unconscious dynamics of ‘sublimation’

A third narrative strategy that interviewees used for preserving coherence and ambiguity was that of ‘depicting a wishful future’. In applying this strategy, interviewees exhibited an equal inclination towards ambiguity and coherence, directing attention away from a current difficult life situation that is experienced as ambiguous towards a coherent vision of a better future that is built around the claim that ‘it will all be good’. In their narratives, then, interviewees escape ambiguity in the present by taking refuge in a hopeful future. This third narrative strategy was most apparent when interviewees tried to make sense of their ambiguity in relation to an anticipated career move:

Interviewee: The next [career] step would be to get into a line position. That is basically the question now whether it works with the line position or not, that's a decisive factor. If it works, then everything is great. If it doesn't work, something has gone wrong. [...] Then I will keep looking around within the organization, or change the organization or start my own business.

Interviewer: Is that something you want to do in the future?

Interviewee: Sooner or later, 150%. Because I think that is the only thing that makes sense in life, I mean career-wise, to start your own business (Anton, Industry, Interview 18).

Having determined that getting into a line position is the next step in advancing his career, the possibility that "something could go wrong" creates a strong sense of insecurity that forces this interviewee to consider other options, such as looking for other positions or changing companies. This insecurity is countered by the compelling future vision that "one day I will have my own business". Reinforcing this vision, the interviewee says that starting his own business is "150%" likely, and "the only thing that really makes sense in life". Despite this coherent plot, the interviewee's current ambiguity is not fully resolved, since his immediate and pressing wish is to get into a line position; then, "everything would be great".

In another example, an interviewee takes refuge in a romantic vision of a better future where he can combine his nostalgia for the past with an ideal work setting in the future:

I can imagine, based on my background, my personality, to move into the direction of consulting again. Not necessarily in the old setting, to go back again to one of the big consultancies. Instead I would rather do my own thing, maybe with a particular circle of friends, those coming from a similar environment, to build up something together. My favorite vision would be to combine consulting with winery. Well, since I have a

passion for wine I really thought, maybe that works as well (John, In-house Consulting, Interview 2).

Even though the interviewee was not facing a career move imminently, he is contemplating different scenarios for his future. In particular, he is trying to make sense of his continued identification with his consulting past and his wish to move in that direction again. In this vision then, he creates coherence between his past and his projected future. In so doing, he shifts attention from his ambiguity-laden present that seems to lack some of the desirable qualities that he had encountered in the external consultancy, as well as the passion associated with his romantic vision of working with a circle of friends in an area of interest.

We have linked this third narrative strategy to the ego-defense of *sublimation* to address unconscious dynamics that may be under the surface. Sublimation is an unconscious activity with the underlying desire of substituting an originally unacceptable and therefore repressed impulse with a more socially acceptable drive that can be gratified in the long-term without objections (Adler, 1986; Brenner, 1973; Capps and Carlin, 2011). It has been theorized largely as a ‘mature’ or ‘healthy’ defense mechanism (Kim et al., 2013) since it often leads to culturally accepted behaviors. Especially when an unpleasant and ambiguous work situation arouses negative energies of anxiety or frustration, people may be motivated to redirect these energies unconsciously towards useful social activities, creative ends, or a higher life purpose, such as a compelling vision of a better future (Capps and Carlin, 2011; Gioia and Thomas, 1996; Ybema, 2004).

A complete absence of ego-defenses in ambiguous work situations may result in feelings of helplessness and resignation; sublimation may help to overcome these feelings by directing attention to an invulnerable future self-image. However, over-functioning sublimation and total involvement in future scenarios may lead people to disconnect from

present challenges. Thus, a certain degree of ambiguity may be necessary for staying attuned to the present, even while focusing energy on the future.

- Insert Table 2 here -

Case illustration: Coherence and ambiguity in the life story of Steve

With the following case illustration we provide a fine-grained example for how the link between narrative strategies and ego-defenses can serve as an interpretative guide for understanding unconscious dynamics in identity narratives of career change. This case also illustrates that the different strategies for combining coherence and ambiguity are apparent not only in discrete narrative moments, but also in the broad trajectory of an unfolding life story in which people maintain both coherence and ambiguity by switching between different storylines. More concretely, the analysis shows that two seemingly coherent storylines can still result in a sense of ambiguity, especially if the storylines are contradictory.

Moreover, conflicting storylines that initially create a notion of ambiguity can be read as coherent, particularly if they are consistent with other aspects of the narrative overall. By providing a psychoanalytic reading of these dynamics, we hope to develop a better understanding of how unconscious dynamics underlie narrative strategies, preserving both coherence and ambiguity, when people try to make sense of the present in light of career change.

We focus here on Steve (interview 25) because his life narrative clearly depicts the ongoing interplay between coherence and ambiguity – and thus the three narrative strategies – through conflicting yet compatible storylines. Steve is an ex-consultant who, at the time of the interview, worked for an NGO. Thirty-eight years old when the interview took place, his life story covered about 20 years of his schooling and work life. Steve had studied Political Science at a highly prestigious university in the UK. After serving in the British military for

several years, he moved to Switzerland for personal reasons and started his career in banking. After two years in banking, a friend suggested that he apply for a position in a renowned global strategy consultancy.

Attracted by the competitive application process and the consultancy's status, Steve followed this suggestion and was hired. Steve described his satisfaction with the consulting profession, which he experienced as an excellent learning opportunity. Yet, despite this satisfaction with his projects, the overall working atmosphere, and his positive performance evaluations, he, like many other interviewees, had doubts about whether the consultancy was "the right thing" for him. Even though he was socially integrated, he had reservations about the organization's culture which he experienced as arrogant and therefore disturbing.

Since he did not see a future for himself in the consultancy, Steve decided to pursue a career that would provide him, above all, with a greater sense of meaning. After three and a half years in the consultancy, he moved to an NGO that is involved in environmental issues. Steve reported that he already had a strong affiliation with this NGO and identified with it closely, having been a member since childhood. At the same time, Steve could apply some of the work experience from the consultancy; he was soon promoted to a senior position. At the time of the interview, Steve had been working at the NGO for nine years. Since the interview, Steve has remained within the same NGO where he eventually became CEO.

In the following discussion, we show how Steve achieved both coherence and ambiguity in his narrative by drawing on the three narrative strategies and weaving together his storylines. We also make inferences about the unconscious dynamics that underlie this interplay between coherence and ambiguity.

Minimizing transition pain while staying in touch with reality. As stated earlier, the narrative strategy of 'ignoring the change' is driven by unconscious desires associated with the balanced ego-function of *denial* which allows people to minimize the insecurity or pain

associated with a career transition while simultaneously allowing them to stay in touch with reality. Steve's life story illustrates these dynamics, for example, when he compares the banking context and the consulting context. It may be worth noting that Steve's friends, and particularly his wife's friends, had strongly opposed against this career decision, particularly given the negative public image of management consultancies as ruthless profit-seekers. This painful confrontation may have compelled Steve to maintain distance from the new working context and so to deny any adaptation to it:

Steve: I was one of two consultants out of 170 who every morning took the bus for getting to the office. And it was not my world. This was not problematic in the teamwork, but I noticed this particularly during large company events.

Me: How would you explain that you were one out of two to take the bus?

Steve: Generally I did not adapt my lifestyle and I didn't want that either. This would have limited me in my possibilities. We lived in a shared flat back then and we stayed there as well. I saw no reason for doubling my expenditure just because my salary had doubled.

We see in this passage Steve's desire to minimize potential pain – for instance, disapproval from his friends – associated with transitioning from the bank to the consultancy by emphasizing aspects of continuity across the changing work environments such as 'not changing modes of transportation' or 'not moving into a different apartment'. He even displays resistance towards the consultant lifestyle when he says he "didn't want that" and saw "no reason for this". At the same time, his desire to connect with reality may explain why Steve does not ignore the doubling of his salary, which does mark a considerable change in status. Also, there is some ambiguity in his otherwise coherent rejection of the consulting culture when he states that being a consultant "was not problematic in the teamwork".

In the next passage, however, Steve gives evidence not only of having adapted a consultant identity, but of preserving that identity in the new context of the NGO. Because Steve consistently follows the strategy of ignoring change when moving to new working contexts, we can argue that his life story overall shows continuity across these contradictory storylines:

Me: Would people say that you do things like a consultant?

Steve: [laughing] Yesterday someone just said that to me after a conversation. He said: “One can still very much spot the consultant in you!”

Me: After nine years?

Steve: Nine years, yah, yah. I also asked, well, one could take this as a compliment now or as an offense. And he said: “No, it’s just the way that, when a lot is being discussed by many people, you can pick exactly those things and recite them back to people to finally get the conversation landed at the point that you were heading for.” [laughing] I found that interesting, because I didn’t even know where I was heading for in the conversation, it was a pretty chaotic conversation. But just the impression, that it came across like that.

With his ‘evidence’ for being recognized as a consultant nine years after leaving the consultancy, Steve offers the picture that ‘nothing has changed’, and so minimizes the potential pain associated with his professional identity transition. At the same time one might infer that Steve accommodates his desire for staying in touch with his new working reality at the NGO by claiming that his consultant-like behavior was not intended, since he “didn’t even know where [he] was heading”.

Confronting ambiguity without claiming total control. As outlined earlier, the second narrative strategy of ‘admitting the ambiguity’ seems to be driven by unconscious desires associated with *rationalization* which allows people to confront the ambiguity of their present without claiming total control over it, which would distance them from their true feelings. To highlight this dynamic in Steve’s life story, we look at an episode in which he reflects openly on his ambiguity concerning his past consulting experience and thus the related career move to the NGO:

There was always a kind of ambivalence regarding the identification with the [consultancy] firm. On the one hand, first of all very fascinating, also good interpersonally, on the other hand I realized, this is not my thing.

By stating that there was “always a kind of ambivalence”, Steve shows his desire for confronting ambiguity as an enduring and therefore manageable aspect of his previous identity. At the same time, a conflicting desire to not assert total control over the ongoing ambiguity is apparent: Steve ends his reflection saying, “I realized this is not my thing”, an insight which led eventually to his career move and helped him to resolve the ambiguity, at least for a while.

His desire for partial control over ambiguity appears in another interview passage, where Steve claims that welcoming ambiguity-producing career moves is an ongoing pattern in his life:

Even before I had done career jumps that were not aligned. [...] And the same basically happened when I joined the NGO. Some people completely didn’t understand it. [...] I never had the ambition, career-wise, to follow a logical path or in

my social environment to stay in a homogenous environment. I would find that extremely boring.

Here, Steve's desire to confront the ambiguity of his discontinuous career path is expressed in his claim that, not only does he tolerate this ambiguity, but he actively seeks it. In this way ambiguity is framed as unproblematic, enduring and unresolvable, which would be "extremely boring". At the same time, his desire to avoid total control is evident when he admits that "some people completely didn't understand it". While Steve can exhibit control over a discontinuous career path, he has no control over other people's reactions; this keeps him balanced between instability and total control.

Directing energies towards the future while not losing sight of the present. The third narrative strategy of 'depicting a wishful future', so we assumed, is driven by unconscious desires associated with *sublimation*, which allows people to direct their energies towards the future while not losing sight of the present. This third strategy and its related dynamics become evident when Steve directs attention away from an ambiguous present – especially when pondering his next career step – by depicting different and seemingly coherent versions of his future career development.

In the examples that follow, the interaction between different storylines leads to insights into the dynamics of how coherence and ambiguity co-existed. In this passage, Steve clearly directs his energies towards a vision of the future that is marked, above all, by stability and continuity:

For me it is very difficult to imagine to not work for an NGO, that's very difficult to imagine. Like to work for a firm where in the evening you put down your identity. In the sense of, in the evening you are no longer the bank employee. But in the evening I

am still the NGO's employee, you don't put that down. [...] Several times I had the chance to change jobs, but I was always happy to stay. I never followed up on the other options.

Interestingly, this passage gives no indication of any ambiguity. Thus, it is not clear why Steve would want to direct attention away from the present towards the future. On the contrary, by affirming his strong identification with the NGO, Steve creates a scenario of never-ending career continuity. Yet, when looking at his life story broadly in terms of consistency and fragmentation, it becomes apparent in a different passage that he is actually not fully settled regarding his current work situation. This may explain his desire to look towards the future:

Me: Could you imagine returning to consultancy?

Steve: I have thought about it before. Because interestingly, indeed, STEEL [the consultancy] is starting to work very strongly in the NGO field. They have done a lot of good work in the sustainability area and they are working together now with NGOs. And that would have been unthinkable when I was still there. So, on both sides things have moved on. In that regard the worlds are not so different anymore. When they really gain momentum now in the NGO sector, that would be a reason to consider a return. I don't believe so. But it would not be impossible.

In admitting that he had considered returning to consultancy – and an alternative vision of his future – Steve contradicts his earlier, then unambiguous assertion that “it is very difficult to imagine to not work for an NGO”. In fact, there is evidence that he has engaged seriously with the idea of returning to consultancy and that there would be good reasons to do it. We suggest that these contradicting storylines reveal Steve's desire for staying cognizant of the

present in which, sooner or later, he will have to make a definite career decision. And yet, by stating that he would consider returning to the consultancy only if they have “gained momentum now in the NGO sector”, and that he “[doesn’t] believe so”, he creates consistency again between the two opposing future scenarios.

Discussion

Following Hoedemaekers’ (2010) call that identity studies take better note of elements which unfold outside our direct awareness, we have paid particular attention in this paper to the unconscious desires which permeate narrative identity construction during career changes. Our literature review summarized what we can learn about identity dynamics from either a narrative or a psychoanalytic reading; however, in our careful analysis of career change narratives, we found it illuminating to work in the intersection of these two perspectives. While this intersection has long been a part of psychotherapeutic literature and practice (see e.g. Boothe et al., 1999; Dimaggio et al., 2003), it is less established in the field of organization studies. This is unfortunate: the interface between narrative and psychoanalytic theory allows for affective theorizing of complex organizational phenomena such as people’s simultaneously coherent and ambiguous identity constructions when their careers are in flux.

More generally, a psychoanalytic reading can help to explain what narrative scholars have observed and described. As Clarke et al. (2009) claim, narratives provide ‘wiggle room’ for people to author different, antagonistic, but at the same time compatible life stories. A psychoanalytic perspective acknowledges that people, especially when confronted with career change, can react in unexpected or seemingly irrational ways (Neumann and Hirschhorn, 1999). By drawing attention to their deep-seated, inner experiences (French, 2001; Kets de Vries and Balazs, 1998), psychoanalysis, perhaps uniquely, appreciates identity as informed and mediated by a thick layer of unconscious desires, emotions and fantasies (Antonacopoulou and Gabriel, 2001).

We do not challenge narrative theory's understanding that people construct a sense of self as they unfold their life stories. However, we have expanded that view in this paper by putting forward the argument that frictions in a narrative allude to unconscious subtexts (Ninivaggi, 2010); the influence that these subtexts have indicates that identity construction is more than a consciously controlled linguistic endeavor. A psychoanalytic framework, in fact, challenges the idea that a person has easy access to his or her operating identity story through phenomenological reflection (Polkinghorne, 1996), thereby opening avenues for analyzing human beings as desiring, emotional and passionate.

With this argument we counter the widely held view that the study of unconscious desires in organizations goes beyond the reach of textual analysis. As the argument goes, textual analysis is inadequate for identifying pre-discursive qualities (such as affect, the physical and the aesthetics) of organizational life (Chia, 2000). While we acknowledge that the textual analysis of interview material may have its limits for making analytical claims regarding underlying emotions and unconscious desires, Hoedemakers (2010) maintains that it is exactly the "pronounced use of oppositional logic in self-narratives" (p. 383), as illustrated in the narrative strategies of ex-consultants for combining coherence and ambiguity, where the unconscious may be studied in otherwise conscious interview material (see also Muhr and Kirkegaard, 2013). It is through contradictions in the interview material that the emotional subtext is brought to the surface, thereby allowing for a reading of the unconscious without entering it fully.

In this paper, we have directed particular attention to the unconscious subtexts that underlie career change narratives. Some have argued that people experiencing career change have to battle a surge of attachment which prevents them from embracing the new working context (Vince and Broussine, 1996). From a psychoanalytic perspective, this attachment can be associated with defense mechanisms, which – largely at an unconscious level – defy the change and shield career changers from insecurity and a sense of loss (Kets de Vries and

Balazs, 1998). While defense mechanisms, as aspects of everyday behavior, assist people in better managing situations that threaten the ego, such defensive patterns can be limiting, especially if they become overused and habitual, and so make reactions of avoidance and denial enduring (Vince & Broussine, 1996).

Departing from most studies that focus on this maladaptive function of ego-defenses (e.g., Bovey and Hede, 2001; Brown and Starkey, 2000), we have here taken a particular interest in the so-called normal or balanced functioning of ego-defenses, illustrating that this approach has much to offer for illuminating our understanding of narrative identity construction in periods of career change. In fact, we argue that defensive reactions and their conflicting underlying desires are not problematic per se; they allow people to hold on to that which is experienced as paradoxical and contradictory, while still protecting the boundaries of an individual self. In this way ego-defenses allow for both openness (ambiguity) and continuity (coherence) during career change, which is reflected in narrative frictions.

Moreover, by taking note of the underlying desires that drive these ego-defenses, a psychoanalytic reading helps to better explain how and why people's narrative strategies – infused by unconscious processes – keep their life stories both coherent and ambiguous: it allows them to confront the insecurities and anxieties that come along with crucial changes in their professional life. Or, in Brown and Starkey's (2000) words, "Where there is too much discontinuity, there is a dread of fragmentation, splitting, dislocation, or dissolution – dread of the 'not-me' – and where there is too much continuity, there is dread of paralysis and stagnation" (p. 111). After all, a career change might be more than just a shift between jobs; it might threaten one's sense of self, and introduce insecurities when filling that void.

Or, as Linde (1993) notes, if there is too little coherence in a narrative, it might appear that the person's life proceeds at random without any clear direction. On the other hand, if there is too much coherence, a speaker may seem subject to a deterministic, and, in the worst case, fatalistic theory of causation. Since both extremes are generally unacceptable, a speaker

may balance an overly deterministic account by combining it with an accidental one, or vice versa. Linde (1993) refers to this process as “a sort of philosophic wobble around a socially determined equilibrium point, which carefully avoids taking any position to its logical extreme” (128). Similarly, we have demonstrated in this paper that people are able to simultaneously construct stability and inconsistency when reporting on a career change. This suggests that identity is not per se the product of a coherent or a fragmented narrative. Rather, it is constructed in an iterative process of coherent and ambiguous storytelling. This corresponds with Weick’s (1996) claim that “tales of continuity and discontinuity can be constructed from the same facts” (52).

Besides informing our conceptualization of narrative identity construction, this understanding can also help us to grasp and better respond to career change experiences, including even those that are not voluntary. Scholars in this area have argued that career changers who do not navigate the transition period successfully are likely to experience identity threats. This, in turn, can affect people and their (new) employment situation negatively, including decreased performance (Steele, 1997), reduced self-esteem (Taylor and Brown, 1988) or resistance to change (Nag, Corley, and Gioia, 2007). It is not surprising then, that many scholars have explored the consequences of identity threat and people’s broad range of responses to it (Petriglieri, 2011).

Instead of focusing exclusively on negative responses to professional transition, in this paper we have tried to contribute to the understanding that experiences of change, rather than being one-sided, are often marked by tensions between clarity (coherence) and uncertainty (ambiguity). This is apparent, for instance, in the simultaneous reactions of optimism and pessimism towards change, or mixed feelings regarding the fact that the change can go ‘either way’ (Vince and Broussine, 1996). The analysis of life story interviews with ex-consultants has, moreover, indicated that disruptive moments, instead of being experienced only as painful and confusing, can simultaneously contain the opportunity for people to reorganize

their experiences and emerge with a stronger sense of professional identity, by incorporating their own resourcefulness into the new working context (see also Conroy and O’Leary-Kelly, 2014; Maitlis, 2009).

This said, Vince and Broussine (1996) noted that few organizations make space for their members to express or engage with contradictory feelings. Rather, most environments try to control, suppress or eliminate all paradoxical tensions caused by change. While these attempts may help to smooth over a transition process, they are also likely to remove all possibility for new cycles of growth (Petriglieri, 2011). However, with a psychoanalytic understanding of career change narrations, practitioners – such as supervisors or HRM counselors – could help career changers retain and make sense of the frictions in their stories and their underlying unconscious desires. This would clearly be a step towards shifting from a merely rational engagement with career change towards a more relational and affective one (Steyaert and Van Looy, 2010).

Conclusion

By providing an analytic framework that helps to address unconscious aspects in people’s narratives around career change, we have tried to advance an understanding of identity that goes beyond the limits of conscious control. While the narrative perspective helped us to delineate clearly the linguistic patterns through which former management consultants dealt with ambiguities of the present – often induced by reflections upon a past or anticipated career change – the psychoanalytic framework, with its dedication to underlying emotions and affect, allowed us to explain the possible origins, motivations and meanings of these different emotions (see also Gabriel, 1998). Since psychoanalysis provides both a language and concepts for analyzing affective layers in the unfolding of life stories, we see much further potential in this interface between narrative and psychoanalytic theory for substantializing our affective understanding of identity dynamics based on conflicting unconscious desires.

An affective conceptualization of identity bears the promise of generating new and interesting questions which challenge some long-held assumptions about the supposedly passion-free arena of organizational life. By bringing the discursive and the non-discursive into a meaningful balance, this conceptualization responds to a call for remaining sensitive to those aspects of organizing that fall within the realm of the pre-personal, the pre-conscious, the not-yet-said (Iedema, 2011). While ignoring these dimensions of affect would undermine the development of new understandings, experimenting with different theoretical pairings (such as the narrative with the psychoanalytic) can help to pave the way for more fruitful and complementary understandings of social processes.

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Table 1: Methodological overview of analytical steps

	What	How	Assumptions	Questions asked	Outcome
1st step of analysis	Identifying 3 narrative strategies for maintaining coherence and ambiguity	Empirically derived	Coherence and ambiguity co-exist in narratives of career change	What are the narratives strategies? When are they applied? What is the interplay between coherence and ambiguity in these strategies?	3 narrative strategies that differ in their application and the interplay of coherence and ambiguity
2nd step of analysis	a) Linking narrative strategies with ego-defenses	a) Conceptually informed	a) Psychoanalytic concepts help to explain unconscious dynamics in narrative identity construction	When linking the narrative strategies to ego-defenses, what can we infer about unconscious desires which underlie people's narrative identity construction in times of career change?	A framework that links narrative strategies, ego-defenses and unconscious desires in stories of career change
	b) Delineating the unconscious desires that drive ego-defenses	b) Framework development based on analysis steps 1 and 2a	b) Unconscious desires drive ego-defenses and thus narrative identity construction		
3th step of analysis	Giving an illustrative reading of conflicting unconscious desires in the unfolding of a life story	Applying the analytical framework derived from previous steps in the analysis	An analytical framework can serve as a guide for studying unconscious dynamics in people's life stories	How do people weave contradictory storylines together to maintain coherence in the overall unfolding of a life story, and how can a psychoanalytic framework help to take better note of unconscious dynamics in career change narratives?	An example of how the analytical framework could be applied in practice or in the context of further research

Table 2: Analytic framework – narrative strategies, ego-defenses and underlying unconscious desires

Narrative strategy	Application	Interplay between coherence and ambiguity	Associated ego-defense	Unconscious desires of balanced ego-defense functioning
Ignoring the change	When comparing the past and the present	Overall coherent narrative of “nothing has changed” is interrupted by markers of ambiguity/ change	<i>Denial</i>	Minimizing transition pain while staying in touch with reality
Admitting the ambiguity	When engaging with the ambiguity of the present in relation to a past career move	Active engagement with ambiguity and contradictions is countered by a claim to coherence: “it’s all under control”	<i>Rationalization</i>	Confronting ambiguity without claiming total control
Depicting a wishful future	When escaping the ambiguity of the present in relation to an anticipated career move	An ambiguous present co-exists with a coherent vision for the future where “it will all be good”	<i>Sublimation</i>	Directing energies towards the future while not losing sight of the present

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