

**COMPELLING IDENTITY: FUSING POSTSTRUCTURALIST
THEORIZING TO UNDERSTAND GLOBAL CORPORATE
MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT**

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to argue that the concept of identity regulation (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002) has much to offer in understanding management and leadership development in corporate, multinational contexts, but is incomplete without accounting for insecurity, both material and symbolic (Collinson 2003), experienced by the participants. Thus the paper will work to fuse these two seminal ideas – identity regulation and the importance of insecurity in identity construction -- through presenting findings of fieldwork in two contrasting international firms. The first, I argue, reflects a Darwinian model of management/leadership development; the second, a Creationist model. In each case, participants were carefully selected as future leaders of the firm and participated in an ‘elite’ months-long development program, while performing their regular jobs. Using an iterative research design that combined in-depth interviews with key informants and program participants (N=47) in both firms, observations of their joint working in strategic project groups, and careful examination of the literature, this study presents findings which: a) illustrate two models of identity regulation in practice, b) outline in detail the identity work that is done in these contexts -- the ‘selves’ which are enacted, given the regulation, and c) suggest conclusions which have implications for the theorizing of identity dynamics and the importance of insecurity in the contemporary workplace.

This paper reports findings of an inductive study of identity construction and regulation within development programs for ‘high potential’ managers in two global companies. The two case organizations provide contrasting settings in the intensity and purposefulness with which identity is ‘regulated’ (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Each involves some 25 middle and senior managers, selected from corporate offices and subsidiaries around the globe. Drawing on non-participant observation and extensive semi-structured interviewing with nearly all of these participants, it is their accounts of their experiences of the programs which form the primary empirical material for the study. This is supplemented with archival data, corporate documents, and interviews with program

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directors, to surface each program’s aims, structure and practices. Adopting a poststructuralist analytical framework to explore identity dynamics in the elite programs in each of the companies, the theoretical base is provided in the main by Alvesson and Willmott’s model of identity regulation in organizations (2002), and Collinson’s emphasis on the importance of insecurity in identity work processes, heretofore under-emphasized in empirical studies of subjectivities at work (2003). Using, or fusing, the Alvesson and Willmott model, and Collinson’s notion of conformist, dramaturgical and resistant ‘selves’, as heuristic tools, I compare the organizational contexts as well as participants’ accounts within and across the two firms. This allows an investigation of the central research question for the study: how does power act to shape people’s identities or sense of self within these global leadership development programs?

The following section sets out the theoretical background for the study. It focuses on Alvesson and Willmott’s model of identity regulation, and Collinson’s theorizing about the practical and conceptual importance of insecurity in understanding identity work. This is followed by a description of the two research sites, and the methods used to conduct the fieldwork and analyze the ‘data’. Then findings are presented in two sections, centering on models of identity regulation in the two firms, and identity work by participants. The paper ends with discussion and conclusions suggesting avenues for further investigation.

1 IDENTITIES AND THEIR REGULATION

Poststructuralist theorists have considered for some time the question of how identities, subjectivities or ‘selves’ are constructed, regulated and resisted in the workplace, given discursive practices such as culture change programs, performance evaluation systems, and more recently, professionalization (e.g. Willmott, 1993, Townley, 1993, Casey, 1999, Alvesson and Willmott, 2002, Fleming and Sewell, 2002, Collinson, 2003, Hodgson 2005). Several ways in which nuanced, de-romanticized, ‘newer’ forms of resistance are enacted, in the face of such discipline and control, can be identified in the literature: the seminal work here is perhaps Kondo’s study of identity construction in a Japanese family-owned firm (Kondo, 1990). Emphasizing the conceptual and practical importance of insecurity, both symbolic and material, within the asymmetrical power relations of contemporary workplaces, Collinson theorizes three types of ‘employee subjectivities’ that are used as survival strategies in response to experiences of selves-monitoring, identity-regulating organizations (2003). He calls these conformist, dramaturgical and resistant selves (Collinson, 2003). Drawing on the work of Judith Butler (1992), Hodgson found that ‘performativity’, involving a parodying of the identity being imposed on a person, can characterize resistance in the post-bureaucratic workplace as well as society more generally (2005).

These studies share important common themes, including the ambivalent and contradictory constructions and experiences of the employees involved, as they are both pulled and repelled by the identities on offer. As Fleming and Sewell succinctly state: “subjectivity is the very terrain that is being contested” in these contemporary organizations (2002, p. 861). Studying ‘selves at work’ or employee subjectivities, defined as feelings, values, self-perceptions and cognitions (Alvesson, 2000, p. 124), challenges researchers to see people as both subjects and objects, not passive entities fully determined by external forces or structures, nor fully self-controlling agents shaping the world around them (Collinson, 2003, p. 542).

With symbolic interactionists and others, poststructuralist theorists are critical of notions of human beings as autonomous, unitary and coherent individuals, and of the tendency to artificially separate “individual from society, mind from body, rationality from emotion” in social theorizing (Collinson, 2003, p. 527). As opposed to this ‘false dualism’ and its essentialist notions of ‘personality’, people should be seen as ‘social selves’ (Burkitt, 1991), both constituting and constitutive of social relations, both subject and object. ‘Selves’ are multiple and fragmented, and identity is not usefully viewed as a singular phenomenon concentrating on only one feature of self, such as class, nationality, gender or ethnicity (Collinson, 2003, p. 534, Kondo, 1990).

Alvesson and Willmott’s (2002) model of ‘identity regulation’ aims to explain the processes through which organizations induce the construction of particular selves or identities in employees, as a form of control. The authors propose that identity regulation is ‘done’ by an employing organization, more or less intentionally, through discursive tools and other mechanisms aimed at enjoining employees to construct certain identities or self-images “that are deemed congruent with managerially defined objectives” (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002, p. 619). As they explain, control may be achieved through “the self-positioning of employees within managerially inspired discourses about work and organization with which they may become more or less identified and committed” (2002, p. 620). Deetz’s evocative explanation, quoted by the authors, bears repeating: “the modern business of management is often managing the ‘insides’ – the hopes, fears and aspirations – of workers, rather than their behaviours directly” (1995, p. 87).

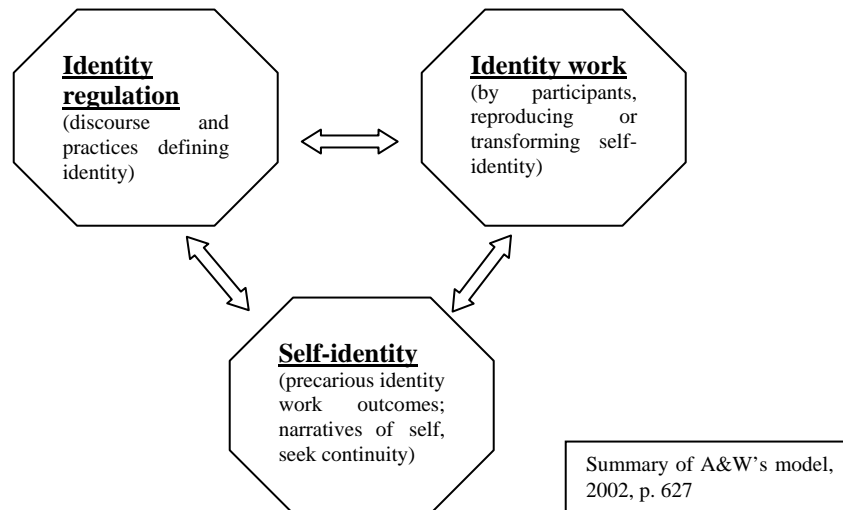
The pervasiveness of this idea is perhaps borne out by the popularity of management literature focusing on the need to “align” the “hearts and minds” of employees (e.g. Katzenbach, 2000). Alvesson and Willmott (2002) argue that management practices including rewards, leadership, hierarchies, divisions of labour, are intricately integrated with the individual’s identity work. They do not operate *outside* of the individual’s quest for self-definition, coherence and meaning, but rather as an integral part thereof. The authors identify induction, training and promotion procedures as particularly notable in their implications for shaping and directing the identity work of employees. While noting that they do not wish to imply that identity regulation is necessarily effective in increasing employee commitment or loyalty, they predict that “in the absence of counter-discourses,” such mechanisms will yield instrumental compliance and “increased, serial identification with corporate values,” if these are compatible with other sources of identity formation (2002, p. 622).

Yet other authors such as DuGay have emphasized that “power does not always move downward, but is also present in the ‘multiple resistant interpretations’ made by ordinary employees in the course of their everyday lives” (Prasad, p. 256). Indeed, as shown in the opening paragraphs of this paper, resistance has been a central theme within poststructuralist theorizing. Collinson points out that Foucault himself suggested that power can work in both directions, from top to bottom and vice versa, and can be creative and productive as well as repressive (2003, p. 528). Following this lead, others such as Kondo (1990) emphasize the importance of ‘creative tensions’ and the creative potential of power, while never negating the asymmetrical power relations characterizing ‘organization’ in contemporary contexts. As Gabriel (1999) argues, in the ambiguity and ambivalence inherent in processes of identity construction, there can be space for “unmanaged

organization” in which subjects counteract, shift and shape the managerial image of self, that is, exert and construct power. Indeed, this may be seen as an important foundation of the argument articulated by Hodgson (2005), drawing on Butler (1990), in his study of “performativity” in professionalization processes.

Identity work thus involves people continuously engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that produce a sense of coherence and distinctiveness for themselves, an ‘identity’ (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Their model below theorizes the interplay of identity regulation, identity work by individuals, and its outcome, self-identity. The double-sided arrows show that while regulation is ‘done’ to employees, individuals’ identity work also influences these discourses through the interpretations of employees. Employees more or less actively interpret and enact organizational discursive practices (2002, p. 628). Similarly, discourses must be linked to processes of self-identity formation. According to the model, ‘regulation’ depends upon this link. So, discourses may well be produced without ‘sticking’ to their targets. If they stick, control is accomplished. Alvesson and Willmott go on to propose nine possible means through which such ‘sticking’ may occur, that is, through which identity regulation is enacted. These include ‘defining the person directly’, ‘defining a person by defining others,’ providing a specific vocabulary of motives, and so on (2002, pp. 629-632). Such organizational practices and discourses must have valency -- meaning and emotionality, for example relating to anxiety, enthusiasm or involvement -- in order to contribute to the regulation of identity (2002, p. 632).

As will be shown below, it became clear in the relatively early stages of the fieldwork and analysis for the present study that both organizations were indeed engaged in the regulation of identity, according to Alvesson and Willmott’s model. Thus I use the model to frame the presentation of the findings, below. First, however, it is important to outline the second ‘heuristic device’ used in this study to make sense of the identity work done within the leadership development programs presented here. This is Collinson’s ‘typology’ (my term only) of selves or subject positions which employees tend to produce, he argues, given power dynamics and managerial control in contemporary organizations; in other words, in conditions where the regulation of identity or people’s ‘insides’ is the ‘more or less intentional’ aim.



1.1 Collinson’s ‘Typology of Selves’

Collinson proposes that three ‘selves’, subjectivities or identities reflect those which people tend to construct or craft as ‘survival practices’ in identity-regulating organizations – conforming, dramaturgical and resistant selves. The three are set out below. The production of these selves is bound up with the *insecurity* which is at the heart of contemporary organizational life and the often asymmetrical power relations of organization – a notion that Collinson argues has been underplayed in studies of identity construction which exaggerate autonomy without giving due consideration to its “conditions, processes and consequences” (Collinson, 2003, p. 529). Insecurity may be *symbolic*, encompassing status anxieties, one’s sense of self-respect and esteem, autonomy and well-being (thus, existential, psychological and social insecurities), and *material*, as in job insecurity and economic insecurity more generally. In practice, the two types are often interwoven. For example, competition to gain material security as well as status, dignity and respect can further intensify subjective insecurity, as Collinson shows (2003, p. 531), and as any of us working in large, ‘modern’ organizations is bound to know. Insecurities abound in ‘meritocratic’ organizations, where for example, an individual must be an ‘achieved self’ and is only as good as his or her ‘last sale’, like Willy Loman in Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*. Collinson goes on to discuss in detail several ways in which insecurity is profoundly important in the production of selves (see 2003, pp. 530-533), citing the work of Sennett and Cobb (1977) and several others.

Conformist selves: the pursuit of material and symbolic security through conformity. Collinson cites Foucault in emphasizing the self-disciplining aspects of workplace surveillance systems that “tie individuals to their identities” (2003, p. 536). He makes reference to several workplace studies, inspired by Foucault’s work, which show how power exerts control over people to ‘actively construct’ conformist selves, for example through shaping their relationships and identities. In conformity, individuals are “preoccupied with themselves as valued objects in the eyes of those in authority, subordinating their own subjectivity in the process” (2003, p. 536). In short, the production of conformist selves is the effect which Alvesson and Willmott’s identity regulation is intended to bring. Conformist practices include the pursuit of a ‘successful’ career, or what might be labeled career striving. This can involve instrumentalism in social relationships, skilled impression management as described by Goffman (1956), and an increase in the competitive nature of some corporate cultures (2003, p. 537).

Such career striving can mean that individuals will feel compelled to meet organizational requirements including working longer hours, meeting tight deadlines, and traveling extensively at the organization’s behest. Paradoxically, as Collinson suggests, such striving does not bring the security that many seek through conformity in contemporary organizational life.

A second practice of the conforming self, according to Collinson, involves a psychological distancing of self from the organization, while nonetheless conforming to its imposed identities. A person enacting this subject position would show indifference and instrumentality at work, while reserving the “real me” for life outside of the organization. Again, the importance of not reifying these different categories of selves bears noting here. The latter pattern of behaviour may in practice reflect a self more resistant of organizational

control rather than conformist. It seems clear that even conformity as explained above can have counter-productive outcomes for the organization.

Dramaturgical selves: Here, the heightened surveillance or ‘gaze’ of the organization brings more self-consciousness, which in turn brings “skilled manipulations of self, reputation and image” in the eyes of ‘significant others.’ Dramaturgy may be seen as a variation of the ‘conformist’ theme, however the character of dramaturgy rests on these skilled manipulations, rather than a more unquestioning conforming, implying that employees have not necessarily ‘bought in’ to the identities on offer. As Collinson explains, dramaturgical selves may be produced when increased exposure makes employees more aware of themselves as visible objects; organizational monitoring intensifies self-consciousness and create ‘performances’ (2003, p. 538).

Again, Goffman is an influence in that individuals in this position strive to present themselves in a favourable light, but through “choreographing their own practices” and controlling their reactions to being monitored, rather than conforming (2003, p. 539). Collinson includes within the practices of dramaturgy employee tendencies to “conceal, mystify, overstate and/or understate” organizational information in order to show this positive light, for example, the manipulation of performance data. Thus employees are more likely to enact dramaturgical subject positions when they are highly visible, but also threatened, subordinated, or on the defensive (2003, p. 539).

- ***Resistant selves:*** In conditions of identity regulation and commodification of employees, neither conformity nor dramaturgy is necessarily inevitable. Different types of resistance help employees to express their discontent, assisting in their ‘survival.’ Resistance may allow employees to construct a more positive sense of self than that prescribed by the organization, or may be motivated by the need to restore self-respect (Collinson, 2003, p. 539). Alvesson and Willmott (2002) use the term ‘micro-emancipation.’ For example, resistance may be covert and subterranean, including foot-dragging or whistle-blowing, or may rest in expressions of irony or satire, or what Fleming and Spicer (2003) label cynicism or ‘cynical selves.’ Another way to define resistance is offered by Deetz, as cited in Alvesson and Willmott (2002): the occurs “when the ‘self-positioning’ of employees *is not within* managerially inspired discourses about work and organization with which they may become more or less identified and committed.”

Resistance as a subject position is by no means ‘pure,’ however, and Collinson along with other writers such as Kondo (1990) emphasize its inherent ambiguity, and caution against its romanticization. Resistant or ‘oppositional’ practices can have a “diverse, shifting and multiple character.” Employees can often themselves be caught up in the contradictions which their resistance highlights, through their own counter-cultures and criticisms of management. This leads to Kondo’s more nuanced theorizing of power, subjectivity and resistance, in which she rejects the closed or neat categories of resistant action seen in much of the literature. Instead, apparent resistance “is constantly mitigated by collusion and compromise at different levels of consciousness, just as accommodation may have unexpectedly subversive effects” (Kondo, 1990 as cited in Collinson, 2003, p. 541). Moreover, sometimes resistance against organizational control can itself constitute a form of domination and control, as shown in feminist research such as Cockburn’s (1983)

study of organized male labour engaged in segregating and dominating practices of its own.

It is important that the three categories of selves not be reified in their application, as clearly they cannot be seen as discreet phenomena. Kondo's (1990) finding that different subjectivities involving resisting and accommodating, for example, or varieties of coping, consenting and resisting may be present at different levels of consciousness at one time, is particularly helpful in seeing why this is the case. Social actors 'craft selves' for themselves, sometimes through contradiction and irony, and the selves should not be seen as "seamless, fixed, coherent, bounded or whole" (Collinson, p. 534, in part citing Kondo, 1990). In more general terms, the poststructuralist framing of identity clearly captures the multiple, ambiguous, shifting and contradictory nature of selves (and this in itself may at times serve to reinforce anxiety or insecurity).

This paper extends the investigation of these issues through an in-depth, semi-ethnographic study of identity regulation and its consequences within 'high potential' leader development programs in two global firms. As will be shown, the context in one organization is characterized by high insecurity, both material and symbolic, where the selected program participants operate within conditions of considerable uncertainty, both within and outside of the program. Indeed some question whether they will retain their jobs following the development program. The other firm offers a more stable environment to program participants. Their experience of the program may even be seen as a kind of country club, to which they are flown every couple of months for exclusive management training. Nonetheless, there is pressure and stress here as well, as with all learning perhaps, and for many, the subjective anxiety that comes with being compelled to 'change' ones' 'insides.'

Thus the paper examines the extent to which people are compelled by the identities on offer, *and how and why*, and the extent to which they wish to, or are able to, resist these. Its purpose is not theory-testing but rather, exploration of the data set using the ideas above, with a view to fusing and elaborating these seminal theories through their empirical application.

2 RESEARCH SITES, METHODS AND FIELDWORK ANALYSIS

The two research sites for this study were chosen because of their potential to facilitate an inductive examination of the construction of member identities, and its interplay with organizational identity and the production of local working cultures, given the multi-nationality character of the settings. The specific access which I was afforded, through a lengthy negotiation process with program directors, involved the leadership development programs. This was attractive from a research perspective, given the strong comparability on the surface of the programs – similar numbers of participants, and similar program structures with strategic team projects as central to the model. While my fieldwork strategy is described in the subsequent section, relevant details of the two firms and the programs are outlined below.

2.1 Site 1: Global Association (GA)

GA or ‘global association,’ a pseudonym for a large international industry agency which is one of the sites for this study, has two head offices, one in North American and one in Europe. Over the past three years, GA has undergone a significant process of organizational change under the direction of a new chief executive. Funded by its members, large companies within the industry in question that operate out of many of the world’s countries, the new chief executive’s mandate was to re-make GA itself in the image of the most efficient and profitable of these companies. While GA is not profit-earning, the more efficiently it can operate the better for its member companies, who pay fees for the important services that GA provides. Moreover the industry is confronting a high degree of change including technologies that are revolutionizing several of its functions. In this context, GA’s chief executive resolved to pursue aggressive objectives for organizational change, including ‘busting bureaucracy’ and rationalization of staff in several areas, plus re-structuring and downsizing of all regional offices. As part of the strategy for wide-reaching organizational change, GA introduced a leadership development program, which we will call GAL, Global Agency Leaders.

The program used project-based learning in which participants were divided into four project groups comprised of seven ‘high-potential’ middle and senior managers, and directors. These groups were assigned project assignments deemed to be strategically important to the firm, to complete during the course of the program of five months duration. While the selection process for the program proved to be controversial, as detailed below, having a mix of geographical locations, and regional and head office people within the program overall, and in each project group, was important in selecting participants. In the cohort involved in this research, the participants represented 16 different nationalities. See Figures 1 and 2 below for more information.

Program objectives were stated in company materials as the retention, motivation and development of ‘high-performing leaders’ in order to: ‘support the successful implementation of the company’s vision; facilitate succession planning; increase the overall quality of management at all levels; encourage “new/fresh” approaches to speed up business processes and challenge current management and organizational assumptions; and extend the network of “change agents” who will support the alignment of processes and structures to strategic vision.’ The materials continue:

‘thus the company each year identifies a limited number of employees having leadership potential – defined as ideas, values, energy and edge - and eligibility for promotion to senior management positions. The program does not give the selected employees any special status, guarantee for promotion or financial reward. The rewards are professional challenges, visibility, exposure, opportunities, management monitoring and coaching. The process is open and dynamic, and every year the lists of selected staff are reviewed and updated.’

Finally, the material notes that ‘status as a member of the program is not a permanent one; individuals are removed from the pool if he/she does not perform in line with the requirements or is she/he opts for a different career orientation.’ (italics added) It bears repeating that a high degree of imposed organizational ‘change’ characterized the environment at GA during the program; according to several participants, the organization

was (and continues to be) in a state of turmoil, with high staff turnover (much of it involuntary), structural change, some divisions being emptied of staff and then re-staffed, and some regional offices being closed.

The program itself was structured around a series of three workshops which ran for several days, held in one or the other of the two corporate headquarters (North American or European). These were facilitated by consultants and GA staff. Company Vice-Presidents and other senior people participated in delivering some of the content of the workshops, for example on the management of stakeholders, priority setting and so on. Further details of the program background and design are included below in Figure 1.

2.2 Site 2, Multinational corporation, MNC:

MNC is a profitable multinational operating in a traditional industry, with a history of buying up subsidiaries in promising markets around the world. Its headquarters are in Western Europe and it is listed on the New York Stock Exchange. As part of its global expansion, the company created the ‘Top Global Managers Program’ or TGMP (pseudonym) three years ago. The program was originally designed for top local managers of newly acquired Eastern European plants and facilities. The firm wished to retain these managers but also to educate them in western management techniques and company procedures and methods. Thus a decision was made to invest a considerable sum in their development, and over the past three years, the program was widened to include managers from other parts of the world, and from headquarters itself. In the cohort under study here, 24 middle and senior managers from 14 regional offices plus headquarters, were selected to participate in the TGMP. The program director was a former graduate of the program, and had been promoted to her Director position after her successful performance therein the previous year.

While MNC corporate values were discussed in the context of the program, for example by the CEO when he visited a newly selected cohort, unlike GA these were not stated as the specific objectives or driving values of the program itself. Company materials state the corporate values to be:

- sense of urgency and speed
- anticipation, decisiveness and risk-taking
- passion for getting the most difficult things done
- confidence, humility, integrity
- listening, learning, sharing, teaching

A corporate competency model had also been developed for use in performance evaluation and for development purposes. Seven ‘core’ competencies were identified in the model: integrity, teamwork and cooperation, analytical and learning capability, achievement orientation, creative thinking, interpersonal understanding, and customer service orientation. An addition three none-core competencies were: coaching and leading others, communication and influence, and vision and strategy. Each is accompanied by a set of outcomes that would result from enacting the desired competency, and a list of indicative, ‘observable’ behaviours.

The program director explained that the program was not originally intended to extend beyond cross-functional knowledge, but that she and others had seen the opportunity for participants to use their team working as a source of ‘self-learning’ and ‘self-improvement.’ However she was very clear that evaluation of participants’ performance was not part of the program – this was seen as only their own managers’ role. “We would never use the 360s for evaluation,” she explained, “They are only a developmental tool. It would not be fair to use these results in any kind of assessment; these are only an auxiliary tool for them to use to develop and grow.”

The formally taught portion of MNC’s program, consisting of 3, 2-week modules of instruction in various management disciplines, took place at a famous business school in Western Europe. Vice-Presidents and other senior people were brought in to do short talks about the firm and its strategy, as well as to help apply the learned material specifically to the company context through scenarios and case examples.

A final note is that the director estimated that the program cost US \$100,000 per participant, a significant proportion of which went to travel costs and accommodation. Cost figures are not available for GAL although given the program elements and related comments by the program director, these can be expected to have been dramatically lower.

The average age of MNC participants was 36. Average tenure with the company was 8.5 years. Like GA, program participants represented all the major functional areas in the firm, including operations, sales, finance, accounting, corporate affairs, procurement, planning and information systems. The 25 participants represented 20 nationalities and worked in 14 different countries around the world. There were 17 men and 8 women in the program. As at GA, participants were formed into four strategic project groups early in the program, one of 7 members and the others of 6.

While no average age is available for GA, it may be estimated at 38, covering a wider range than at MNC, from mid-20s to mid-50s. Average tenure is likely considerably lower in that a number of participants were chosen for the program after only one year of service with the firm. The maximum tenure was 16 years.

2.3 Methods and analysis of fieldwork material

The fieldwork for this study was conducted over a period of 18 months in total, with the first 6 months comprising the most concentrated activity, and the latter 12 months involving follow-up interviews and additional fieldwork, e.g. attendance at a company conference. Over the initial 6-month period, I conducted interviews with all but two program participants across the two organizations. The interviews took place during the final third of the program in one organization, and just after program completion in the other. Questioning was responsive and open-ended, focusing on participants’ experiences and opinions of the program and its various elements, including the selection process, their impressions of the project work, processes and practices used in their project groups, perceptions of their personal learning, their careers with the organization, future plans, and expectations for networking and keeping in touch with colleagues from the program. I began in every case by asking about the person’s background, regular job, education, places lived, nationality, and previous employment. I also interviewed program directors, internal coaches and assistants, and had several less formal conversations and discussions with them

and with program participants themselves. In one organization, I observed each project group in the process of its work, on several different occasions. In both organizations I had several opportunities for general ethnographic, observational work, for example, observing an internal ‘top managers meeting’ over two days.

Case 1 (MNC): Large multinational with worldwide operations

- 40,000 employees in 70 locations around the world, based on acquisitions and subsidiary development
- CEO is non-Anglo-American
- VPs represent 5 nationalities
- third year of leadership program entitled ‘Top Global Managers’ Program’ (TGMP)
- program operates in English only
- 25 participants representing 14 regional offices + HQ, and 21 nationalities
- 17 men, 8 women, average tenure 8 years, newly appointed managerial to mid-senior managerial ranks
- cross-functional project groups of 6 to 7 people working over 8 months on key company initiatives
- program objectives to **increase general and cross-functional management knowledge**, contribute to succession planning and build future leadership cadre, create cross-functional international networks, **retain key employees**
- program design - intensive group project and mini-courses across main management functions; the latter took place at a major executive business school in France
- ‘360’ feedback and other personal development measures included
- program participants supported by four external coaches
- internal senior management sponsors for each group

Case 2 (GA): International industry association

- 1,400 employees in 70 countries
- organization financed by worldwide membership and own revenues
- DG is non-Anglo-American
- VPs represent 3 nationalities
- second year of leadership program entitled ‘Global Agency Leadership’ (GAL)
- program operates in English only
- 28 participants representing 14 regional offices + 2 HQ offices, and 17 nationalities
- 20 men, 8 women, varying tenure (1 year to 14 years), newly appointed managerial to director ranks
- cross-functional project groups of 7 people working over 5 months on strategic initiatives; groups intentionally ‘flat’, no named leader
- program objectives to develop management and leadership skills, **identify cadre of change leaders** who will share and promote new company vision; **enable decisions on succession planning including who to retain and who to let go**
- program design - intensive group project completion and three intensive workshops to promote new vision of company and desired behaviours; workshops took place at either North American or European HQ offices
- ‘360’ feedback from peers viewed as essential learning/testing element
- internal coaches for each group
- internal senior management sponsors for

each group

Figure 1: Research sites and leader development program overviews

In order to conduct the interviews, I regularly visited both firms’ head offices, at time when program participants were visiting headquarters either for program workshops or for team meetings. Still, of necessity one third of the interviews in GA were conducted on the phone, to the person’s regular work location. All participants signed informed consent forms prior to the interviews. The interviews lasted between 45 to 90 minutes, with a small number lasting more than 2 hours. All interviews were tape-recorded, except for one where the participant preferred that it not be taped, and supported with extensive note-taking. The results of my interviews and fieldwork were many hundreds of pages of notes, transcripts, and research memos.

<p>Summary of fieldwork:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• N=47 program participants; (24 of 24 remaining participants in GA; 23 of 25 in MNC); 45-90 minute interviews with each• Plus program directors in each (2, several times each); coaches (3) in GA; assistant director (1) in MNC• Several participants –4 in MNC, 3 in GA were interviewed formally a second time, several months following program completion• Informal conversations with several people in both firms, some dinners, lunches, coffee• Observation of one major managers’ conference in GA, where I also had informal conversations with several participants – following up the interviews• Group observations in MNC, 2x1.5 hours each for each of the 4 groups

Figure 2: Summary of methods

The analysis of the fieldwork materials has included interrogating them through several readings and re-readings, while iteratively returning to the literature in areas of key emerging findings and themes. Broad patterns across individuals and project teams were identified in the early stages of analysis. I was then able to follow up and pursue each of these, re-interrogating the data for deeper insight into participants’ meanings and the complexity of the phenomena under study. The coding and re-coding of the data was informed by Strauss and Corbin’s axial coding model for grounded theory-building (2001). While this is perhaps a more technical approach than some may see as appropriate for my aims, it nonetheless offered a comprehensive and rigorous method of analyzing the interview transcripts and other materials, to refrain from idealizing the data.

So, to summarize, the study began with a general area for study, the interplay of personal and organizational identities in multi-nationality, multicultural organizations, asking: What identities do people see themselves as having in these settings, and why? Once having been in the sites for some time and gathered some data through interviews, it became clear that identity regulation was a concept, even a central category’ in Strauss’ and Corbin’s words, that had explanatory power for these sites. As interviewing continued, I added questions and changed emphases in the interviews to reflect emerging themes – one example was to pursue participants’ ideas about the importance of perceived insecurity in their jobs, following the key point from Collinson in the literature, which I continued to review and consult as new themes and ideas arose from the empirical work.

I read and re-read transcripts to understand participants’ experiences of the programs, how positive or negative and why, the degree of variety in experiences, read to understand participants’ experiences of the programs, how positive or negative and why, the degree of variety in experiences, and also studied transcripts of the other key informants – including the internal coaches in GA, and program directors and assistant directors in both organizations. Coding itself involved constant comparison, naming categories and sub-categories, as well as the writing of numerous memos, e.g. ‘case’ memos on each of the different project teams in both organizations, and several memos on individual participants, as well as the two organizations more generally. I began with open coding and identified several analytic notions – for example concerning stress, boasting, resisting, conforming, ‘pain’, psychological insecurity, growth, development, putting on performances, competing and others. Differences between the two corporate settings were quite readily identifiable, for example in terms of the degree of vulnerability felt by participants, and the degree to which the program was seen as a test (GA), rather than a learning experience. I then proceeded to more detailed coding at the individual level using Collinson’s three subject positions as a guide.

3 FINDINGS

Findings are set out below in two main sections. First, discursive processes and practices of identity regulation in each firm are described, and the two emerging types are proposed. This is followed by a more direct focus on identity work done by program participants in each setting. Discussion and conclusions follow.

3.1 GA: A Drive for Alignment, to Reduce (Organizational) Insecurity?

Identity regulation appears to be strong, and the desired identity tightly-defined, in GA. The leadership development program involves a distinct identity discourse around themes of the need for ‘the chosen ones’ (one participant’s phrase) to have ‘edge’, energy, decisiveness and ‘speed.’ These behaviours or qualities are deemed to be critically important for the future success of the company. A number of discursive mechanisms are used explicitly to tie achievement of this ‘leader’ identity to participant performance along these particular dimensions of behaviour. A key example is a forced ranking exercise where project group members are asked to rank one another within a strictly limited timeframe, as to who is the best ‘leader.’ While this term remained undefined in the exercise, according to the accounts of many participants, they were nonetheless required individually to rank one another: #1 as the best down to #7 as the weakest, after spending 2.5 days in one another’s company. The ranking had to be completed within 30 minutes. The extent to which such exercises ‘got at people’s insides’ is explored below, when I outline in more detail different teams’ and participants’ accounts of this experience.

The dynamics of the selection processes for the program also point to the use of an overarching identity discourse as a form of control. Participants at GA, once selected and labeled as ‘GA change leaders’, are given ‘no choice’ but to participate. No exceptions were made. Even two new senior directors with extensive corporate experience who had been hired in the preceding year believed they had very little choice but to complete the program. This was despite what it would mean in concomitant productivity losses within their units given their partial absence. One participant who was more junior and geographically ‘peripheral’ (from head office), said she very politely turned down an initial

invitation to apply from her boss, citing poor timing given her other pressing priorities on the job: “And I got an e-mail that I *should* apply, in a way that was, simply, you apply or... you are dead!” Several other participants’ accounts reinforce this notion that one cannot decline the offer of a place on the program, without threatening and perhaps even terminating their career with the company. Indeed one newly-hired director located in one of head offices who did refuse to participate left the company six months later; in this case she stated that she simply could not continue to work “somewhere with that culture” and chose to leave.

Nonetheless, some participants said they were ‘honoured’ or flattered to be asked to join the leadership development program. A small number of participants said they had applied to the program themselves, and expressed pride in being selected. Such invitations did indeed hold a certain caché within the company, although the label, ‘GAL’, appeared to be a moniker of diminishing returns by the end of my fieldwork period.

In addition to the considerable indications that the development program targeted people’s subjectivities or sense of self, the insecurity of the context, both symbolic and material, was palpable. Consequences of not performing according to the desired identity characteristics are grave. In the period of my interviewing with participants, which began a couple of weeks following completion of the program, each of the 4 project groups had one ‘ghost’, that is, one member who had been terminated as an employee. Both program participants and the director indicated that these terminations were due to undesirable performance in the program. Several participants reported realizing, over time, that the program was a ‘test’ rather than an opportunity for learning, or a game that you either ‘got the hang of’, or didn’t. Moreover at the time of writing, only two program participants have received promotions due to completing the program, an expectation several had shared, and four additional participants have been let go.

Thus Collinson’s insistence on recognizing how the asymmetrical power relationship of contemporary workplaces renders insecurity an important concept to grasp in understanding the production and reproduction of selves rings particularly ‘true’ in the GA context. At the organizational level, the firm seems to be fighting its past, which is causing a high degree of insecurity in itself, in that the traditionally highly bureaucratic organization now sees itself as needing to emulate its most ‘lean and mean’ members.

Several participants’ own perceived insecurity within the program and overall employment relationship was also palpable during the interviews. It is instructive to look at the experiences of participants who expressed higher anxiety or insecurity upon entering the program. For example, two women and one man in the program, all non-HQ and all of more junior rank, expressed in different ways their sense that ‘the playing field was not level’ upon entry into the program. Requirements such as traveling to HQ locations (common practice for other participants but not for them), not knowing other participants, being more junior, being in a minority either as women or as ‘non-western’, and in two of these examples, being non-native English speakers. Their interviews show particular trajectories of meaning given to the program experience, starting with this high anxiety, with different outcomes for each. That is, one person’s narrative was about growing, contributing, having an impact (and her account was clearly supported by others’); one’s response was more neutral (steady state in terms of self-image and development); and one quite negative, with paranoia and a loss of confidence characterizing the outcome. The

latter asked me to let him know what other participants said about him in their interviews, and went out of his way to explain at length how he was meeting the program criteria (edge, decisiveness, speed etc) in his daily work, since completing the workshops and project work.

3.2 MNC: Country Club with an Edge

In MNC, participants’ narrative accounts of their experiences, taken collectively, tell a story of an engaged group of relatively young managers with promising careers, a generally high level of respect for their employer, and a view of the development program as an opportunity to learn, to advance their careers given their new knowledge, and to become better informed about the company. People are not generally on edge, though certainly anxiety and even some anger are evident in accounts of some participants – the latter is directed at project group processes rather than program tenets more generally. A general sense of comradeship seemed to prevail, with some evidence of more competitive striving for senior management attention. At the same time, participants spoke of high levels of fatigue and stress in general.

Please see Figure 4 below which compares the most notable discursive practices, given the fieldwork data, across the two settings.

	GA	MNC
Selection process for the program	- no choice; must participate if asked, risk losing your job or reputation if you refuse	- choice: a handful of interviewees had previously turned down invitations to apply, with no consequences to their careers.
Program rhetoric/discourse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - exclusive -- differentiating of participants through titles (Global Agency Leader) - stronger, more direct use of the ‘values’ - ‘strategically important projects’ - individual drive and achievement, results orientation - having ‘edge’ a prime differentiator - a ‘no-hierarchy’ rule is enforced in the groups, more strongly in to see who emerges as leader 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - exclusive -- differentiating through titles (Top Global Manager Program) - ‘strategically important projects’ - general managerial rhetoric - no group leader is named but groups are encouraged to identify one, may be rotated
Degree of added visibility, exposure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - contact with senior management, sponsors – internal, senior people (VPs); dinner with DG – internal coaches; constant gaze - final presentations to executive management team - ‘on the spot’ presentations to 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - contact with senior management as team advisors and in other fora - external coaches, detached from internal politics - final presentations to executive management team

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	senior management during workshops	
Mechanisms for evaluating participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - forced ranking by peers, on ‘leadership’ criteria, on 2 occasions - 360 evaluation by own work group in regular job context - meetings of senior mgmt team as to who would be retained or promoted - no team measures, individuals only are evaluated despite extensive team working 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -360 evaluation by project team on program + 3 additional program participants, no link to assessment, developmental only - peer performance feedback on a certain set of ‘competencies’, however comes only at the end of the program, no ranking of colleagues is involved - teams encouraged to reflect on processes
Degree of stress and tension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - company ‘lied’ about time required; participants report 100% + more than regular workload, not the promised 25% more - much more onerous for non-HQ people, travel time, budgeting - no holidays allowed even if pre-booked - families suffer - regular job suffers even for most senior (no re-configuring of responsibilities during program) - non-level playing field in terms of having staff to whom to delegate - deadlines immediately following regular holiday periods (late Dec.) - team projects difficult, fraught with political issues - no cross-cultural training or preparation for participants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - likely higher for participants with only ‘single-market’ experience (away from HQ) – travel demands more onerous, change greater - young families suffered - retain own job responsibilities during program; people varied as to arrangements for their absence - no cross-cultural training or preparation for participants - several people in MNC changed jobs and work locations while on the program
Promotion rate following program completion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - few (1-2) program participants had received promotions one year after completion, an expectation several or most had shared 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - several participants (one quarter to one third) have been moved to new, more senior positions.
Attrition rate during or following program completion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -four participants let go during program itself - 4 additional participants let go since program completion (involuntary departures) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - one participant has voluntarily left, for a promotion opportunity with another large MNC - all others remain in the firm

Figure 3: Discursive practices in 2 programs

There is substantial evidence, then, that GA is simulating a Darwinian environment with its development program, whereas MNC may be seen as the benevolent developer of its managers’ potential, a Creationist approach. Insecurity arises again as a key differentiator.

3.3 Identity work

The argument made thus far is that both leader development programs under consideration in this study aim to ‘regulate identity’ or control participants’ “insides,” albeit with different degrees of intensity and purposefulness. The present section focuses on participants’ responses to this regulation. The questions guiding the analysis of data here are: What are the micro-processes involved in this regulation or control? How and to what extent are the desired identities constructed, enacted or reproduced by the people engaged in the programs? In short, what identity work do participants perform? Do the desired identities offered or imposed at the discursive level, as above, ‘stick’ to their targets? Or do people resist, and if so, how and why? Collinson’s ‘typology’ of selves provides a useful heuristic device to assist in this exploration. Again, these ‘types’ must not be reified or assumed to be ‘pure’ or unitary. For example, all three may be easily recognizable within one participant’s account.

- To the extent that participants enact conforming identities, as would be expected given that identity regulation would be aimed at conformity. What are the practices of conformity?
- Do participants perform in the dramaturgical sense, ‘acting out’ the required identities, or otherwise manipulating their responses in order to succeed, perhaps, in the eyes of the employer (or the interviewer)?
- Alternatively, do participants resist the identities on offer, and if so, how?

The following section sets out the results of this part of the study. Given space limitations it is possible only to present detailed findings from GA. However findings at MNC will be summarized at the end of this section.

Conformist selves

There is a considerable story of conforming selves at GA. Much identity work done by program participants consisted in trying to conform, to fit the model that was expected of them as leaders, to advance their careers or become ‘better’ or closer to what management wanted. Despite evidence of resistance described below, only one of 24 participants voluntarily left the company shortly after the program ended (a member of the one ‘resistant team’, also to be described below). The identity work undertaken by most participants involved, in the overall sense, an effort to do what the program required, to become what it exhorted them to become.

Given detailed coding of the interview data, a number of ways in which conformity was enacted in GA can be identified. These are:

- acceptance of the need to compete with peers, i.e. in the forced ranking exercises, and for who gets the leadership role in the teams;
- cases of people over-performing in order to conform, having experienced some rejection in the groups (3 important cases);

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- ‘allowing others to get used to me’ in order to conform, not rocking the boat as a perceived ‘non-mainstream’ person;
- following decreed processes, even if these are seen as ineffectual, in the teams;
- wanting badly to ‘improve self’ and seeing improvement as evidenced in other program participants’ approval of self;
- Serious reflection on self, exploration of ‘what is right and what is wrong about me’, given program aims, discourse;
- gratitude for the experience of being on the program;
- extremely hard work, to succeed in the program – evident at individual and group levels;
- using program jargon to describe self (‘I’m very results-oriented’; ‘I love feedback’; ‘we have been very aligned on this’);
- disseminating program ideas into other fora at work;
- joining other selective corporate activities – e.g. interviewing new applicants – acting as an ‘insider’;
- repeating program philosophies without question or irony (e.g. ‘leaders must create sets of followers’);
- using DG’s first name and regularly repeating program jargon or speaking like an insider (‘we’);
- seeing fellow group members as not conforming (e.g. ‘we had a bit of trouble with ‘x’; ‘she was the different one’).

Dramaturgical selves

This subject position is strongly suggested by the increased exposure and visibility participants were subjected to on the program - to the senior management team, including DG and VPs. The evidence of dramaturgy in the identity work of my participants includes:

- making efforts to sound ‘global’ and to play up international experience;
- wanting badly to know what others said about self (perhaps, ‘master conformer’);
- performing in the literal sense at the final presentations for the executive management group.

Resistant selves

Resistance at GA arose in the form of critical attitudes towards important aspects of the program and the employer; such ‘attitudinal’ resistance emerged in many interview accounts. Resistant actions or behaviours were much less prevalent at GA, as shown below:

- strong cynicism and expressed desire to thwart the program aims (2 cases);
- complaints about stress, feeling highly and inappropriately pressurized (very widespread);
- withdrawal of emotional investment, or failure to exert it, in the program (a handful of cases);
- mild cynicism and skepticism (widespread);
- use of irony in describing experiences (several cases);
- refusal to use imposed process tools for completing group project work (1 project group out of 4);
- refusal to take exercises seriously, forced ranking and other activities (1 team out of 4).

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- one notable case in which the resisting person spoke out publicly to senior management against what she saw as ‘hypocrisy’ or contradiction in the program, and was fired.

Ambivalence and contradiction are themes that show up continually in the participant’s accounts. That is, some participants express high cynicism and talk about how the program was alienating for them personally, but then go ahead to talk about emancipatory feelings of self-development and growth following program completion.

Finally as mentioned above, of the four project teams in the GA program, one team emerged as a site of counter-discourse and resistance for its members. It is important to note that the non-mainstream members of this group – those accruing little power or cultural/social capital – did not experience a threat to their self-concepts in the intersubjective processes developed in the group. Rather they reported more straightforward growth experiences (micro-emancipation), without having to go through any route of vulnerability, or even degradation, in the process. The ‘collective’ resistance expressed in this team - including the use of humour, refusal to use imposed process tools, and social bonds - thus brought important outcomes that were not available to others in other teams. Notably, the program director and consultants labeled this group ‘arrogant’ and ‘bad listeners.’ Several explanations for this effect may be plausible; likely a combination of the following factors were at play: The team functioned as:

- a ‘back-stage’ place where people can be away from the managerial gaze
- a source of tension-relief, stress-relief
- a source of functional learning ‘from one another’ in a non-threatening environment
- a source of counter-discourse, challenging managerial discourse of control
- a source of loyalty, social bonds, and inclusion -- of belonging that counteracts the insecurity rooted in the program experience.

Selves at MNC

The major finding here is that considerable conformity prevailed at MNC, as at GA. The conforming practices or enactments of self, however, were of a different character than at GA, as shown in the following table.

Indications of ‘conformist selves’

(pursuit of material and symbolic security through conformity)

Codes emerging from interview data at MNC:

	MNC	GA
<i>Acceptance of program aims</i>	Widespread support shown in interview data, unsullied by sarcasm	‘Justification’ of aims, defending them
<i>Expressions of pride in being chosen for</i>	Half of respondents expressed this.	Perhaps one-quarter – pride was expressed as were many other

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<i>program</i>		emotions (e.g. anger, frustration)
<i>Intention to disseminate program aims in own office</i>	Several participants talked about doing mini-360 reviews in their own offices	Fairly widespread but expressed performatively
<i>View that program is positively viewed in company</i>	“It is an excellent program, viewed as prestigious and good. Many people would love it. The level is very high.” others less effusive but positive	
<i>Teams using process tools to work more successfully</i>	One team – very much; Others – to a considerable degree	One team – very little; Others – to a considerable degree
<i>Exposure welcome, valued</i>	Many participants spoke in positive terms about the exposure permitted by the program, to other parts of the company	More irony expressed around this term
Code samples emerging from interview data at <u>GA:</u>	MNC	GA
<i>Hard-working, nervous demeanor of some</i>	Little nervousness of this type	Junior participant extremely occupied and hyper-organized (Julian H.); sense of being watched
<i>Careerism - unapologetic, open</i>	Not widespread however definitely pockets (Nikos); Derision on part of some about others’ careerism	Georgina – plus other notable examples (a few)

Figure 4: Comparing emerging codes for ‘conforming selves’ at MNC and GA

Resisting Selves at MNC

Perhaps paradoxically, there was considerable resistance emerging from the interview and observation data at MNC. It became clear in analyzing the data however that at MNC, the regulation of identities or selves appeared to operate to a considerably greater extent at the *team level*, among peers, as opposed to the organizational level. At GA, one could argue that it operated at both levels, with managerial or organizational discursive practice being stronger, and teams acting, in a sense, as agents of management, for example in the forced ranking exercise. This was not the case at MNC. Rather, teams themselves appeared to make decisions as to who needed to modify themselves to fit the desired model of self. While a full discussion is beyond the space limitations of this paper, this theme will be taken up in subsequent work on this study. For now, perhaps it will suffice to report that several people within MNC quietly refused to comply with the identities that their teams imposed on them – certainly a form of resistance in this context. The ‘group mirror’ was simply deemed to be wrong in these cases. Examples include a man on whom the team imposed the leadership role because ‘he needed to develop authority and assertiveness

most’, while his own reflections on the experience showed him holding firm to his existing approach. Other such examples emerged from the fieldwork, across several program participants. In these cases the imposition of power did not bring conformity in the form of a desire to change self or evidence of such change, but rather resistance or non-compliance with the selves on offer. Nonetheless, the actors involved in these cases clearly conformed at a certain level to what was required of them. They all succeeded in the program

4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Several points of discussion may be pursued given the foregoing analysis. These will be set out here briefly.

4.1 Contrasts in identity work/production of selves in the two organizations

First, people clearly construct conforming identities in both contexts. Some of the same means by which this is done show up at MNC, as at GA, but others do not (e.g. there is less *serious reflection on self* and *wanting badly to improve self*, as well as less emotion and tension, in people’s accounts.) So, the conforming at MNC seems to involve less work. This is predictable, perhaps, given that the required ‘self’ at MNC is not as narrowly or rigidly defined, as at GA. Or, it may be due to the fact that more insecurity and uncertainty are built into the GA context through discursive practices like the forced ranking, as well as the job insecurity that pervades the ‘test’ aspect of the program. The latter perhaps offers a preferable explanation, given that the former reflects a more essentialist line of reasoning.

Second, it seems to be the case that there is more resistance at MNC. This is perhaps a paradox. The discursive practices offer less of a ‘target’ for people’s resistance, in that they are less rigid and obvious. But resistance is also easier at MNC simply because the stakes are lower. Resistance at GA is difficult and even dangerous. There is, however, more dramaturgy at GA – no one is actually rigging results but people assume they are being tested and act accordingly. This is consistent with the analysis here.

Third, the resistance which does exist at GA is in part practiced at a collective level. Does this mean there is a rather straight trajectory from ‘higher danger’ to ‘strength in numbers’? Perhaps not. However, whereas at MNC no team can be seen as resistant, there is one such team at GA.

And fourth, the production of resistance at MNC occurs in response to intersubjective processes within the project teams, rather than at the level of organizational discursive practice per se. These processes certainly reflect and reproduce the broader discursive power dynamics. Teams are reinterpreting what they think is management’s view of what the ‘top global manager’ should be, and then imposing this on their members. Moreover most people seem to conform most of the time, given the data collected here. The resistance that is produced comes from a few people who refuse to accept or enact the selves that others are trying to impose.

Finally, returning to the theme of insecurity, one might argue that the insecurity at MNC is limited to symbolic insecurity, whereas at GA it is both symbolic and material. While the implications of this bear further study, insecurity is indeed an important phenomenon to understand in unraveling the dynamics of power, control and the production of identities in

practice, in contemporary organizations. It takes different forms and permeates the dialectics of identity regulation at several levels. Indeed, identity regulation – geared to people’s ‘insides’ -- is itself bound to produce insecurity. This is because, although it may be difficult to resist, identity regulation cannot be viewed as welcome, *a priori*, by its objects.

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