Identity Funneling : The Manufacture of Management Consultants' Identities in Business Schools

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Résumé :

Cette communication entend contribuer à une meilleure compréhension du rôle des interactions avec des outsiders dans les processus de régulation de l'identité professionnelle au sein d'une organisation. À travers une étude ethnographique au long cours des interventions de consultant(e)s dans une Grande École de commerce française, elle entend plus particulièrement porter un regard empirique sur la "fabrication" des identités professionnelles dans un cadre académique. En se focalisant sur les microprocessus de régulation identitaire, nous montrons comment les consultant(e)s s'appuient sur diverses pratiques interactionnelles pour construire l'identité de leur auditoire et réactualiser la leur. Nous mettons en évidence trois régulations identitaires spécifiques qui orientent la carrière mais aussi les identités cognitives et éthiques émergentes des étudiant(e)s. Ensemble, elles réduisent progressivement la pertinence des autres possibilités d'identification professionnelle et individuelle, en utilisant une combinaison des registres transactionnel et émotionnel qui sapent les autres possibilités d'identification : nous désignons ce phénomène "l'entonnoir identitaire".

Mots-clés : identity regulation, consultants, business schools, ethnography

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INTRODUCTION

Studies of identity regulation in management and organization studies have focused on the processes by which organizations attempt to 'mould' employees' identities (Bardon et al., 2017) turning organizational insiders into 'identity workers' (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002) charged to integrate managerial discourses into narratives of self-identity to better fulfil their 'home organization' goal whether it is a bank, a local public administration, a labor market intermediary organization, an activist or police organization, a university or more classical companies such as professional service firms (Bardon et al., 2017; Boussebaa & Brown, 2017; Cuganesan, 2017; Jammaers & Zanoni, 2021; Rahmouni Elidrissi & Courpasson, 2021).

Yet, identity regulation is also concerned with how an individual is defined or implied by reference to the 'Other' (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). While some research started to analyze the agentic role of outsiders in shaping local professional identities (Reay et al., 2017), still too little is known about how local identity regulation can be performed by actors not belonging to the organization. This paper highlights the centrality of third parties in influencing the identity regulation process. Inspired by other studies of identity regulation (Jammaers & Zanoni, 2021), we therefore ask : How do professionals regulate identities outside their workplace ?

To tackle this question theoretically, our paper builds on the identity regulation perspective that 'seek to understand how organizations work to shape the identities of their employees to achieve managerial goals' (Boussebaa & Brown, 2017). Identities are theorized as being constituted within discursive regimes (Brown & Humphreys, 2006) but also through material and interactional processes (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Cuganesan, 2017; Jammaers

& Zanoni, 2021). As we know that identities are 'derived from countless numbers of interactions with others' (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002) and that the importance of 'interactions between professionals and others has been relegated to the background' when it comes to identity formation (Reay et al., 2017), we specifically focus on the interactional character of the identity regulation process. Our paper also draw on the identity perspective that consider that identities are worked on in social interaction and integral to processes of organizing (Brown, 2022). Identities are 'crafted' in local contexts that permit reflexive actors to accommodate (Bardon et al., 2017).

Empirically, the article addresses this issue by presenting a 21-month ethnographic study of consultants' interventions in a French Business School. While the workplace is being considered a 'most important site of identity construction' (Knights & Clarke, 2014) we analyze those aspects of identity regulation that – quite literally in our case – "fall outside the immediate workplace" (Musson & Duberley, 2007). We know that both management education and professional affiliation are powerful media of identity construction (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Both management consulting and business schools are related to the issue of identity (e.g. Alvesson & Empson, 2008, 2008; Alvesson & Kärreman, 2004; Harvey et al., 2017; Knights & Clarke, 2014; Mosonyi et al., 2020). The links between consultancies and business schools are important, insofar as schools train consultants and consulting is a highly sought-after activity among graduates of business schools (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006; Binder et al., 2016), but also because consultants may be involved in designing study programs (Dallimore & Souza, 2002; Thompson, 2018) and training procedures 'developed in ways that have implications for the shaping and direction of identity' (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). This also relates to the burning issue of the new generation of young graduates that transform the professional aspirations, to link them to 'Grand challenges' such as climate change (Brès et al., 2019), upsetting traditional professionalization. Professionals must take into account the greater good, promoting both expertise and ethos, creating meaningfulness, directly influencing their professional identity (Iatridis et al., 2022).

To discover how business graduates were encouraged to regard consulting as means for securing both "meaning and prestige" (Weller et al., 2023), we examine practices consultants employ to regulate the identities of students. We find three main identity regulations by which consultants create career, cognitive and ethical identities. Taken together, these mechanisms progressively reduce, from career generalities to individual values, the other possibilities of identification for students using a combination of transactional and emotional arguments. Such set of regulations, which we refer to as *identity funneling*, is an underexplored phenomenon providing two main contributions.

The first aim of this article is related to the identity regulation literature. We demonstrate how interactional dimensions are related to identities, extending Alvesson and Willmott's (2002) research by highlighting interactional processes that organizational outsiders can use to manufacture identity. We also adopt in this paper a multi-layer identity regulation approach that is attentive to both transactional and emotional dynamics while previous research has, for example, examined emotions as distinctive resources for identity in the context of junior professionals (Ahuja et al., 2019).

A second contribution is related to the consulting literature. We develop our understanding of the making of consultants identities through an in-depth ethnographic journey, isolating the specific identity regulations performed by consultants in the under researched context of academia. We draw on consulting research to stress how career rationale, cognitive practices and ethical behaviors are involved in the broader process of identity building, prior entering the consulting firm.

In what follows, we begin by discussing the literature of identity regulation. Next, we turn to our ethnographic study of consultants' interventions in a French business school, describing our research setting and method. We then turn to our findings before discussing them.

1. IDENTITY REGULATION

1.1. WHAT – A MEAN OF ORGANIZATIONAL CONTROL

Organizational processes of identity construction have been explored using the notion of identity regulation. Studies of identity regulation 'seek to understand how organizations work to shape the identities of their employees to achieve managerial goals' (Boussebaa & Brown, 2017) and the various organizational practices they use to 'influence employees' subjectivity and manufacture preferred types of individuals with appropriate behaviours' (Lai et al., 2020). Identity regulation is about making identity statements that may influence employee's feeling of similarity and distinctiveness (Cuganesan, 2017).

Identity regulation research originated from Alvesson and Willmott's (2002) seminal work. They regard identity regulation as 'a pervasive and increasingly intentional modality of organizational control' encompassing the 'more or less intentional effects of social practices upon processes of identity construction and reconstruction'. Identity regulation can target the definition of the person directly, with explicit characteristics that distinguish a person from others, offer a specific vocabulary of motives to understand the meaning of work or relate to the construction of knowledge and skills, ideas and norms about the 'natural' way of doing things in a particular context (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). These various 'regulatory efforts' (Gotsi et al., 2010) may be grouped into those that focus on 1. The employee, or the regulations in which the employee is directly defined or implied by reference to the Other ; 2. Action orientations, the regulations in which the field of activity is constructed with reference to appropriate work orientations ; 3. Social relations, the regulations of 'belongingness and differentiation' ; and finally 4. The scene, the regulations indicating the kind of identity that fits the larger social, organizational and economic terrain in which the subject operates.

Identity regulation refers to a mode of control that ultimately 'rests on individuals' proactive implication in their own self-constitution as subjects through their own identity work' (Jammaers & Zanoni, 2021). Identity regulation is distinct from 'identity work', i.e. 'the range of activities individuals engage in to create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept' (Snow & Anderson, 1987, p. 1348) in the sense that is does not comprise the self-processing of the aforementioned organizational regulation.

1.2. How – Discourse and beyond

Specific strategies of identity regulation are rarely examined in research (Gotsi et al., 2010). The idea of regulation originally insisted on 'discursive practices concerned with identity definition that condition processes of identity formation and transformation' (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Through these practices, people are led to accept the 'official discursive resources for identity work made available to them' (Bardon et al., 2017). Organizations can define a worker 'directly by using specific words and expressions, or indirectly, by defining him or her as different from a worker or group of workers which is defined directly' (Jammaers & Zanoni, 2021).

Yet, 'Recognition of the significance of discourse as a way of understanding identity does not exclude consideration of other aspects.' (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Identity regulation can happen beyond a discursive practice and it does not rest upon discourse and abstract idealized identities, but is rather lived every day by specific individuals (Rahmouni Elidrissi & Courpasson, 2021). Not only does 'discursive identity regulation is materially enforced through a bureaucratic practice' (Jammaers & Zanoni, 2021) but identity claims are also enacted through both discourse and practice (Cuganesan, 2017). Organizations replicate existing representations of identities but also 'proactively produce their own through their discursive and material practices.' (Jammaers & Zanoni, 2021). Jammaers & Zanoni see for example organizational discourses and material practices as a form of socio-ideological control, stressing the complex relation between them (Jammaers & Zanoni, 2021). This is in line with scholarship that emphasized the wide spectrum of other regulatory means like space, technology, ideas and norms about the 'natural way of doing things' conveying workers' ideal behavior, or 'appropriate work orientations' and ideal characteristics (Jammaers & Zanoni, 2021), forming together 'a complex mixture of conscious and unconscious elements, an interpretive and reflexive grid gradually shaped by processes of identity regulation and identity work.' (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002).

1.3 Who – Professionals and identity regulation

Identity regulation has been related to professional identity – i.e. the 'patterns of characteristics, beliefs, values, motives and experiences that individuals employ to define themselves in a professional setting' (Slay & Smith, 2011). Profession is a significant source of identification, and organization have incentives to regulate professional identity of their own employees, 'a particularly cost-effective modality of control especially suitable for jobs requiring the worker to retain a certain degree of discretion, such as professional and service-oriented jobs' (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000).

In this regard, Reay et al. (2017) have produced two important arguments. First, complementary to previous research that suggests professional role identities are designed by professionals themselves, they stress the influence of others in professional identity formation drawing attention to a 'much stronger role for others in changing professional identity than has previously been considered' (Reay et al., 2017). They show, through an empirical study of physicians, the role of managers engaging in 'strategically oriented meetings and conversations that set out a pathway toward a new physician role identity', thus demonstrating the professional identity construction process of physicians and how it can be adjusted through the orchestrated and purposeful efforts of others. Second, drawing on the idea that professional role identities are relational, they specifically stress the critical role of social interactions in this identity building process in which 'what it means to be a family physician' could be reconsidered (Reay et al., 2017). While in the existing studies of professional role identity 'the importance of interactions between professionals and others has been relegated to the background.', they underlines the agency of others in organizing interactions intended to encourage professionals to change their identity (Reay et al., 2017).

Similarly, a lot of studies of identity regulation focus on discursivity (Iatridis et al., 2022) and how discourse is an significant resource of professional identity for individuals. The question of regulation through interaction has been surprisingly neglected, although (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002) stressed that identities are derived from 'countless numbers of interactions with others' (…) and privileged a 'less totalizing and deterministic notion of discourse (…) to allow for the inclusion of 'somatic and tacit aspects of social interaction'. The role of interactional processes remain understudied in this perspective, even for conventional group like managers and others professionals where identity matters have been largely investigated (Brown, 2019).

2. RESEARCH DESIGN

2.1 THE MANUFACTURE OF MANAGEMENT CONSULTANTS IDENTITIES IN BUSINESS SCHOOLS

The decision to study regulation of management consultants identities in business schools was influenced by historical perspectives which has noted the close relationship between consulting and academia (McKenna, 2006). Since the beginning of the twentieth century, "the university (and the schools in the French case) have become the place for the institutionalization of managerial knowledge" (Boussard, 2009). Consultants "take their place in the business school, in close interdependence with other actors such as academics (...)" (idem). They come to "teach in these places. They exchange and collaborate with the academic world, which also conceptualizes new knowledge on its own." (idem). In the 1980s, the market for business schools and management programmes was booming in Europe and the rest of the world: "The consultancy industry is forging links with the new local management training systems, thus ensuring a steady stream of suitably acculturated recruits" (Djelic, 2004). Reviews emphasize the lasting importance of identity construction in consulting literature (Mosonyi et al., 2020) and, parallelly, business schools are increasingly recognized as playing a decisive role in developing an understanding of consultants and some research highlighted "the interest of turning the scientific gaze (...) during the school journey", raising the question of the constitution of the consultant "before entering the business world" (Bourgoin & Stenger, 2020).

Consulting is still today one of the most highly esteemed activities among business school graduates (Armbrüster, 2006; Binder et al., 2016, p. 20; Gebreiter, 2019; Kipping & Armbrüster, 1999). The business school appears in studies devoted to consulting through the question of the degree as a condition for the recognition of the consultant by his hierarchical superiors and peers (Creplet et al., 2001) or as a key element in ethnographies (Bourgoin, 2015; Stenger, 2017). Consulting is sometimes seen as a "school" sector that educates the managerial elites and can, in turn, be cited in research on business schools (Abraham, 2007; Fondeur, 2004). The relationship is organic between business schools and consulting firms, and it is common to refer to a "blurring of boundaries" between them (Engwall, 2012).

Despite the recognition of this key role, research that focuses on the ways in which consultants act and interact in these academic settings remain understudied empirically. If we know that "the consultant is just behind the door of the university" (Boussard, 2009), what he does when he is inside its four walls is still to be investigated. More specifically, while historical analyses are common (Boussard, 2009; Djelic, 2004), long-term in situ ethnographic studies are much rarer in the business school context. This could be precisely where the central ideas of consulting are promoted in the context of a clearly identified recruitment issue for consulting firms (Gebreiter, 2019).

Some research finds that, within elite universities that are supposed to offer the most career opportunities, nearly half of the graduates go into a narrow range of career options, including the consulting sector. Binder et al., (2016) refer to it as "Career Funneling" and highlights how Elite students learn to desire ''prestigious'' jobs. Interviewing recent Harvard and Stanford students and alumni, they find that after graduation, students are much more familiar with consulting jobs than they are with other corporate jobs. Social pressure and the pursuit of prestige lead students to pursue careers 'worthy' of their elite degree and to draw status boundaries that separate these worthy jobs from "ordinary" careers. Together, these elements lead to a funnel effect, whereby access to elite universities, instead of opening up unlimited employment opportunities for their students, have actually restricted them (Binder et al., 2016). Crucially, the authors find that students' career aspirations are not simply the result of individual preferences but are strongly influenced by the organization of the university and its various actors. Students at elite universities thus actively construct the meaning of certain jobs as "prestigious" in collaboration with other university actors such as consultants. This makes the academia an interesting field to explore the identity regulation that this presence may produce. We know that both education, management education programmes included, and professional affiliation are powerful media of identity construction (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002).

2.2. Research field

We conducted our research in one of the top business schools in France – FrenchBS. Access to the field was made possible by our involvement in teaching and research activities at the school.

Internationally-recognized in rankings, FrenchBS is best-known for its most prestigious program – Master in Management "Grande École" within which our fieldwork took place. The graduate prospects are closely linked to consulting (approximatively 1/3rd of the students enter the sector after graduation) together with finance, and FrenchBS graduates from the Master in Management program are target for the most prestigious consulting firms. FrenchBS was thus an appropriate choice for our research inquiry of studying the manufacturing of consultant identity.

2.3. AN ETHNOGRAPHIC-TYPE PARTICIPATIVE OBSERVATION METHOD

Since September 2020, as observers adopting an ethnographic perspective, we followed an elective program in management and organizational consulting (Bourgoin et al., 2020; Garfinkel, 2018). Teaching staff, guest speakers and students were always informed of our research activity at the beginning of the program. We therefore had complete access to the classes (direct observation, video recordings, syllabus, materials, etc.). This allowed us to combine archival data and observations. Examining the "consultant factory" that are the classes at a business school, in which practicing consultants meet students who are considering becoming consultants, therefore seemed to be an appropriate approach, as this is precisely where the central ideas of consulting are transmitted, discussed, tested and promoted.

We have ensured that the firms and consultants involved remain entirely anonymous, and that the confidentiality of information and documents has been maintained. All data used in this study has been duly anonymized.

2.4. DATA COLLECTION: A MULTIFACETED COLLECTION OF DATA

To address our questions, we used a qualitative research methodology, in line with other studies of identity regulation in organization studies. We designed and carried out our empirical journey by making typical choices of qualitative research (Zilber & Meyer, 2022). Our unit of analysis is micro identity regulation processes which reflects any attempt to interactionally shape a specific professional image. We study a group-level phenomena involving three actors: teachers, consultants intervening during the classes, and students.

Observations and video recordings. These classes were part of three-hour modules taught once a week, or on two blocked seminar days. We took field notes of our observations as auditors. All of them included factual descriptions, verbatim transcriptions, memories of interactions, conversations, and any relevant information.

The school is equipped with a video recording system for classes. The video recordings were partially transcribed and reviewed in order to cross-check them with our field notes. We began working in the field with the aim of understanding the interactions between teaching staff, consultants and students during classes, with a focus on "keeping an eye open to serendipitous findings, or even randomly browsing, which often leads to seminal ideas" (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). In total, the data relates to 90 hours of lectures, more than a hundred students and some twenty consultants during the period between September 2020 and June 2022, i.e. a total of 21 months of observations (see Table 1).

Working documents. We systematically collected the working documents used in the classes. These include institutional presentations, presentations of the "case study" method by the firms, classes conducted by the teachers, and rating tools developed using Microsoft Excel spreadsheets. The field documents were essential to the analysis as a "stabilizer of the meaning" given to the situations by the different actors and in order to supplement the more interpretative observations in the ethnographic notes (Bourgoin et al., 2020), even when cross-referenced with the video recordings.

Informal conversations. As in conventional classes, we engaged in many informal conversations with multiple actors – discussions in which ideas and points of view were shared with consultants and students during breaks in lectures – which can be considered as informal open interviews (they are reported in the field notes).

Table 1. Overview of empirical material

Data sources	Quantity	Timeline	Resulting Data
Management Consulting Course *(Observation, physical and distance learning*)	30h (10x3h)	September 2020 to December 2020	Video recordings of classes Presentation materials from consultants Extensive field notes Notes from informal conversations
Management Consulting Course *(Participant observation, physical learning*)	30h (10x3h)	September 2021 to December 2021	Video recordings of classes Presentation materials from consultants Extensive field notes Notes from informal conversations
Management Consulting Seminar *(Participant observation, physical setting)*	30h (2x15h)	June 2021 and June 2022	Video recordings of classes Presentation materials from consultants Extensive field notes Notes from informal conversations
Total	**90h, 158 students, 21 different consultants**	**September 2020 to June 2022**	

2.5. DATA ANALYSIS

Our approach was grounded in a categorical analysis focused on practices and mechanisms (Zilber & Meyer, 2022) and involving three main steps. To put our data collection into perspective, we drew on recent studies in the consulting literature (Bourgoin et al., 2020), particularly those involving an ethnographic-type approach (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

***Stage 1**. Data collection and analysis in media res by an observer-researcher: a balanced appraisal of lecturers', consultants' and students' actions.*

The first stage of the analysis was carried out during data collection. A researcher was in charge of observing all participants, noting what they said, the questions, and the main interactions. He followed the principle of saturation and the recurring interactions between the actors progressively constituted our unit of data. This led to the production of a highly descriptive ethnographic account divided into small "chunks". Each actor's discourses were analyzed throughout this first account: the consultants, students and researchers themselves set the scene for the lectures, put this scene into perspective, and commented on it. We focused on the present meanings assigned to these interactions by the actors. At this stage, the consultants-guest speakers were interviewed by the researcher-observer adopting a reflexive approach, during breaks in classes and afterwards (a debriefing, lasting from a few minutes to more than an hour, was almost always carried out with the consultants after their interventions). An initial open coding process (Miles & Huberman, 1994) was carried out by the observer-researcher at this stage.

***Stage 2**. Focus groups with students*

An important stage at the end of the series of classes consisted in asking students about 1. changes in their image of consulting before and after the classes on consulting, 2. their "memorable moments" during these lectures, 3. how they could characterize the consultants' way of thinking. All students wrote down their answers to these questions and subsequently reported back orally: this raw material was systematically collected and then copied out by the junior lecturer-researcher. These focus groups corresponded to a total of six hours of data and written statements from students.

Stage 3*. Analysis of data on different actors by the two researchers to ensure a reflexive balance*

The third stage consisted in a second coding of the ethnographic raw material, cross-referenced with the recordings of the interventions (if a passage deemed interesting was only partially transcribed in the notes, the video sequences were consulted) and the documentary data (in particular the firms' presentations). At this stage, the senior lecturer involved in the classes reviewed this raw material and the corresponding coding carried out by the first researcher. This stage included self-observation (Adler, 1994) and reflexive ethnography (Sandstrom et al., 1999). This approach is consistent with other studies which consider that involvement creates opportunities to generate potentially strong theoretical ideas and "academic stories", and that learning in the field requires both personal involvement and professional detachment (Anteby, 2012).

3. FINDINGS. THE FUNNELING EFFECT : HOW CONSULTANTS PERFORMS PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY REGULATION IN BUSINESS SCHOOLS

We discovered that interactions had considerable potential to shape consultants identities. We reveal three regulations. The first regulation concerns the professional attributes attached to consulting job and career. Second, such broad panorama was completed by the shaping of a cognitive identity. This mechanism had a strong knowledge-related dimension covering two complementary logics related to the conquest and mastery of the academic environment in which the consultants are intervening. Third, consultants who participated in the process were involved in the regulation of a distinctive 'Great people' identity, completing expectations about career prestige and knowledge, with personal values. Students felt social pressure to do important things worthy of their elite degree, but also to be a 'great person'.

Our observations reveal the collective dimension of the construction of identity, which is based on a division of labor: consultants are legitimized both by the students' acceptance of the rules and by the teaching staff. A critical and dialogical dimension emerged in the context of these interactions within the business school, which reflects these actors' mutual influence upon each other. Together, these mechanisms led to an identity funneling effect, whereby consultants, opening up consulting prospects to their students, actually restricted them to a narrow range of acceptable career pathways and identities.

In order to provide a detailed analysis of the complexities of the manufacturing process, we set out to illustrate them by reproducing 11 recurring interactions (labelled by the actors' statements), in which actors engaged and that participated in the identity creation process. When reviewing these results, we occasionally refer to the interactions summarized in Table 2, which provides an overview of the main empirical illustrations of each mechanism identified.

Table 2. List of recurring interactions

Interactions	Summary	Related Data
I1. 'Reselling an experience with us is very easy'	Consultants' show the value of a consultancy experience for their future career, and in particular the exposure of a successful 'diaspora', both from the consultancy and from the school.	Institutional presentations of the firms Partial transcript of the videos Ethnographic notes Notes from informal conversations
I2. 'I want to do the interview training, I prepared it'	Identity regulation is achieved through the active adherence of some students to the tasks proposed by the consultants. It is particularly obvious in the interview training provided by the consultants to the students	Partial transcript of the videos Ethnographic notes
I3. 'You will be evaluated, as professionals, by the consultants"	Teachers take part in the organisation of identity manufacturing by enabling them to conduct sessions and legitimising the evaluation of consultants in oral presentations.	Partial transcript of the videos Ethnographic notes
I4. 'Your presentation was too academic'	The 'schooling' of consulting is a source of tension. We are faced with two heterogeneous processes: on the one hand, consultants seem to be initiating a process of 'de-schooling' of knowledge and, at the same time, a 're-schooling' of professional life in its social aspect. The academic expertise of the business school is denied by the professional expertise of consultants.	Partial transcript of the videos Ethnographic notes 14 student presentations
I5. 'The approach is more important than the answer'	'Expertise as procedure' seem to be dominant for the consultants. The so-called 'market sizing' case studies demonstrates that analytical skills take priority over the accuracy of the answer. It also highlights the importance of the aesthetics of the 'right reasoning' versus the right solution.	Partial transcript of the videos Ethnographic notes 5 business cases
I6. 'It's consultant jargon, you have to translate'	The use of expert terms, even in trivial contexts, runs through the interventions. This shows that despite the opacity of the language for an outsider, all actors understand each other.	Partial transcript of the videos Ethnographic notes 14 student presentations
I7. 'In real life…'	Consultants are claiming a knowledge of the field and of 'reality' that is absent from the academic world. They claim to be holders of the facts.	Partial transcript of the videos Ethnographic notes 14 student presentations
I8. 'There is an ethics committee within the firm'	Environmental and societal awareness has been a constant theme in the consultants' interventions. This is achieved through missions stories, refusals of some clients and an institutional handling of ethical issues.	Partial transcript of the videos Ethnographic notes
I9. 'We promote diversity'	The firms are tackling other issues in addition to environmental impact, like the place of women in society, or the inclusion of the LGBTQ community.	Institutional presentations of the firms Partial transcript of the videos Ethnographic notes
I10. 'It was a bit of a marketing presentation.'	Student antagonism is present. Students question what the consultants tell them, well aware of the interests at stake. Some assert their determination to join them while other remain skeptical.	Focus group with students Informal conversation
I11. "I'm not here to sell consulting"	In this scene, we were interested in the role of the teacher: comments, reactions and discourse held in front of the consultants and the students. What emerges from the beginning of this reflexivity exercise is the interoperability of the profiles mobilized (academic, former student, former consultant) and a role of mediator of knowledge.	Focus group with students Informal conversation

3.1 Career Regulation : unmatched prospects narrow professional identities

Adherence to the operating methods of consultancy firms, their practices, their recruitment processes and their rules, both formal and informal, is the result of a specific division of labor among each of the actors.

The consultants. To encourage students to embark on a consulting-related career path, the consultants endeavor to convey a positive image of their activity. This consists in promoting the professional qualities of consultants, who are portrayed as analytical and creative, well organized, results-oriented, good listeners and highly motivated, with the capacity to work as team members and forge strong relationships with colleagues and clients. "Reselling" is one of the arguments that crops up quite naturally: "Reselling an experience is very easy for us" (Interaction 1). Experience in a prestigious consultancy is considered to act as an accelerator of careers, and consultants emphasize this fact. For example, an institutional presentation slide showed 21 alumni who are considered as some of the "successes" of one firm as start-up founders, or famous leaders. This "diaspora" of former consultants is accompanied by a diaspora from the school itself: the consultants-guest speakers were themselves often alumni of the business school, and some clearly described the paths they had followed. "Seeing alumni from our school made more sense", stressed one student during the question-and-answer session at the end of a class. Rather than consulting being a dream job for management students, it is more a question of the students themselves manufacturing this dream of being consultants – by coming back a few years later as alumni to promote this activity.

The students. Students have a preconceived image of the consultant's profession. There is a relative stability in some of the students' opinions at the beginning and end of the program: consulting profession is perceived as requiring well-structured, interesting and analytical profiles. Student consent is perhaps best observed during the case-study training sessions (Interaction 2). A mock interview between a consultant and a student shows the latter's acceptance of the highly codified business case game – a key component of recruitment interviews in the profession. The student admitted that he spent a substantial amount of his spare time outside lectures preparing for these cases with a classmate. Without this acceptance of the more or less formal rules of the exercise, this interaction could not have taken place.

While the consultants' actions and their discourses reflect efforts to convince the students, antagonisms are also sometimes expressed during the sessions. When the students are invited to comment on the presentations and their interactions with the firms, skepticism and even criticism are sometimes expressed (Interaction 10). Some students are aware of the "charm offensive" aspect and no longer feel impacted by consulting firms' sometimes overly corporate presentations. When interviewed during the focus groups, the most fervent critics sometimes prove to be those who have been rejected by the firms' selection processes.

Teaching staff. The teaching staff defend a position of neutrality: "I'm not selling consulting; I'm just showing what it's about." (Interaction 11). They seem to be participating in the collective organization of consent through a process of legitimization, first and foremost by encouraging visits by consultants. Above all, the consultants are legitimized via a partial transfer of academic judgement: by organizing oral presentations in the presence of consultants who provide feedback, and by letting them participate in the grading process, the lecturers officially recognize their credibility and influence in the academic environment (Interaction 3).

3.2. Cognitive regulation : Best Professional methods reduce epistemic possibilities

This mechanism has a strong knowledge dimension as it relates to the conquest of ideas and the mastery of knowledge. Two complementary mechanisms relate to the mastery of knowledge, and the appropriation of the academic game by consultants in a dual discourse, both depreciative (you need to leave the academic phase), and laudatory (you will find in the firm what you like about Business School).

Conquering the academic terrain. The "academic" question is one of the most obvious sources of tension related to the presence of consultants in the business school. It demonstrates the existence of two heterogeneous processes: the first consists in advocating a post-academic process to students as opposed to that offered by the academic environment. The second consists in restoring an academic dimension to the consulting environment in light of some common benchmarks derived from the Business School environment. For example, as part of management consulting lectures, consultants and lecturers asked students to make presentations, often supplemented by an oral submission. The consultants-guest speakers assigned grades which the teachers harmonized. After a presentation by a group of students as part of the exercise, the following criticism was made when a senior consultant concluded: "Your presentation was too academic" (Interaction 4). She then pointed out the "smooth" and "clean" nature of the presentation, lacking any enthusiasm or great creativity. In this way, the academic dimension becomes not the guarantor of knowledge but of its incompleteness.

And at the same time, many aspects of a presentation delivered by a consultancy, made deliberate reference to the academic environment, but this time in a laudatory manner. The consultancy is the "Business School revisited", promoting learning and development. One consultant recounted the seminar organized by the firm upon his arrival. Each "wave" of arrivals is composed of a "small group" of two to 12 consultants. It is "school-like", but with a much more positively perceived social aspect. In his presentation to the students, he shows a "class photo" of several of the firm's offices. One student, on another occasion, drew parallels between consultancies and student associations: this analogy was known and recognized by the consultants. Therefore, conquest also involves a reappropriation of the academic dimension with a social aspect that is seen in a positive light.

Mastery through knowledge. The process of *mastery* provides us with a dual demonstration of appropriation of the method and of the facts. "Expertise as procedure" seems to predominate for the consultants, who exhibit their methodological mastery on a very regular basis. For example, as part of their program, students are required to reflect on several case studies, that is designed to gauge the candidate's analytical skills. Consultants often state that "The approach is more important than the answer" (Interaction 5).

This also underlines the importance of the aesthetics of the "right reasoning" versus the right solution. Students working on the human aspects of restructuring plans are recommended to rephrase and to save this aspect for last. Similarly, students are not advised to expressly use the traditional toolbox (SWOT, etc.). If it is used, it must remain hidden. These "frameworks" are used to make assumptions and as an aid to reflection. They are merely tools – fundamentals that must be kept hidden but mastered.

The second part of this mastery concerns the mastery of facts. The fictitious business case that students analyze is often based on a real but simplified case of an assignment carried out by the consultant-guest speaker. The case is a microcosm of the consulting assignment and is intended to test the same competencies as those mobilized on an assignment. In the consultant's real life, the case will be more complex (Interaction 7) : this special relationship maintained by the consultants vis-à-vis the professional realities is reflected in the feedback given during the students' business proposal presentations. They are informed that "in real life", they will be interrupted by the client during their presentations, for example. This confusion reaches its peak when some consultants talk about the new "online game" that is sometimes part of the interview process, in which the player-candidate is immersed in a natural environment populated by different kinds of plants and animals, some of which succumb to an unknown disease. In this online scenario, candidates are required to participate in the survival of an ecosystem whose rules are already written. The player is constrained by time and limited resources; as time goes by, more and more constraints are added in line with the laws for the construction of this world that is created from scratch, but which directly mirrors a real situation.

These mechanisms for mastering knowledge are embodied in the imposition and sharing of a common language, as well as in communication and interaction practices (leadership and meetings, organizational life, ways of working and communicating). The lectures are peppered with English-language terminology (the course is mainly in french). The students are not found wanting in this regard during their oral presentations: some proposals are Agile-, digital-, or UX *(user experience)*-focused. The consultants themselves are amused by this consultants' "jargon", and the need for translation (Interaction 6) in the French-speaking world.

3.3. ETHICAL REGULATION : RESPONSIBLE EMPLOYEES SHAPES 'GREAT PEOPLE' IDENTITY

Far from confining their aspirations to the provision of consulting services, consultants embrace other issues. Environmental and social awareness is a recurrent theme in the consultants' discussions, for example. This leads them to refuse assignments: "We wouldn't work for the tobacco industry", and more broadly to emphasize their engagement in ethical issues: for example, one manager underlines that "the firm has an ethics committee" (Interaction 8). It is also reflected by the consultants highlighting internal initiatives promoting key sustainability and green transition issues, from environmentally friendly technologies to animal welfare. These discourses are embodied by facts: bicycles have replaced company cars in one firm, for example.

This is accompanied by a discourse on diversity (Interaction 9). The stated aim is to provide the best possible environment in which everyone can flourish at work, with the onus on promoting inclusion, equality men/women, LGBT community and diversity within firms, among clients and in society. However, recruitments are repeatedly characterized by their immutability in top firms: in the French case, graduates are broadly recruited from top seven schools (business schools and engineering schools), including the one being studied.

Dialogical dimension: behind the resistance, the status quo

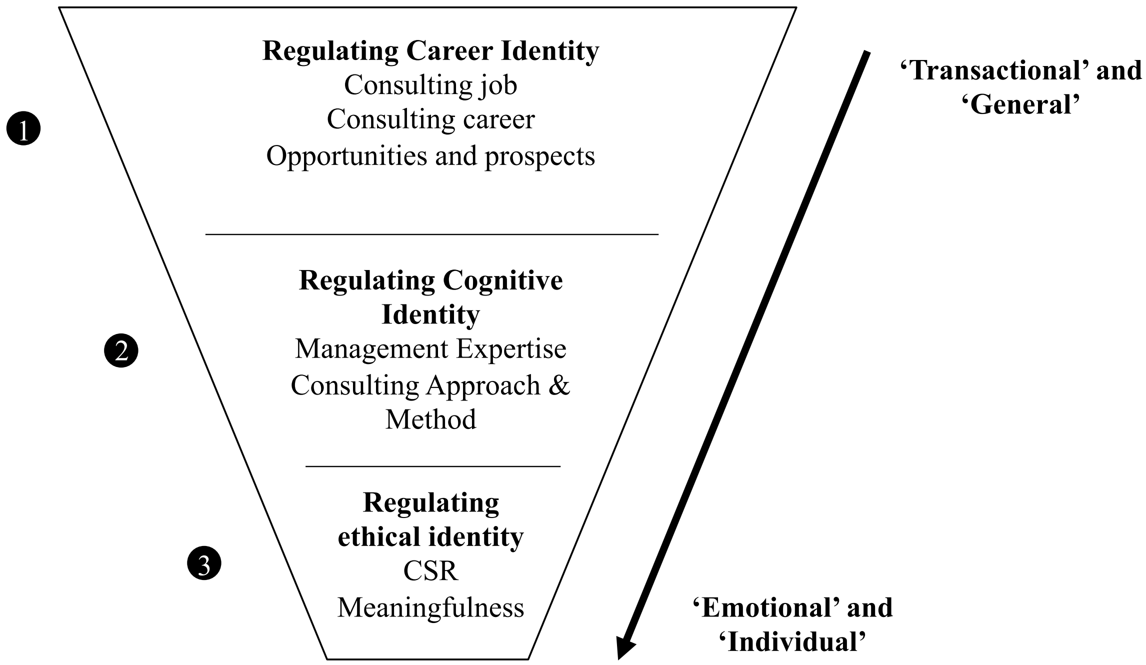
A dialogue, main way of interaction, is maintained between the different actors, with multiple functions: putting the discourses into perspective and adapting to the different configurations of the classes. When speaking to the students, the consultants insist on the benefits of consulting, but speak much more frankly about their work during informal conversations, describing the shortcomings of their profession, even to students. When discussing their career, for example, they readily admit their desire to try a different line of work because of their weariness and the fast pace of the work. Far from the curbing students' ambitions, this transparency seems to encourage their consent: authenticity is considered a quality.

This dialogue can be critical, via the students' antagonism, and enables the consultants to take these criticisms into account and thereby defuse them. Students sometimes elicits skepticism, or even criticism. They also deplore the fact that the firms "oversell" themselves. Students call into question what the consulting firms tell them. However, a difference is observed depending on whether or not the session is conducted in the presence of a consulting firm. The questions and remarks tend to be more politely worded in the consultants' presence. Overall, these postures of resistance to consultants do not fundamentally change the students' perceptions of consulting.

The teaching staff are also stakeholders in this dialogic space. During oral presentations by students, for example, teachers point out the proliferation of "buzzwords" in such presentations.

To students who questioned them during breaks in classes, the teachers confided that they wanted to answer in a neutral manner, without influencing choices but by providing the keys. At the same time, they commended the students for their questions and their critical scrutiny.

Figure 1. The Identity Funneling Effect



Our observations have led us to conclude that identity is a collective construction in which all actors participate. The consultants are clearly hoping to see students embark on this career path, but dynamics are already reflected in their choice of this consulting program and the acceptance of the division of labor between students and consultants. The students' meticulous preparation for the case studies outside of classes, and the faculty's legitimization of the consultants by allowing them to guide the sessions and grade the students, have systematically enhanced the position of the consultants in this environment.

However, instead of simply promoting a career in consulting (Regulation 1), the consultants have embarked on a conquest of the academic world (Regulation 2). Finally, the interactions are characterized by a dialogical process of elaboration: each of the actors engages in a process of redefining knowledge. This dialogue between the actors gives rise to a challenge that is necessary to ensure the perpetuation of the project, which must undergo contradiction and mediation in order to attract complete support. In this case, resistance does not pose a threat to identity; on the contrary, it participates in its construction. This construction also involve personal and intimate values (Regulation 3). Together, the mechanisms reduce the very possibilities of becoming something else than consultant, without incurring losses, professional or personal.

4. DISCUSSION

In this paper, we aspired to understand how professional identity regulation could be done in a given organization through interactions with organizational 'others'. We have explored how consultants' interventions in business school programs can contribute to the regulation of professional identity of students, prior entering the consulting firms. We have found that consultants draw upon various regulations, some of which in conflict with the local organizational identity. In this section, we discuss our findings to further elaborate on two distinct contributions.

The interactional character of identity regulation. First, our study draws attention to the interactional character of identity regulation and integrates the rational and emotional elements that can regulate identities. Our findings show that FrenchBS was the site of various organizational practices (career, cognitive or ethical related) that regulate graduates identities but also reaffirm consultants identities. Consultants are not only 'career shapers' (Bosley et al., 2009) but cognitive and ethical identities' ones. More than just a rational argument aiming at creating an elite identity, the process was also an attempt to produce, behind the good consultant, the Great individual, connecting the issue of identity with CSR and meaningfulness.

In this sense, meaningfulness' is, for example, not only 'a discursive object that allows individuals to talk about themselves as engaged in a self-project that involves pursuing a particular goal, namely a purposeful life.' (Weller et al., 2023) but also a powerful interactional occasion to build synergy between consulting firm objectives and the rejuvenation of consultants identities. The last 'ethical' regulation we discover is the most individualistic but also the more connected to macro 'grand challenges', thus participating to the connection of the micro/meso (individual-organizational) dynamics of identity regulation and macro, societal, one's (Boussebaa & Brown, 2017), complementing the studies of identity regulation within organization studies that have been 'conspicuously lacking in efforts to link internal processes to external wider contexts.' (Lai et al., 2020).'

Consulting beyond the consulting firm: a new perspective. Second, in line with the narratives of the 'ready-to-think factory' (Zerbib, 2013) for which consultants may be held responsible, our study confirms that the academic context is a key stage in the construction of a way of thinking and being. Like Stenger, we note that the process of 'breaking away from academic references" within the Business school would be "good preparation for joining a consulting firm", combined with the fact that 'it (...) remains an academic environment' (Stenger, 2017, p. 83). Here too, we have also identified the issue of the influence of the 'diaspora' of consultants (Sturdy & Wright, 2008). Previous studies have revealed a powerful *esprit de corps* within the workforces of flagship firms like McKinsey and BCG (Byrne & McWilliams, 1993), associated with an influential diaspora that monopolizes expertise, while participating in the formation of an elite bloc at the very top of the social hierarchy. In fact, in our case, it was school spirit that drove the consultants to return in their professional capacity to the classrooms they had attended as students, reflecting a 'diasporic game' with multiple sources of allegiance.

What emerges from our analysis is also the circularity of the identity-based relationship thereby established; it is not so much a question of management students considering consulting as their dream job, as management students personally manufacturing this dream of becoming consultants and returning a few years later as alumni to breathe new life into it. In this process both locals and outsiders are regulated. The 'professional, expert and individual identification' effectively acts to 'reduce the range of choice, making identity funneling compatible with career funneling (Binder et al., 2016).

Mosonyi, Empson, & Gond (2020) found that the interface between knowledge and identity is mostly theorized as knowledge being a resource for consultants' identity construction, having expertise that helps to build the identity of individuals and organizations. They label the knowledge-identity interface as *resourcing* interaction in a sense that one theme is a resource for the other; thus, 'knowledge is a resource for identity, as consultants and consulting firms define themselves based on their knowledge and identity is a resource for knowledge development' (Mosonyi et al., 2020). This is consistent with the idea that the construction of knowledge and skills are key resources for regulating identity in a corporate context as 'knowledge defines the knower: what one is capable of doing (or expected to be able to do) frames who one 'is'' (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Essentially, one role of consultants in the academic setting we explored is to regulate the students' identity in the form of behaviors or cognitive patterns which they should adopt and individual that they should be once in the firm and even before.

CONCLUSION

Starting from the premise that identities can be constructed through micro-social interactions with organizational 'others' and the fact that business schools are increasingly recognized as playing a decisive role in developing an understanding of consultants (Bourgoin & Stenger, 2020; Stenger, 2020), this paper aimed at examining consultants' identity regulation in the specific context of academia. Our findings highlight three mechanisms, each consisting in a set of interactions considered as the 'vehicles' of the consultant identity, that together produce an 'identity funneling effect' reducing the possibility of identification for students. The implication is that attempts at managing identity through education programmes can be seen as a key activity for third parties : 'others' regulate what we can do, how we might think and *who* we are authorized to become.

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