

Contradictions in qualitative management research

Consensus and dissensus perspectives on impression, identity and management work

Per Richard Hansen and Jens Dorland
*Department of Development and Planning, Aalborg University,
Copenhagen, Denmark*

Abstract

Purpose – Contradictory accounts in empirical material are often perceived as deliberate “lies” or “misleading deceptions” performed in acts of impression management, or they are simply neglected. When observed in the material collected empirically, methods have been developed in order to identify and remove them from the analytical work. The purpose of this paper is to re-visit and re-introduce a dissensus-based management research strategy in order to analytically be able to work with what appear to be contradictions and misinformation in qualitative research accounts, and give them a more profound role in the understanding of management ideas, work and practices.

Design/methodology/approach – A literature review is presented on consensus and dissensus orientated theories on contradictions and multiple and conflicting identities in a single individual in an ethnographic inquiry. The purpose is to analyse and reflect upon the contradictory information gathered, and how it can shed light upon important aspects of the management work and practices performed by the informant. This is done by focusing on apparent contradictions in a single interview situation from an ethnographic case study through, respectively a consensus and a dissensus perspective.

Findings – The findings indicate that dealing with contradictions and inner conflicts between self-view and external demands and conditions, led the informant to the production of multiple narrative self-identities imaging multiple realities that all appeared real to the informant. Each of these realities had different and contradictory impacts on the ideas and management work and practices he presented and performed in the organisation. These findings challenge the notions of “lies”, “deception” and “misinformation” in management research, and call for a more reflexive approach to analysis work in ethnographic accounts.

Originality/value – By applying consensus and dissensus-oriented theories to a single account the authors point to conditions, phenomena and relations, which most current and historic management research streams fail to see. Multiple and conflicting identities surface in a single respondent during an interview situation, creating clearly self-contradictory and conflicting narratives and practices, that all appear to be oblivious to the respondent. These multiple and contradictory narrative identities all have significant impact on the management work performed by the respondent.

Keywords Contradictions, Impression management, Qualitative research, Management research, Dissensus-oriented theories, Multiple identities

Paper type Research paper



Introduction

This paper represents an attempt to re-visit and re-introduce the dissensus perspective (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000; Deetz, 1996) into a management research study, in order to deliberately and reflexively (Alvesson and Sköldbörg, 2009) pay particular attention to the analytical value of what appear to be multiple accounts of contradictions and misinformation in the material collected empirically. A conventional consensus

analysis followed by a disruptive dissensus perspective is applied to the same single ethnographic account with a department manager of a knowledge intensive business service organisation. By analysing a single conversation in this manner, we seek to exemplify, challenge and broaden normative consensus-based assumptions about the collection and presentation of material collected empirically, and the attribution and meaning of “truth” and “deception” in interview accounts. Normative consensus-based studies have a tendency to support and reproduce prevailing discourses of management practices and ideas (Johnson *et al.*, 2006), and is often accused of being reductionist (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000). However, as Fontana and Frey (1994) stated more than two decades ago:

More recently, sociologists have come to grips with the reflexive, problematic, and, at times, contradictory nature of data and with the tremendous, if unspoken, influence of the researcher as an author – (p. 372).

Despite these early insights, we suspect that there is still a rather straight forward relation between how management ideas and work is being described and treated in the mainstream literature, and the way consensus-based studies are producing knowledge of it in general, and we find this to be problematic. More specifically there seem to be a lack of reflexive and critical analytical focus on accounts where contradictions, conceived as lies, deception or confusing misinformation are recognised in the collected material. Alvesson and Deetz (2000) speculate about this lack of attention when stating that:

Disdain directed at variation and confusion keeps the varied and confusing results from being embraced and explored for richer and more complex understanding – (p. 51).

To begin with, the bulk of studies we have come across usually explore contradictory statements between various sources, and hold them up against each other in order to eliminate the odd. Only very few look into contradictions within individuals’ accounts. An example is a 2004 paper on “doublethink”, El-Sawad (2004) arguing that:

Contradiction within individuals’ accounts is rarely of itself the feature of analytic interest, representing a missed opportunity to understand the significance of such accounts – (p. 1).

While answering these calls for a more open, interpretive and reflexive approach with a focus on a single account, our applied dissensus perspective dissociates this present study from most mainstream consensus-based studies in several ways. A consensus perspective assumes trust and hegemonic order, whereas the dissensus assumes suspicion and conflict as a natural state (Deetz, 1996; Alvesson and Deetz, 2000; Johnson *et al.*, 2006). Consensus-based research focus on mirror representation, and interviews and ethnographies are seen as tools or methods for “data collection” where the agent is autonomous and free, and the researcher anonymous and out of the picture. Science is seen as neutral, theory as abstraction and validity is a central concern. In a dissensus perspective research is focused on reconsideration, and an interview is conceived as a complex social situation affected by the people involved, the interview context, as well as the metaphors, vocabularies and discourses invoked by the researcher and the respondent. The research interview is, therefore, better viewed as the scene for a “conversation”, where the contents and outcomes are co-authored and reproduced in an interplay between the conversational parties consisting of a historically and socially situated agent, and a named and positioned researcher (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000, p. 72). From this perspective, our study suggests that what

at first glance appear to be contradictions, deceptions or lies presented by the informant, are for the most part the outcomes of co-authored multiple realities reproduced in the conversation. We argue that our respondent appears to be oblivious to the contradictory nature of the narratives he presents, and that he very likely believes in every one of the mutually exclusive realities he describes, as they all make sense to him in the various contexts he depicts. As such they all represent a storehouse of information, capable of enlightening the researcher in understanding the patchwork of complex, fragmented and often contradictory ideas and management work performed by him. Finally we discuss some of the implications that our findings have on how to gather, interpret and present material collected empirically.

Contradictions and confusing misinformation (studying lies, truth and the subjective)

In order to qualify our dissensus perspective and further demonstrate how it differs from its consensus counter, we will begin by elaborating upon the term “contradictions”, which we find defined by ways of deduction by Choi and Nisbett as occurring:

[...] when two pieces of information are inconsistent with each other in such a way that if one of them is true, the other is likely to be false – Choi and Nisbett (2000, p. 891 cited El-Sawad, 2004, p. 1182).

An interesting detail in this definition is that Choi and Nisbett does not consider the term “true” problematic in any way or form. However, another detail is the word “likely”, which leaves room for an abductive approach (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2009) where both pieces of information could in fact be “true”. Neyland (2008, p. 84) treats another part of the subject in discussing how to know if an informant is providing “misleading information”, saying that the only way is to draw multiple members in of any setting and not leave anyone as a “single voice”. Other consensus-oriented scholars perform various loosely coupled discussions on how to ensure “validity and reliability by triangulation” or other various “multiple view” case-study scenarios (LeCompte and Goetz (1982); Mill and Ogilvie (2003); Pawluch *et al.* (2005); Kvale (2008); Fetterman (2009); Yin (2009)). Common to these methods are the purpose of “uncovering deliberate acts of lying or misinforming” and to “validate correct information” in the interest of uncovering the “truth”. Interestingly, most of the debates are related to only short mentions of the philosophical nature of “truth”. Dingwall (1997, pp. 58-59) reasons that where such “truth” might usually be taken hostage, and contradictions in statements and practices might subsequently emerge, is when the respondent engage in what he labels “impression management” (see also Gardner, 1988; Leary and Kowalski, 1990; and later Bolino *et al.*, 2008; Merkl-Davies and Brennan, 2011 and Shih *et al.*, 2013), concerned with bringing the occasion off in a way that demonstrates his or her competence as a member of whatever community is invoked by the conversational topic.

Impression management

Impression management is an umbrella concept for many different paths of consensus-based social psychology research in interpersonal practices, and is defined by Leary and Kowalski (1990) as “the process by which people control the impressions others form of them”. Without adding much new or different Merkl-Davies and Brennan (2011) provides a more recent literature study on the subject, where they define it in similar terms as “studying how individuals present themselves to others to

be perceived favourably by others” (Merkl-Davies and Brennan, 2011, p. 2). These perspectives are mainly based on concepts of rationality and motivation theory where individuals are seen as manipulative, calculating and to some degree also deceitful. Leary and Kowalski (1990) is so far still the most interesting contribution to this discussion in defining two distinct processes, “impression motivation” and “impression construction” – the essence being that they are ongoing and recursive. Impression motivation is termed a function of three interrelated factors; “The goal-relevance of impressions”; “the value of desired outcomes”, and “the perceived discrepancy between one’s desired and current social image”. These three aspects of impression management motivation are interrelated as they all assumingly affect “self-esteem”, the attainment of “desired outcomes”, or the development of “desired identities”. At the same time Leary and Kowalski (1990) describe the motivational work as strategic and deliberate acts of manipulation, or “impression construction”, which is defined by five factors:

- (1) “Self-concept”, which is how people see themselves – their self-identity, where: “the images people try to project are often consistent with how they see themselves. In fact, people may impression-manage to ensure that others accurately perceive them” – (Leary and Kowalski, 1990, p. 40).
- (2) “Desired identity” or “desirable identity image” described as “what a person would like to be and thinks he or she really can be, at least at his or her best” (see also Schlenker, 1985).
- (3) “Role constraints” stemming from the expectations of the social roles individuals occupy, requiring them to appear in certain ways – like certain types of professions (see also Ruane *et al.*, 1994, and Hunt and Manning, 1991, on real estate managers and police lies).
- (4) “Target values” meaning that people tailor their public images to the perceived values of significant actors (Mori *et al.*, 1987).
- (5) “Current or potential social image” as how actors think other actors might perceive them now, and in the future.

Seen from our applied dissensus perspective these assumptions do not appear unproblematic and we do consider the whole concept of IM to have certain issues. One apparent issue is that deliberate acts of IM would require a person to have a rather well-informed idea of what other people know or might know of them, and at the same time be conscious of the image they intend to project in often very complex and ambiguous social settings. It is likely, that in most cases this would be left to prejudice and assumptions based on guessing on the part of the informant. Another issue would be that an individual is hardly capable of evaluating their own social goals; of picturing their own social image, or foresee desired outcomes of their impression management work on an often unclear or undefined desired social image. To have a clear idea of the image or identity one intends to project in any social setting seem a complex and somewhat unattainable task, as it would require a rather comprehensive insight into and understanding of their multiple and ambiguous character. A third problem seems to emerge when a complex surrounding society denies accepting or recognising the images projected. Finally, recent research in identity and self-identity work (see e.g. Hammack, 2008; Alvesson, 2010 and McAdams and McLean, 2013) suggests that the question “who am I?” is somewhat harder to answer than first assumed by the

consensus based frameworks, which suggest that to even be able to project an image of oneself is equally difficult. We hence consider managing a single central identity, and developing and applying deliberate strategies for how to present it in advantageous ways to be, if not unattainable then, at least quite difficult, and many contradictory interview statements most likely originates from this.

Self-presentation, self-deception and doublethink

In an attempt to qualify this debate, symbolic interactionism (SI) represents a more anthropological take on the subjects. In recent works Scott (2012) uses SI to discuss the consequences of deception and impression management in daily life:

Symbolic interactionism shifts our attention away from actors' intentionality to the consequences of deception, as a social act that lies outside the realm of ethical debate – Scott (2012).

Scott's (2012) overall contribution to the discussion is pointing to the difference in deception depending on the level of intimacy of the actors. She concludes that as social relations become closer, deception become more emotionally charged and risky. This further leads to the question of the ultimate deception "self-deception" where the actor is assumed to operate on different levels of consciousness (Scott, 2012). An example of what might resemble self-deception could be the single individuals' accounts analysed in El-Sawad (2004) article on "doublethink". "Doublethink" is here defined as:

When one individual holds simultaneously two or more conflicting beliefs – El-Sawad (2004).

In a consensus perspective this would initially be considered unlikely, since according to Choi and Nisbett (2000, p. 891 cited El-Sawad, 2004, p. 1182) if one is "true", the other would be considered contradictory or "false", and hence be an act of "deliberate self-deception". According to Meltzer (2003) the notion of such "deliberate self-deception" is to be considered "nonsense". The actor, Meltzer claims, would have to take the role of the other to understand their perception in order to mislead them, which "is impossible to do to the self" (Meltzer, 2003, p. 70). However, while seeking to explain why their respondents perform "doublethink" El-Sawad (2004, p. 1199) keeps the door to self-deception open by instead pointing to several elements in their research implying that "although doublethink is not conscious, it is in some way intentional, or at least performed to fulfil a goal".

Multiple dialogical constructions of narrative self-identities

In recent contributions to identity work within psychology McAdams and McLean (2013) argue that we discover what is "true" and "meaningful" in our lives and in ourselves through the creation and telling of personal myths:

Through narrative identity, people convey to themselves and to others who they are now, how they came to be, and where they think their lives may be going in the future – (McAdams and McLean, 2013, p. 233).

They argue that people's stories not only say something about how they see the world around them, and how they believe they fit in, but also how they would like to fit in. Over time, we develop and revise our stories and open up new possibilities for our lives. Identity is no longer static, but fluid and under process. This narrative theory approach sees the ongoing and fluid creation of a single narrative self-identity as a central stabilising dimension in identity work. But as we have already argued, an interesting

characteristic of dissensus studies on identity work in general, is that of the individual not being conceived as having a single or central subjectivity or identity based on static perceptions, emotions, thoughts and conscious actions. Instead emphasis is shifted towards the linguistic and discursive context in which the subject is constructed:

Consensus orientations apply role and identity classifications and relate them to other variables; dissensus orientations see identity as multiple, conflictual, and in process – Deetz (1996, p. 198).

Another example of contradictions in a single account of management work and ideas is a study by Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) where the emergence and identification of multiple managerial identities appear to play a central role when multiple contradictory statements occurred in:

[...] a process in which individuals create more or less contradictory and often changing managerial identities (identity positions) rather than one stable, continuous and secure, manager identity – (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003, p. 1165).

According to Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) these multiple narratives and identities have many layers – some of them so deep that they are very hard to reach – and influence – which is probably that, which make some people appear more stable than others. In a literature review leading to a framework built on a metaphorical outset, Alvesson (2010) later identifies seven images on identity, and relates them to different typologies and paradigm distinction within identity research study traditions. Among the seven, two of these are related to our dissensus perspective: the “Struggler” and the “Surfer” (Alvesson, 2010, p. 199). The “Struggler” is characterised by dealing with contradictions and conflicts between a self-view and external often conflicting demands and conditions, whereas the “Surfer” is responding to a complex and multi-discursive world driving the individual between different subject positions leading to fragmentation and fluidity. In these readings, our perceptions and identities are multiple, layered, selectable, alternate and somehow changeable over time. Two other interesting images are the narrative “Storyteller” and the subordinated “Soldier”. The “Storyteller” is based on McAdams and McLean’s narrative framework and characterised by an individual who is seeking to create meaning through crafting a personal narrative, to some extent with the purpose of creating order and direction in life. In contrast, and while under pressure, the “Soldier” is more superficially responding to the availability of (attractive) social categories used for social and organisational identification and affiliation, by subordinating himself to a greater whole. As we will later show, the first two images in many ways reflect and explain the many contradictory statements from our respondent manager, whereas the latter two candidates as consensus-based explanations. In the dissensus understanding identities are multiple and potentially contradictory from the outset; contradictions which the individual is unable to realise or comprehend in the situation or simply do not see as such. Identity construction work hence becomes a continuous “process of becoming” rather than “being” a well-defined structure as suggested by Leary and Kowalski (1990) and Meltzer (2003), etc. This process depends heavily upon contemporary language, immediate representation and discursive contexts. Subjectivity or identity becomes a phenomenon that is – at least in part – limited in both time and space – very often defined by the limitations of social structures and material conditions in which the discourses are developed (Alvesson and Sköldböck, 2009, p. 164). Presenting an appropriate self hence becomes a process in which a struggle takes place between

different, dominant and underlying discourses and layers of “narrative self-identity constructions” and “identity metaphors”. Sometimes we tell others who we believe we are, but more often we tell ourselves, and then try to act as if we are who we say we are. This leads analytical attention away from analysing statements as directed towards others, and instead focus is on statements as directed towards the self. Within this process of identity-formation it is possible to find layers of fragmentation – often in the shape of complete ambiguity. In case different conflicting narratives consciously collide, it possibly creates tension and instability, which again can have implications on identity and reality constructions. In that case an alternative, perhaps even oppositional and immediately invoked “narrative self-identity” becomes a possible stabilising element – or image – which is potentially capable of reducing temporary and long-term insecurities and ambiguities, as well as tension and struggle in the person. Here it also might be of use to similarly seek to identify not only what is “me” but what is “not me”. This might, in the case of resistance, envy or perhaps even outspoken frustration, result in “anti-identity-work” or “dis-identification” as noted by Elsbach (1999). Here the respondent seeks to build an identity by reflecting upon how they do not see themselves, based on the premise that “If this is not me, then the opposite, or what is left, must be”.

Implications on the study

Arriving from this dialogical and somewhat poststructuralist stance we further bring into question the ontological and epistemological nature of “truth” and “deception” in qualitative studies, as well as the term “contradictions”. While applying a subjectivist view on ontology and epistemology, i.e. language (see Deetz, 1996; Johnson *et al.*, 2006) we largely subscribe to a slightly moderated but overall affirmative subjectivist stance, where “reality” becomes an outcome of the discursive practices employed in the conversation, and where discourses partially also actively create and naturalise objects and phenomena:

The result is that knowledge, truth and reality become construed as precarious linguistic constructs potentially open to constant revision but which are often stabilised through scientists’, and other actors’, performative ability – (Lyotard, 1984 cited in Johnson *et al.*, 2006, p. 144).

“Truth” and representation is in other words a temporarily stabilised construct more or less obliviously applied by the respondent, and ultimately by the researcher as conversational co-producer, as well as editorial author. And since we do acknowledge some sort of transcendental realism, where an independent and inter-subjectively shared “reality” is maintained through the employment of shared metaphors (see for instance Morgan, 1997), even this study cannot completely avoid falling into this analytical trap. Studying an organisational setting long-term and in depth could potentially lead the researcher into adopting and incorporating organisational discourses and “realities” as informed and taken for granted shared metaphors. In a pure dissensus perspective, these shared metaphors are overall considered suppressive, elite conceptions taking precedence over intimate individual constructs, ultimately leading the conversational parties into particular interpretations and presuppositions. In other words, it is our intention to reproduce our dissensus analysis:

[...] in a deconstructive process whereby elite conceptions are unmasked to allow organizational activities to be given multiple and conflicting descriptions within particular sites – (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000, p. 28).

This further implies that “contradictions” are only recognisable as such when studied from a consensus perspective, whereas the dissensus perspective will see them as

naturally occurring accounts of multiple and ambiguous realities. For the sake of the example, we will therefor begin our analysis by identifying what appear to be contradictory impression constructions in a consensus perspective, and subsequently analyse them in a dissensus perspective as outcomes of multiple narrative self-identities reproduced in the conversation with our respondent “Manager”.

The study

The following single conversation with our respondent “Manager” has been selected from out of a study performed in one of the big 5 internet consultancies emerging in the late 1990s, here labelled “e-buzz”. The study is part of a PhD thesis on “knowledge, professionalism and identity regulation in knowledge intensive work” (Hansen, 2007) at the Danish Technical University. The general purpose of the PhD is to generate knowledge about the conditions for the creation and reproduction of professional identities in a novel knowledge intensive environment characterised by an intense competition among many different professions claiming to collaborate in a unique organisational setting. The study took place over a period of four years, from the beginning of 2001 till late 2004, and was mainly conducted as a full-time observant participation (Czarniawska, 1998) period of seven weeks duration in the spring of 2001. In this period, the main author of this paper took part in developing internet homepages, visiting clients and taking part in sales pitches, as well as participating in internal meetings and regular daily activities. Additionally, 37 open-ended qualitative interviews were performed on 29 different members of the organisation, and they were followed up by 11 exit-interviews in the period of 2002-2004. The observations were recorded in a daily diary, as well as in audio and video clippings, and the interviews were all fully transcribed and analysed. Before, during and after the study a large cache of internal documents, manuals, descriptions and newspaper clippings were collected and analysed, all in the spirit of triangulation. All collection, documentation, transcription and analysis work was performed by the main author, who at the time was a 30-year-old male PhD student with a short professional background in engineering and management consulting. The conversation from which the following excerpts have been taken was held in the morning in the attic of the office building of e-buzz. The attic was arranged as a cosy lounge with living room furniture and shelves decorated with books, vases and lamps. The area was closed and intimate, and during the entire conversation there were no interruptions other than background office noises, and no one else was present. In our reading of “Manager”, in this neutral environment that may encourage people to talk more freely (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 1991), we will emphasise on explaining and relating the multiple readings of his statements and the images and realities he presents to the researcher, to the observations and other statements and data cache information collected during the study. The purpose is to show how what appear to be confusing, contradictory or misleading information provided by manager not only all makes sense to him but also leads to important insights into, and make sense of, the apparent ambiguous and self-contradictory management work and practices he performed in the organisation. e-buzz was at the time of the main study in 2001 in economic turmoil and further troubled by decreasing sales, an unsuccessful merger with a larger bureaucratically organised IT company “Whitecollar”, and from long periods with absence of leadership. This allowed for the escalation of internal competitive politics, which eventually led to its downfall and hostile takeover in 2004. As will become evident, some of managers contradictory ideas and actions carried forward by his multiple narrative self-identities, in many ways promoted this development, despite his best intentions.

Manager

At the time of the study manager was a 42-year-old male with a decade long career in top business consulting. When listening to the conversation and critically analysing him, one thing we notice is that despite that he had, what appeared to be, an impressive career and now held a managing position in an upbeat e-business consultancy, his whole life bore the impression of a line of quits, setbacks and personal defeats. His career began very early with his childhood dream of studying medicine, which he failed because he could not keep up the enthusiasm and motivation in high school, and thus did not achieve the grades to enter med-school. Instead, he went to business school where he during his studies used his father's connections in the consultancy business to get a job with McKinsey, and more or less dropped out of school. After seven years of "recruitment period" with McKinsey, he apparently quit his job – a decision which he seemed to have regretted ever since:

It was really an exciting job, and sometimes I think to myself, dammit I should have stayed [...] I mean, It was a really tough decision you know, because shit, this is where I liked to be. For 3-4 months I was really down. What the hell was I going to do now? – Manager.

After McKinsey he went through various middle manager and consultancy jobs for a couple of years, all for which he felt "headhunted", and ended up spending two years with Andersen Consulting. He then made a phone call to one of his former Andersen colleagues, who in the meantime had switched to e-buzz a few months earlier, and was "accidentally looking for more qualified employees". In that conversation he was "talked into meeting 'Director'" the CEO of e-buzz. It took "Director" "about one minute" to convince him to start working for him. Despite the fact that director was a salesperson, selling both e-business solutions, as well as job positions in e-buzz, and actually never asked potential employees for their qualifications, manager again felt "headhunted". When he was hired, it was originally as a traditional strategy consultant, and as such he felt that he was fitting right in. At the same time he expressed that he was drawn in by "the young and dynamic environment", which stood in contrast to the "old and dusty consultancies". Manager was later internally promoted, and was now performing the role of one of four business team managers (BTMs) ranking just below managing director. This role included personnel responsibility, as well as being main responsible for the sales of his team's services and planning of the project work. Most likely due to the lack of interest in his employees credentials, as well as the completely failing merger with "Whitecollar", the CEO, director, "had to leave" the company a few months later, leaving the position open. As manager put it:

I don't remember what story we put in the papers about his exit, but of course we couldn't tell the truth – Manager.

At the time, director was very much acting as the father figure for every employee in the organisation, and most people there felt secure and confident enough to work under his wings. As manager put it:

Director was very charismatic, and basically carried the culture here. Most people just worked for him really. It actually became very complicated when he left. Daddy was suddenly gone – Manager.

Shortly after, all four BTM's, including manager, applied for the now vacant position. None of them were found qualified. Being the first time he was turned down so clearly manager's reaction was muted and somehow embossed while reflecting upon that

“we were all weighed and found too light”. Still, without an acting CEO, all BTMs saw the overall division in teams as a means and a right to follow their own individual strategy and ways of organising, and they were actively building their own businesses while stealing customers and skilled employees away from each other:

It’s actually only a fraction of the people employed here, who really knows what it means to run a business, and that’s basically us [...] the business team managers. And how the hell should the rest of the employees know. They have never learned it – Manager.

Due to the fact that manager was spending most of his time out of house with clients, the projects in his team back at the office were for the most part managed by junior project managers, which often resulted in problems. Manager found that this development required some kind of leveraging system similar to the one in the consultancy businesses, and for this to happen he had built up and actively promoted a career ladder system in six steps from “Analyst” and up to his own position as “Engagement Manager” and BTM. Although the programme, as well as the rest of his management style, had found its supporters in global management, it was creating growing frustration and tension locally among the other BTMs, who publically rephrased it as a threat to their autonomy:

We all have very different profiles, and we run our teams very differently. We’re not ready for a ten-tier career model with 12 levels of professional development in 27 categories – BTM colleague.

This effect was imposed on the other professions as well, since it was actively escalating the conflicts between general management and production, as well as between the different occupational and production tracks. As one of the leading creative employees put it:

The other day one of our team leaders (Manager) was in the news calling us a consultancy house. That’s just not how we creatives see ourselves. It just doesn’t match the spirit in which we conceive and understand what we are and do. We are not consultants. We are human beings – Senior Copywriter.

Shortly after the conversation, a new CEO was found and hired, and eventually, only a few months later, manager decided to quit his job and leave e-buzz. After his departure, his entire team was dissolved and more than half the employees in the company were laid off. As a consequence of the ongoing bad economic performance and organisational turmoil, the management track was eventually shut down completely, leaving the conflicts between the remaining occupational tracks to continue and escalate until they eventually seized to collaborate entirely.

A consensus perspective on manager

When listening to manager telling his story, and while reading it from a consensus-based impression construction perspective (Leary and Kowalski, 1990), we are able to identify several accounts of apparent contradictions in his statements in the conversation, and in the observed practices he performed. Contradictions are here identified either by two or more statements in discrepancy; statements contradicting observed actions that are logically mutually exclusive, or by comparing to other sources disputing the statements. In the following, we have chosen to present three such accounts of contradictions, although there were many more.

“A hard working professional” or “an attending family man”?

The first contradiction we present is the account where manager is talking about his former career with McKinsey, and the schooling he obviously takes great pride in

having received there. In this account it becomes very unclear whether he is as a hard working professional or a caring and attending family man, when he states that:

Manager (14.40): It's an up or out environment and that's good and bad. You build a different threshold for what is what. Working for McKinsey changes you as a person. To work hard comes natural to me. There are lots of people here who would get sick if they had to work for more than 30 hours a week. Working hard to me means working more than 80 hours a week.

In this account he implies that he is a changed person. He is not like the rest. He works hard unlike many others in e-buzz, and the narrative seems to reside with and is actively reproduced among his team employees:

Manager Team employee: He really seems like a guy who is in control of it all, and willing to work 80 hours a week to make it all happen.

Minutes later, as he lays out his life story, he paints a very different and contradictory picture about his ethics and capacity for work, while responding to the inquiries into why he eventually decided to quit and leave McKinsey:

Manager (18.30): It was 3 nights away every week and an average workweek of 60-70 hours for 6 years I believe [...] and when I went to the states I ran into a project that was sold wrong and it was a huge challenge. I ended up working more than 100 hours a week in the first 6 months.

PRH (18.55): "Until you burned out?" – Manager (18.59): "Yes, actually." – PRH (19.02): "Do you know your children?"

Manager (19.06): [...] Well [...] so we eventually went home, and when I came to my senses I said to myself, that's no good at all. I just simply do not want to be bothered working that many hours, and not have the time for a real life, and not see my wife and not see my kids and so on. I mean. You can live for so and so long on the McKinsey lie.

Applying an impression construction approach (Leary and Kowalski, 1990) to his first statement about his high working hours it seem to resemble an attempt by manager to invoke it as a pre-constructed "desirable identity image" related to his prestigious positions in the consultancy business; as a professional who is trained to work hard. In this reading it could be seen as his attempt to impress the researcher. In addition, he seems successful in convincing his employees about its legitimacy, despite the fact that he was hardly ever present. However, as the story advances discrepancies appear as he claims that he "cannot be bothered working that many hours". In this reading manager appears to draw on various motivational strategies by incorporating the "desired social image" of the contemporary politically correct choice of "family over work", as he is restricted by the "target values" and "role constraints" induced by the researcher when implicitly questioning his relation to his wife and child. The switch between roles seems to appear when he changes his vocabulary from "I went to the states" to "we eventually went home"; thus including his family. Although we are left with the impression that he is hard working, it remains unclear whether he is in fact working hard, or if he is even willing to do so. And since he was more or less always out of house, it was difficult to observe. It is therefore also difficult to point to any unambiguous "self-concept" as described by (Leary and Kowalski, 1990, p. 40), since the way he "accurately sees himself" is clearly inconsistent.

"A selfless friend of the people" or "a headhunted intolerable self-important careerist"?
The second consensus reading contradiction we come across is how manager puts distance between himself and his former colleagues in McKinsey and Andersen by describing himself as "normal" and "friend of the people" against what he labels

“the intolerable self-important careerist management consultants”, while clearly emphasising his own career path as a headhunted specialist at the same time. Referring to his career path and the reasons for his choices he replied rather straight forward when reflecting upon his identity image as a former McKinsey product:

PRH (21.48): But did you have sort of like a [...] you know, like pilots. Pilots only socialise with other pilots [...].

Manager (22:00): I believe that it’s been sort of like that in that organization. I have in some way or another from the very beginning been different. Many of these arrogant self-absorbed consultants, I just couldn’t really stand them you know. Most of what they sell is just theoretical bullshit, really. I felt I was different from them. But on the other hand, the support staff, I was on really good terms with and I am still in contact with some of them.

While avoiding referring to the ways in which he felt different, these reflections eventually steered his career path towards what he labelled line-management positions in “normal companies”. It further linked his understanding of the consultants with a lack of leadership and caring for the greater good of every employee in favour of the benefit of personal career and promotion opportunities. Having stated this, he then continues with referring to the many times he felt headhunted, and of how successful he was with choosing career and promotion opportunities over staying to the bitter end and finishing the tasks he was hired to do:

Manager (22:50): Then I sought a job in Communications, so I came out in a management job with a staff of 40 employees. I was involved in some post-merger thing. However, the company was ailing pretty badly. So after about a year I was headhunted for a job in Super where I also had an interview the year before, and I would really like to work there when I left McKinsey. I was there for two years in corporate management, and after those two years Super was on one hand turning around a bit, on the other it was not as fun anymore. It was a bit tight in relation to the roles and positions you could develop into. In that respect I have always liked the career ladder system in the consultancy business, and when some of my former McKinsey colleagues called me from Andersen Consulting [...] they had offered me a job a year after I left McKinsey, and the year after, and then 3 years later they finally got me.

As it turned out, manager apparently was still in contact and on good terms with the “arrogant and self-absorbed” former colleagues from McKinsey, and they land him a new job back into the career ladder. Still things did not turn out quite as expected, or perhaps even so:

Manager (25.25): There was this big conflict inside Andersen. Everybody ran around thinking they were better than everyone else. There was no collaboration at all between departments either. And all the talks about a different lifestyle [...] it just never happened. I wrote a 5 page memo on it. Very diligently prepared.

So after having “barely escaped an Andersen doing the same things to my personal life” he went through ten job interviews with Boston Consulting Group “in order to make sure I didn’t end up in another McKinsey”. Instead he ended up turning that offer down and eventually took the job with e-buzz, where he felt that he fit right in:

Manager (55.40): It’s quite difficult for e-buzz to sell strategy consulting because it’s just not credible. The original management consultants working here, they just weren’t good enough. They could only be sold if I took them out with me. What we need are engagement manager types like me who can get in and sell projects and guide project solutions with respect for the existing strategy. Like the partners in McKinsey who does the fun part. And then you have a bunch of analysts who does the hard work documenting that what you say is right.

While reflecting upon the apparent contradictions in his self-image, actions and ideas of his management role and responsibilities in e-buzz, the consensus perspective would first point to the “role constraints” stemming from his position as BTM, having to care for his employees and the team work in the company management. The strategy to achieve stability and meeting the “target values” becomes one of badmouthing his former consultancy colleagues, while he adheres to the “selfless friend of the people” image by picturing himself as the “good consultant” attempting to reform the “non-collaborators”. At the same time he invokes the prestigious consultancy world and the clear-cut career paths as the ideal, even though his short-lived stint in Andersen showed yet again that he did not fit in. He was consistently an “out” and very well aware of it. As an alternative he makes what appears to be an attempt to impress with his collective career path, which appear successful and on the right track, as he describes himself as being “headhunted” for every job he ever had. Again we are left with very little clue of his “true” “self-concept”, as all of these portrays seem more like “desirable identity images” than anything else, which further seems to be in line with the relatively inconsistent career choices he has made.

“Revolutionary adhocratic rebels” or “untenable shambles”?

The last contradiction we present here is Managers praise of the “young and dynamic rebellious nature” of e-buzz while he simultaneously tries to stifle what he labels the “untenable shambles” by his attempts to bureaucratise the organisation with his leveraging system. On several occasions during the conversation he was making an effort out of stating that he was conspicuously fascinated by the internet revolution and the flat adhocratic project organisation of e-buzz, which to him illustrated the sort of collaboration he felt was lacking in his previous consultancy positions:

Manager (10.01): This place is 17 puzzles which are to be put together in one big mosaic. And then of course, it’s a rebellious place [...] e-buzz [...] and it should be. I haven’t even built up my wardrobe for it yet. I have more than 20 suits in my closet, but I still only have one pair of jeans to wear to work.

He was further actively promoting this adhocratic project management model as a key selling point to his customers when observed at client sales meetings. However, his praise of the “collaborative advantages” seemed to have fainted later in the conversation, when talking about the merger management failings of the previous CEO and the reasons why director initially had to leave the company:

Manager (35.10): That rebel attitude that used to be here, it clearly doesn’t exist any longer. It’s like with the one man business. After a few years they become something more and bigger. Director was good at making small things grow. But now that we are a big organisation and has to be run like one, it wasn’t really him anymore.

And then, only minutes later, when talking about the differences between the IT company “Whitecollar” and “e-buzz”, and why the merger between the two organisations eventually completely failed, he returned to his previous impression construction by again praising the flat reputation-based adhocracy of e-buzz:

Manager (38.00): The conflict between Whitecollar and e-buzz was quite deep and far reaching actually. e-buzz was this sort of rebel company. Well hell, it still is, and I think that it should be like that still [...] While Whitecollar was more like the paid-by-the-hour-working-at-the-client-consultancy kind of thing. Culture wise it is two extremely different organisations, and they are both very very sensitive.

While describing e-buzz as “very sensitive” in relation to the wrongdoings from the disposure of the bureaucratic paid-by-the-hour consultancy culture of Whitecollar, his plans for the future appeared as radical as they were disruptive. Spending the better part of the last 30 minutes of the conversation explaining his plans for the organisation, he saved his final switch back to the need for bureaucracy for last, as he suddenly cried out:

Manager (01.20.10): Now the expressed hierarchy from the consultancy business will be implemented all over, and only because I say so. I am not the one deciding this, but I am doing it because it is the only thing that works. That other thing is just untenable shambles.

These four excerpts, with manager waving forth and back between contradictory “impression constructions”, clearly illustrate disparate accounts of his appraisal of the adhoc nature of e-buzz, and the way he felt it should be managed. In the first excerpt manager embraces the “rebellious attitude” as a “desirable identity image”. Suddenly he is wearing jeans and he feels like he is fitting in. Later he seems prohibited by the “role constraints” and “target values” of his manager role when claiming that the rebellious attitude is dead, and that it does not belong in a matured and sizeable company. Bureaucracy is the answer, and if it was not for the jeans and the whole job sector change thing, the impression construction perspective would argue that this would be his “self-concept”. Still, we are left in serious doubts about which organisational configuration manager actually prefers, and which understanding he has when taking management decisions in it, as he is selectively albeit vividly subscribing to both.

A dissensus perspective on manager

In order to shed a different light on the ideas and actions of Manager, we now turn to our dissensus perspective and take a dialogic identity approach to our reading of him. Initially we have identified, and in our authorship powered position labelled, at least four different “identity metaphors” reproduced in “narrative self-identities” emerging in the various existing and constructed discursive contexts invoked by the conversation, but also in part as an output of our analytical work. Like the “Surfer” this multitude of discourses seems to drive manager between different subject positions. The first narrative self-identity manager reproduces leads to the identity metaphor of “The McKinsey Soldier”; in part building on the pride he is taking in his past career and hence resembling the “Soldier” image (Alvesson, 2010) responding to and affiliating him with an available attractive social category, but more likely as a “Struggler” dealing with conflicting demands and challenges. Later, the conversation leads us into two related identity metaphors: “The Family Man” and the “New-born Rebel”; in part reproduced in order to put his “Struggler” mind at ease for having left the consultancy world and shift to e-buzz, and in part in a ‘Storyteller’s attempt to create a new order in his life. Finally he presents a relatively newly constructed narrative self-identity based on an identity metaphor that we label “The Patriarch” – again in part as an answer to the challenges he is currently facing as a middle manager in e-buzz. We will now take a closer look at these identity metaphors, and their related discourses and narrative self-identities, and link them further to his management work.

The McKinsey soldier

“The McKinsey Soldier” identity metaphor is very likely developed and revised over time as part of his previous work-life identity brought into e-buzz, and from there it is being reproduced and further developed into several contexts during the conversation. Here it seems to serve him several purposes for his identity work, where it obviously

fills him with pride and self-esteem, as well as creating an authoritative platform for his daily management tasks. The conversational topics leading to the emergence of this narrative self-identity are more or less invoked by the researcher, but manager willingly sponsors it by taking over the agenda, and begins explaining his life story without taking notice of the initiating questions – perhaps also triggered by his impression that the researcher is coming from a similar consultancy background, and hence will somehow respond to the informed discourses, vocabulary and metaphors. In the beginning, the conversation is primarily focused on his previous occupations, and the reasons why he ended up in e-buzz. In this discursive context he proudly presents his past in the prestigious consultancies, and his self-image of having been headhunted for every position he held thereafter. First of all this seem to allow him to dis-identify him from his “lazy, unorganised and unskilled employees” thereby creating an example of what he prefers them to be like, but also to justify and strengthen his self-image of now being at the top of the hierarchy. He later reproduces it as one of the main reasons why he is now holding and performing the “partner” position, which he is vividly seeking to consolidate with his new career ladder system. Paradoxically this also implies, that combined with his narrative of being hard working, he somewhat justifies that he actually does not have to work that hard anymore – as he also claims that he already served his full time as a recruit foot-soldier, and now feel inclined to promote himself to partner, so that he does not have go beyond “doing the fun part”. Overall this allows him to identify himself with the other three BTMs, who are from similar backgrounds, which seem to enable him to enact on equal terms and compete with them, in general management as well as in the decisions and actions it allows him to take on behalf of his own team. Finally, without a CEO present, he sees it as a way to gain access to the decision makers on an international level, providing him with what in the end appear to be an overly amount of self-confidence and opportunity to promote his ideas for the organisation.

The family man

While reflecting upon his career path the first cracks in “The McKinsey Soldier” occurs when he openly admits that he is an “out” instead of his preferred “up”. In order to compensate for this loss of respect and self-esteem, and also further triggered by the researcher implying that he was perhaps neglecting his family, manager presents a second narrative self-identity “The Family Man”. The core of this narrative self-identity work most likely takes its origin in when manager in social situations or in job interviews had to explain what could otherwise only be seen as a dent in his career track. His emphasis on the many job interviews he had with Boston, in order to avoid “another McKinsey” with “long working hours and countless travel days”, as well as his rather intense anti-identity work seeking to distance him from his former “self-absorbed and pompous” consultancy colleagues, seems to support this assumption, and makes it appear as a “McKinsey Soldier” anti-identity as well. “The Family Man” is likely inspired by contemporary societal discourses of a socially accepted image of a caring and present father and spouse, again imaging him as the “Soldier” seeking to subordinate and affiliate himself with an attractive social category. But it is also likely an outcome of the “Surfer” as it was further promoted by a local competing discourse residing among the remaining BTMs, who were all performing this same sort of anti-consultancy identity work. In this new context the “Storyteller” further allowed him to reproduce additional elements into it, which seemed to have the effect of putting his mind at ease with his alternative choice of a less prestigious career path, and subsequently allowed him to move on with his life by accepting the job at e-buzz. In that context, his ideas and actions based on this reasoning made perfect sense to him.

A new-born rebel

Perhaps in order to further argue for his somewhat odd or deviant choice of career path, and make him fit into e-buzz, but also to strengthen “The Family Man” construction, manager at some point authors and reproduce a third narrative self-identity characterising him as “A New-born Rebel”. Again the self-identity turns out to be quite complex and relate to several competing discourses in his historic and present contexts. Arguably, “The McKinsey Soldier” is left somewhat flayed at the edges, in part as an outcome of the progress of the conversation demonstrating his intense anti-consultancy identity work, but also due to his ongoing stigma as an “out”. It appears to have left him without any clear cut or defining work identity and sense of direction in his management work. Claiming that he is inherently fascinated by this new and “rebellious” organisation, which indulges him to renew his entire wardrobe and allow him to wear jeans to work, this narrative self-identity could therefor also be interpreted as an attempt to narrate an entirely new work identity, which would further dis-identify him from the “bureaucratic and dusty consultancies” he came from. At the time of the study, employees in the internet consultancies were in general assuming close to rock-star status in the media, and there was a widespread assumption in the consultancy industry, that they would eventually take over the entire business, which was so far dominated by the traditional “big five” consultancy houses. It is reasonable to assume that manager would like to embrace this status by continuing his career in this new and alternative approach to his profession. This would further explain why he actively presents the “rebel” discourse as a sales argument in his pitches to potential clients. However, as the reputation of the industry turns to the worse in the light of the financial crisis, his identification with this self-image tend to faint. It is therefore fair to assume that what manager is reproducing in the conversation, is his struggle with the remnants of a once dominant narrative self-identity based on an affiliation to the highly prestigious McKinsey.

The Patriarch

As part of a respond to his new responsibilities in his role as a team leader, but also to the internal conflicting demands and challenges he is facing in his attempt to gain the upper hand over his colleague BTMs, manager constructs and continuously reproduce yet another new narrative self-identity, picturing him as the patriarchal fatherly figure tending to his children, the immature employees. “The Patriarch” appears to find its roots in his former positions as middle manager, and is further reproduced into his criticism of his former consultancy colleagues, and the way e-buzz is managed in general. It first appears when he is talking about his unsuccessful attempt to become the new CEO. To that extent, it figures more as some kind of anti-identity. Several times manager claims that he is different. He is different than his former consultancy colleagues, he is different than his current BTM colleagues, and he is different than the lazy employees he is now managing. He is different than e-buzz International, who turned down his application. Later it re-emerges several times, and is mostly developed and linked into parts of a legitimization of the bureaucratisation he performs on the problems he believes he is currently facing. In Managers self-image, he is one of the only people in e-buzz who is able to “run a business” and “serve the clients respectfully”. Implementing his bureaucratic career ladder is in that respect also a way of showing global management that he is the new “Director” who “knows best”, and that it was a mistake to surpass him as new CEO. In order to strengthen his belief that he knows best, “The Patriarch” helps him to stay in opposition to the negative

connotations tied to “The McKinsey Soldier”, and his inability to cope with rebelliousness. In essence “The Patriarch” could also be seen as a means to attain new opportunities in his work life, and perhaps prepare his exit from e-buzz.

Reflections

Reflecting upon our dissensus analysis of Managers multiple narrative self-identities, it could be argued that “The McKinsey Soldier” somewhat appears to reside deeper in his identity layers, and that the other narrative self-identities grow out as more or less anti-identities in opposition to different parts of it. However, these identity metaphors appear both much too ambiguous and interrelated at the same time, and his anti-identity work directed towards “The McKinsey Soldier” appear equally much too heartfelt for it to be ignored or downplayed in favour of a more deliberate or consistent consensus-based research finding. “The Family Man” stands more or less in direct opposition to “The McKinsey Soldier”, yet it also helps him to restore his self-image as a responsible and confident professional, with sufficient insight into his own abilities to be able to admit to his shortcomings. And whereas his embracement of the “New-born Rebel” distanced him from the hierarchical consultancy world, of which he continuously claimed he did not want to be part of any longer, it simultaneously created a new opportunity for him to credibly perform his preferred consultancy activities in this, his new context and reality. Lastly, despite the fact that it distances him even further from his superficial and self-centred consultancy background, and provide him with a matured and pragmatic leader self-image, “The Patriarch” in practice builds a meritocratic career ladder monument in its honour. In a consensus analysis this might point to that his McKinsey consultancy background appears to be his actual “self-concept”, and the remaining his “desirable identity images” presented at different convenient times during the conversation, in order to serve his impression management work directed towards the researcher. It is, however, uncertain that manager would in fact gain anything from such intense and consistent impression work upon an outsider, who has no real impact on his reality. Based on our collective analysis it appears very unlikely that this was his intention.

Conclusions and implications on future research

Advised by challenges identified in our search for literature on our topic, and by our own curiosity, we have in this present study deliberately paid particular analytical attention to what appear to be multiple contradicting or confusing statements in a single individuals’ account. Our initial interest is based on the assumption that what is usually discarded in the analysis work as contradictory, misinformation or false statements, will provide us with valuable information about the informant and his management work. We argue that the observed and analysed accounts only appear as contradictory because they are analysed from a consensus perspective. We subsequently perform a consensus analysis on three identified contradictions taken from our single account, by applying the theoretical framework of impression construction work by Leary and Kowalski (1990). In this framework, contradictions can be seen as stemming from lies, misinformation or deliberate applied deception, usually with the purpose of performing “impression management work” by the informant, in order to “control the impressions others form of them” (Leary and Kowalski, 1990). Based on the preliminary analysis, we argue that this consensus framework approach, with its inherent transaction-based perspective, appear inappropriate or insufficient when it comes to understanding the apparent contradictory statements and actions of our informant. To be more exact, we find that it falls short of taking into account the processes taking place within manager, as inner conflicts and

struggles related to his own feelings and convictions, which do not necessarily have to relate to any relational work performed on others. As an alternative reading we present a dissensus analysis on this same account, and argue that what appears to be contradictions, lies or confusing statements related to impression construction work, could instead be conceived as the outcome of multiple realities constructed in multiple layers of narrative self-identities. It is our suggestion that these layers of narrative self-identities are reproducing different and contradictory realities in a search for correspondence between the current “outside” and the “inside”; between Manager’s immediately invoked “narrative self-definition” and the discursive context in which he believes or imagines he finds himself. As these narratives are based on different phenomena in different situations, they eventually become detached from one another, and no longer fit into a complete picture of a consistent single and central identity. Instead they become fragments of an incomplete kaleidoscope of more- or less-related pieces of a puzzle, constituting multiple self-images at random points in time and context. These multiple self-images not only cause initial confusion for the ethnographic account, but also commend the informant to take contradictory actions in his work-life and managerial work, as his narratives manifest in different forms in social and professional situations. In our current account, each and every of the statements and actions performed by our informant appears to make perfect sense to him, as they all somehow serve him in his identity work in the distinct discursive contexts they are developed. We argue that manager appears to be all the narrative self-identities he reproduces in the conversation, and that we find that there is no central or stable identity. All constitute him as a human being seeking integrity in various social and professional settings, and he appears largely unaware of which identity metaphor to apply, until the moment where he is actually reproducing it. Unfortunately, the actions he performs based on these multiple realities ultimately lead to the downfall of his organisation, as well as himself. Based on these findings, we suggest that it appears sensible to shift focus from an analysis of interpersonal impression management work, towards the internal identity work of our informants – as it unfolds in the opportunities for reflections they seize during our conversations with them – when trying to understand and analyse their statements and activities. Careful attention should further be paid to societal and organisational discourses, as well as the current and historic contextual reality of the informant. So, instead of performing management studies where “contradictions” in the material collected empirically (i.e. consensus) are either avoided or deliberately eliminated; and instead of interpreting and analysing them as “lies” or “false data”, we suggest that informants should be understood as individuals presenting us with multiple narrative self-identities holding ambiguous beliefs about multiple realities, which are all relevant and productive for our academic inquiries. This further implies that we should present our information collected empirically in a reading that is as open as possible, and will allow for and present multiple diverging interpretations and assumptions in order to minimise our “performative abilities” and influence as editorial authorities.

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Corresponding author

Assistant Professor Per Richard Hansen can be contacted at: prh@plan.aau.dk

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