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Immobility in appearance only: Ricoeur and identity dynamics in workplace experiences

Sébastien Mainhagu, Renaud Defiebre¹ et François Grima²

Abstract

Immobility in one's career, marked by a long period of stability in the same position, is not synonymous with the absence of identity mobility, on the contrary. This can be deduced from the information collected from 23 employees in a French association in the social sector. In this research we draw on the notions of *idem*, *ipse* and *capacity* developed by Ricoeur. A model of the cyclical identity dynamics in daily work experience has been developed, while contributing to the topics of identification and career choice. It also questions the impact of dominant social norms that favour professional mobility on managerial practices and deprive employees from a critical form of recognition.

Keywords: Career immobility; employee stability; identity dynamics; Ricoeur; identification

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Introduction

Many employees continue to be attached to the notion of the “organisational” career, in some cases remaining in their position for long periods (Baruch, 2006; Clarke, 2013; Dany, 2003). Yet in the West this choice of “career immobility” (Goldner and Ritti, 1967) is no longer valued as an indication of loyalty (Tuma and Grimes, 1981), but rather seen pejoratively as a form of “inertia” (Peltokorpi, 2013). However, staying in the same job does not amount to an absence of change for employees, whose identities evolve as they face the realities of a workplace which is itself transformed (Nelson and Irwin, 2014). All too often, research on changing identities deals with situations of professional transition (Conroy and O’Leary-Kelly, 2014). Work stability is rarely associated with identity dynamics (Rothausen, Hendersen, Arnold and Malsh, 2015). Yet long periods of stability in a person’s career can correspond to mobility in their identity, beyond the socialisation phase that follows the start of any new job (Feldman, 1976).

The question of developing one’s identity at work has been addressed by researchers through the notion of “identity work”, defined as a process involving the search for consistency (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Watson, 2008). But the reading of the work of Ricoeur, from which this notion takes its inspiration, is incomplete. Researchers have neglected the *ipse* process, which manifests itself through action and brings about a renewal of the self (Ricoeur, 1990; 1996). Few research studies have focused primarily on these concepts and offered a comprehensive reading of Ricoeur’s identity dynamics (Mallett and Wapshott, 2012: 17).

The aim of this research is to fill this gap (Mallett and Wapshott, 2012). Its main contribution is the development of a cyclical theoretical model of internal identity dynamics in which one finds the alternation of two contradictory and complementary identity-building processes, which Ricoeur describes as *idem* (accumulation of that which gives consistency to one’s self-

image) and *ipse* (questioning of this image as part of an inner journey. As such, it broadens the concept of identity work by including the *ipse* process, which is rarely emphasised (Mallett and Wapshott, 2012).

This theoretical development, backed up by field data, also serves to enrich the concept of identification raised by other researchers (Miscenko and Day, 2015). This notion has so far only been understood in terms of one's relationship with the organisation or with colleagues thus overlooking the content of the actual work itself (Ashforth, Harrison and Corley, 2008). In this research we draw on the notion of *capacity* developed by Ricoeur (1986): the work context is conducive to experiences that fuel this twofold identity-building process, in which people test themselves through their *capacities* (Ricoeur, 1994). Employees may find that their work is rich enough to steer them on their inner journey and may show no interest in mobility (Dany, 2003; Rodrigues and Guest, 2010). In this sense, one's daily work experience – this relationship with concrete accomplishments (Pratt, Rockmann and Kaufmann, 2006) – feeds the way in which the self is tested (Ricoeur 2005). This experience plays an important role in identity-building, although this is rarely highlighted as a factor of stability in one's professional position (Becker, 1960). Finally, we provide another explanation for the phenomenon of stability in one's career and the decision to remain in the same job (Hoom et al., 2012).

This article presents a model of the cyclical identity dynamics that are activated in one's daily work experience and can be used to explain the career immobility of employees. We begin by outlining the work of Ricoeur and our methodology, based on the stories of the careers of employees in the social sector.

Career immobility versus dynamics of identity

Identity in a state of tension: Ricoeur's perspective

Ricoeur sees identity as an ongoing search for recognition of oneself as a capable being: “Personal identity is something that affirms, asserts and attests itself as the power to exist” (Ricoeur, 1996: 386). It tests itself through the *capacity* to do things, in the many facets of human action: “to be able to say, to be able to act on the course of events or other protagonists of action, to be able to assemble one’s own life in a narrative that is intelligible and acceptable” (Ricoeur, 1996: 386). Via these *capacities*, the power to exist, initially tested through action, becomes part of one’s personal story, provided the consistency of the narrative is possible (Sonsino, 2005).

But by experimenting with their capacities, subjects often also realise their limits, their “non-power” (Ricoeur, 1996: 423). The search for one’s identity therefore causes tension between the need for consistency in identity and the need for doubt, the need to take a reflective distance from oneself. Ricoeur (1990) thereby reveals the existence of an identity in a state of tension, an interior tension between two processes of self-affirmation which he describes as *ipse* and *idem* (Conroy and O’Leary-Kelly, 2014).

One’s *idem* identity addresses the problematic of the need to recognise oneself as “*same*” (identification), as resembling oneself, through the diversity of the subject’s experiences (Mallett and Waspshott, 2012). The path of personal experiences feeds a consistent representation of the self over time. In what he experiences, the subject accumulates that which relates to the “identical”, that which is “similar and therefore immutable, unchanging over time” (Ricoeur, 1987: 356). Built on the accumulation of experiences in this way, the *idem* identity is described as numeric in the sense of an identity “of something seen as the same throughout the diversity of occurrences” (Ricoeur, 2005: 167). Because it feeds on the concrete nature of experiences, on immediate and daily actions, Ricoeur also describes it as “substantial identity” (1987: 348). Immediate action, by accumulation, becomes a personal trait: “Each habit that is contracted, acquired and becomes a lasting disposition in this way

constitutes a trait – specifically a character trait –, that is a distinctive sign by which we recognise a person and re-identify him as being the same” (Ricoeur, 2005: 146).

In what he identifies as the “same”, the individual reinforces his perception of capacities, which are “fundamentally felt and experienced in a mode of certainty” (Ricoeur, 2005: 446), with “confident assurance”. He thereby reinforces the affirmation of his power to exist and identifies with this “I” that acts, with this feeling of power and of being worthy of esteem: “I am that being who can evaluate his actions and, judging the goals of some of them to be good, is capable of evaluating himself, of judging himself to be good” (Ricoeur, 1990: 212). The accumulation of experiences reinforces feelings of “being able to do” things, but the vicissitudes of life also confront the individual with “non-power”, or powerlessness (Ricoeur, 1996: 423).

The *ipse* identity manifests itself when the subject becomes aware that he is another: “It is as if, in seeking to back up the response to the question ‘who am I?’ with traits of permanence and immutability, the subject finds himself confronted by the enigma – and threat – of an ipseity without sameness” (Ricoeur 1987: 381). The impossibility or lassitude of sticking to an image places the individual on the path towards doubt and reflexivity (Ricoeur 1994). Vicissitudes place the employee on the path towards self-reflection (distantiation) and the pertinence of sources of identification, possibly leading to de-identification (Beech et al., 2012; Elsbach and Battacharya, 2001). External influences are seized upon in the internal movement of identity and question the subject about what he is, his image and his capacities (Ricoeur, 1994). The subject is confronted by the self, by the person himself (the literal translation of *ipse*, as Ricoeur reminds us), totally detached from the substantial *idem* identity (Ricoeur, 1987).

This *ipse* dimension of identity is not present in the notion of “identity work” (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003: 1165; Watson, 2008: 129), which neglects part of Ricoeur’s analysis of

identity dynamics by focusing only on the search for self-consistency and distinction from others (Mallett and Wasphott, 2012). For the philosopher, moments of self-questioning cannot be reduced to the search for consistency but include a process of distantiation that paves the way for identity renewal in the accumulation of experiences. This identity dynamic allows the subject to detach himself from self-illusions, to free himself from the confinement of a restricted identity, to be faithful to the self and the new promises it requires (Mallett and Wasphott, 2012). It is the expression of a “dialectic of concordance and discordance” (Ricoeur, 1987: 75), in which one identity triumphs over the other.

Ultimately, this continuity between the *idem* and *ipse* identities suggests the existence of a cyclical identity-building process at work, as explored by Sonsino (2005). However, although he is faithful to Ricoeur’s work, Sonsino does not sufficiently emphasise the *ipse* process and does not draw on the notion of *capacity* (Sonsino, 2005). Similarly, the cycle of identity tensions raised by Rothausen et al. (2015) emphasises the search for consistency faced with external constraints, whereas for Ricoeur (1996), people also seek to test themselves to satisfy their need for self-renewal.

Ricoeur’s identity dynamics and job stability

The conceptual framework provided by Ricoeur can be useful in understanding the decision to remain in the same job for a long time, given that this may generate experiences that contribute to the development of one’s identity. The concrete scenarios experienced at work are rich in information about the capacities of employees, mainly through evaluations by colleagues and supervisors (El Akremi et al., 2009), enabling them to identify with the “I” who acts efficiently (*idem*). These scenarios also provide opportunities to confront the internal and external vicissitudes (structural changes, new professional demands, etc.) that test one’s capacities and question one’s identities (*ipse* process). Identity mobility therefore compensates for the career immobility. These processes described by Ricoeur are perfectly

illustrated by, for example, Pratt et al. (2006): medical interns question their practices, gathering information from their colleagues about their attitudes, competencies and effectiveness, causing them to determine whether or not they see themselves as doctors.

Ricoeur's theoretical model based on a "dialectic of concordance and discordance" – the alternation between moments in which self-identification (*idem*) triumphs over doubt (*ipse*) and moments in which the reverse occurs – shares common ground with that of Rothausen et al. (2015), who point out that individuals endeavour to make consistent sense of the self (*idem*) across life domains. Six elements are identified: purpose, which makes sense of present actions; trajectory, which gives consistency to the path followed by an individual; relatedness, which lends dignity to relationships; expression, which favours competencies; acceptance of one's capacities to act and make decisions; and differentiation as a means for others to recognise an individual's singularity. These authors argue that the departure of employees is triggered by the cycle in which their identity is confronted by the organisational context which puts pressure on them to adopt another identity, thus threatening the integrity of their *idem* identity. The decision to leave is not made immediately, as employees try to make the meaning given by the organisation correspond to that which defines them, through a process of reflection about their own identity. They project themselves into a situation in which they feel more in harmony with their self-image. This effort to face up to the vicissitudes of life within the organisation, this search for consistency (*idem*), is made via three dimensions: reflection, fantasy and social support (colleagues, associates, friends, family, etc.).

Beyond this common ground with Ricoeur's model, several dimensions of identity work remain to be explored in connection with the choice of professional stability. In particular, this literature under-emphasises the role of work experience in testing one's capacities, i.e. strengthening one's identification with the self through action. Ricoeur's approach (1990;

2005) also makes it possible to rebalance the relationship between the external influences that act on an individual and his or her internal dynamics. The French philosopher pointed to the fact that vicissitudes, which threaten the consistency of one's image, come not only from the exterior but also the interior of this need to recognise oneself as a person and as another.

What is more, the few existing studies that provide indications about the identity-building process through the accomplishment of tasks do not demonstrate any link with stability in one's professional role (Becker and Casper, 1956; Hebden, 1975; Pratt et al., 2006). Becker (1960) put forward an explanation for the stability of employees based on feelings of efficiency, an indication of a positive self-image built up through interaction with colleagues, who attribute a label. However, he failed to provide an empirical demonstration. The literature on employee stability (the decision or intention to stay) also sheds relatively little light on the role played by the identity-building process (Hom et al., 2012; Steel and Lounsbury, 2009).

The aim of this research is to fill these gaps and show that stability in the workplace with the same employer – presented as inertia – is favoured by employees as it allows their identity to develop based on workplace experiences that are rich in vicissitudes and evaluative scenarios. To what extent can the career immobility of employees be explained by the identity dynamics activated in one's daily work experiences? Information gathered from employees working in associations in the social sector provides an opportunity to address this issue.

Methodology: coded narratives

Research context and informer profiles

For this article we used some of the data collected from 75 employees working in the social sector characterised by a professional mobility which is less common than elsewhere (Simonnet and Ulrich, 2009). In the French association where these employees used to work, management was looking for solutions to encourage internal mobility for staff in order to

prevent the psycho-social risks associated with people who can no longer bear their work situation, and also to increase the flexibility of the structure. They were therefore willing to accept our research project in an effort to understand why employees were remaining in the same positions for long periods.

To carry out this analysis on identity work in respect of career immobility, we used the content of interviews conducted with 23 employees who expressed a desire to remain in their job while even though most of their careers have been spent in the same position, with minimum seniority of five years (Amossé and Ben Halima, 2010). During the interviews, we asked people to describe their careers. Then, for each significant period, we questioned them about their reasons for wanting to remain in their jobs or to change jobs. The average time spent by our 23 informers in their job was almost 21 years, representing an average of 79% of the duration of their careers. At the extreme end of the spectrum, one 29-year-old employee continued to occupy the same position 5 years after securing her first job (100% of her career in the same position), and a 60-year-old future pensioner had spent half of his career in the position he currently occupies (Table 1). The average age in this group of respondents was almost 49. Most of the interviewees are women (16). Nine of our informers work in an establishment for young disabled persons, eight are part of an intervention service to protect children not in detention (these two areas are known for the stability of their staff), four work in a social reinsertion service for adults, and two in a shelter for children with historically high turnover. 21 of them are social workers (the highest proportion), including two department heads and two secretaries. Six of the interviewees are staff representatives, and in many cases are members of the works committee.

Table 1. Interviewee profiles

Interviewee	Age	Job type	Years in current position	Weighting in career	D P	Gender	Sector
4	60	Dept. head	20	0.50		M	Shelter
9	55	Secretary	14	0.64		F	Shelter
21	56	Dept. head	15	0.66		F	SIA
22	29	Educational worker	5	1.00		F	SIA
32	35	Educational worker	8	1.00		F	SPE
38	55	Educational worker	23	0.66	1	M	SPE
35	35	Educational worker	11	0.73		F	SPE
40	57	Educational worker	34	0.89		F	SPE
41	38	Educational worker	17	0.81		M	SPE
43	57	Educational worker	33	0.92		F	SPE
44	60	Educational worker	30	0.75	1	M	SPE
46	48	Educational worker	24	1.00	1	F	SPE
49	52	Educational worker	24	0.69		F	SIA
50	40	Educational worker	14	0.56	1	F	SIA
56	58	Educational worker	41	1.00		F	Disability
63	50	Educational worker	16	0.75		F	Disability
64	62	Educational worker	40	0.98		F	Disability
65	54	Educational worker	25	0.83		F	Disability
66	42	Educational worker	16	0.94	1	M	Disability
68	50	Educational worker	15	0.50	1	M	Disability
70	34	Educational worker	10	0.77		F	Disability
71	50	Educational worker	23	0.77		F	Disability
72	48	Secretary	20	0.71		F	Disability
	48.9		20.8	0.79	6		

Key: SPE = service for protection of children; SIA= service for adult social reinsertion.

As well as these sources of information, we obtained data about the background of their activities and the organisations themselves at meetings and by ensuring a regular presence on the premises, which allowed us to engage in informal exchanges. We also benefited from reading documents describing the activities, as well as the minutes of works committee and health & safety committee meetings.

Methods for collecting and analysing information

We adopted the narrative approach (Czarniawska, 2004) because, given the questions asked, our interviewees often revealed their inner journeys – what Ricoeur (2004) refers to as the *narrative construction of the self*. This allowed us to obtain information about the identity dynamics of the employees, in a state of tension between the two self-affirmation processes described by Ricoeur (1990) as *ipse* and *idem*. Most of those interviewed sought to justify their stability in their position, something no longer taken for granted (Dany, 2003). They tried to develop a coherent presentation of their identity (*idem*) by establishing links with key events in their work experience and personal lives (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010). Their narrative does not therefore reflect reality but rather a consistent self-image which people sometimes construct on the spur of the moment to represent themselves in a positive light to their interlocutor (Bardon, Josserand and Villesèche, 2015). However, this “identity work” (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Watson, 2008) is not completely finalised, and our informers also expressed doubts and made it clear that their identity was dominated by a process of self-questioning which corresponds to the *ipse* process (Ricoeur, 1990; 2005). They provided a “fragmented” presentation of what they are (Ybema, et al., 2009).

We analysed the data using the methodology recommended by proponents of the grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). The article’s first two authors transcribed and coded the interviewees’ narratives as the interviews were conducted, following an analytical approach that pointed to key concepts (Silverman and Marvasti, 2008). The researchers then produced

and discussed a coding table with codes, categories, dimensions, properties and definitions, which they worked on as the research progressed. They also agreed upon the accuracy of their respective choices in that they re-read the encodings made by the other researcher. This approach made it possible to identify emerging themes that guided the interviews based on an iterative process (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). The meetings organised with employees after this work completed the internal validation process. Of the 250 in vivo codes identified during the first coding phase, we retained almost 80 first-order categories and 19 second-order themes (Silverman and Marvasti, 2008). All the interviews have been recoded using the last update of the code frame. A correlation table of verbatim accounts and aggregated dimensions enabled a last check with a more external control exerted from the third researcher in order to reduce random errors as much as possible (Gibbert, Ruigrok and Wicki, 2008). Here we use the information that was coded as the expression of an identification (*idem*) or self-distantiation (*ipse*) experienced through work.

Results: the three phases of identity development in the workplace

The analysis of the narratives of employees who occupied (or had occupied) the same position for a long period allowed us to identify three identity-building phases: reinforcement, distantiation, and reconstruction.

Reinforcement phase

The reinforcement of one's *idem* identity involves the renewal of self-recognition through action (Ricoeur, 1994). Four elements come into play in this search for the self: concordance, loyalty to a life project, repetition and peer recognition.

First of all, "concordance" is sought by employees between their self-presentation and the capacities developed at work: "*Survey work corresponded to something within me*" (interviewee no. 40). Most of the employees we interviewed justified their long-standing presence in the same post by identifying with the actions their work entailed and in which

they recognise themselves. One department head explained the longevity of her career working with the homeless: *“Throughout these experiences I have always looked after people in vulnerable situations, I put in place tools to respond to the difficulties faced by these people, I was particularly drawn by these vulnerable people with mental pathologies, it was my hobby, I’ve always liked crazy people (laughs)!”* (interviewee no. 15). In the social sector, this identification with the content of one’s work involves experience of close contact with members of the public. Our interlocutors expressed pleasure at being drawn in by the encounters they had with those they were responsible for in their work. Some of them identified with their atypical character traits. One educational worker drew a parallel between her identity and the profile of autistic children: *“It might seem silly but I can actually recognise myself in these young people, I think I have autistic tendencies like them, so for me interpersonal relations are raw”* (interviewee no. 70).

This identity dynamic is established in reference to an action, an ability to do something, which associates one’s life path with the objective of being loyal to oneself (Ricoeur, 1994), as expressed by this educational worker: *“I wanted to help, I think that’s my life path, I wanted to go further, to look for myself: you don’t realise initially that it’s also a personal quest. I often tell parents: ‘there is no need to thank me, I owe as much thanks. I help them but you have no idea how much they help me, everything they give me in return’. It’s always a permanent process of questioning and if I stop doing it, that process comes to an end”* (interviewee no. 71).

The repetition of this “concordance” is also sought. The accumulation of experiences, affirming the subject’s capacities, feeds his assurance. It informs the individual about the permanence of his *idem* identity. Employees cultivated this assurance about their capacities, as in the case of this medico-psychological worker: *“I always like to dig deep, I always have*

to be perfect. And that's why I have always remained in this job, because in this work I prefer to be the best" (interviewee no. 64).

Finally, the development of this assurance requires peer recognition, which also constitutes a type of accumulative *idem* identity movement, as this specialised educational worker told us: *"I think the motivating factor for that stability [in his former job] was that it was a job I liked, I invested a lot in it, I became loyal to the department, and I learned a huge amount as an educational work in the "open custody" department. I developed a big network. I had an address book. And it was gratifying because I could see that my practices were developing, I was starting to be kind of effective, and I was recognised by others"* (interviewee no. 41). This employee valued the assurance he felt in his profession as well as the external recognition, which was the reason why he turned down a promotion: *"I'm an educational worker, I'm recognised, I have experience"*.

Distantiation phase

The following phase is marked by the doubt brought on by one's work experience and an increasing distance from one's previously confident self-image. The *idem* identity, which is full of assurance, becomes clouded by the identity being questioned, *ipse*. The corollary effect of the accumulation of experiences is a weakening of self-identification through action. This experience of strangeness can be perceived negatively, as one educational worker explained: *"From an educational perspective, I wasn't at ease. It didn't suit me, I wasn't satisfied working with a group. I felt like I never had access to individuals. And at the centre they were recruiting very difficult youths and there was a lot of violence. (...) I came out okay physically and professionally, I found my place, but from an ethical and psychological perspective, it was very negative for me"* (interviewee no. 41). This employee's self-image at the time was not that which he had constructed for himself. The person he saw doing things based on certain principles was strange to him. This social worker observing himself at work

(distantiation) could not establish any correspondence with what he thought he was (or wanted to be). The “*I*” no longer matched the meaning given by his work experience.

Nonetheless, this *ipse* identity dynamic can be perceived positively, and can even be cultivated, as it allows for self-renewal. Several social workers develop a character trait through their actions that is one of openness to new things and to that which is atypical and draws them in (autistic, young delinquents, homeless). One department head recognised that young people surprised him and raised questions about his identity, thus allowing him to develop it: *“I’m retiring and I know it’s not going to be easy to manage that absence. I’m going to miss this relationship. (...). Young people surprise you. Sometimes you die laughing, they come up with things during class that do you good, that’s life. (...) There is an exchange, mutual respect. It’s all that that ensures you keep a youthful mindset, always alert, it also allows you to keep going, because there are days when you’re tired”* (interviewee no. 4).

Employees dread routine and repetitive actions that do not feed into their identity work. One young educational worker described a loss of motivation in routine: *“I had done everything there was to do at work, there was no more challenge, a routine began to develop, I became bitter, I started complaining and that’s not in my nature”* (interviewee no. 35). Routine may also be imposed by one’s work structure or the weight of legal and organisational norms, which reduce one’s ability to do things: *“I feel without any standing, I no longer have an identity... Everyone has to move in the same direction, and everything has to go through management...”* (interviewee no. 63). Changes in an individual’s work structure can also deprive his actions of the meaning he attributes to them, as one social assistant explained: *“They ask us to conduct an investigation over a six-month period, so obviously that changes my relationship with people, it changes my attitude, my position, everything I put into the relationship; what I was used to looking for quickly I now spread out over time. And I’m not sure that suits me in the long run in terms of my personality and way of doing things, not*

knowing what to put into a relationship” (interviewee no. 32). In other words, she no longer recognises her character traits as accumulated through her actions or capacities.

Reconstruction phase

In the third phase, employees look for new consistency that will allow them to reconstruct their *idem* identity. The questioning process driven by one’s experiences at work leads to the exploration of new ways to recognise oneself through actions. Several experiences facilitate this self-renewal: diverse work-related tasks, the mobilisation of a leader figure, changes in one’s personal life, new responsibilities and organisational changes.

First, the experience of diverse work-related tasks facilitates this identity dynamic. For those who remain in the same position for a long period, regularly facing doubts is experienced as a regular source of self-renewal, with the corollary construction of a new form of consistency in their identity, as one social assistant explained: *“Here it is the challenges we face that shift. We work with all kinds of social backgrounds. It’s enriching and vast work. (...) Despite everything, this light-hearted aspect in our investigative work, the lack of routine, when we work with families and there’s a bit of feedback, when you have to investigate and dig a bit, when we are almost on the same path in some cases, it can be a fascinating aspect. (...) There is renewal in your work. Every situation has a different story. No situation is like any other. Ultimately it’s about telling other people’s stories. And it’s interesting. There is no routine, so there is mobility in the way you think”* (interviewee no. 38).

Second, reconstructing the self can also be encouraged when one experiences motivational leadership: *“What makes my work so interesting is that the tasks are highly diverse and comprehensive. That’s what I like about this position, it’s not a purely administrative job as you might think. I identify with the new department head in the way he works with families and children, I really like what the head of the department is doing, he’s a good project leader”* (interviewee no. 72).

Third, one's personal life experience can also feed into the reinvention of one's identity in the workplace, as in the case of this young educational worker who renewed the meaning of her actions through her experience as a mother: *"I had a child almost 2 years ago and so with the issues associated with the link between a mother and her child, I see things differently, and so I am interested in supporting these women and children in relation to all of these questions. I evolved in the way I work, in the way I approach things. (...) it has given me a new perspective on work, it has brought renewal. In 5 years I don't think I have ever been bored in my work, even though initially I said to myself: I don't know if I'm going to stay 5, 10, 15 years. My personal life has shed new light on things, it has motivated me, perhaps at a time when I was lacking motivation"* (interviewee no. 22). The changes in her identity are once again in phase with her experience in the workplace (*idem*), following a period in which she took a step back from what she was doing (*ipse*).

Fourth, additional responsibilities such as those of a staff representative, or running new projects, generate experiences that can be sources of identity reconstruction. Such renewal is possible within the same job, as indicated in the testimony of this social worker: *"It has never bothered me to stay in the same establishment, as I never do the same work from one year to the next, every year I have new projects, in terms of our director, this is completely compatible, he allows us to take full initiative and what's more I have invested in the association as a staff representative. I've been here a long time and I'll tell you why! I was the only one, there was only one class, and I managed to change mindsets and set up a second class; now there are three of them, and we have managed to put in place an entirely different schedule"* (interviewee no. 65).

Lastly, self-renewal can be fuelled by changes imposed by one's organisation. In this case, the reconstruction phase is vital as the person concerned senses a loss of that which feeds his or her identity (*idem*). It is the promise of self-recognition, of bearing expectations, and therefore

being credited with certain capacities, that provides the motivation, as explained by this social worker, who was offered a position when her own was eliminated: *“I’m saying to myself: I want to go for it but also turn it down. That’s the phase I’m at. I don’t want to go for it because it’s too hard, it’s a pretext. And this department that they’re tearing to pieces, I watched it develop. I’ve really had it up to here, it’s sickening. And on the other hand I say to myself: go for the ESAT as that’s what suits you. I think to myself okay, I’ll go for it. The director of the ESAT was amazing on the phone because she understands the difficult circumstances and that it’s not so easy. She spoke to me: they have expectations of me. (...) Being welcomed like that by someone who comes up with a sentence, with compassion, we didn’t get that here. They suggested a big meeting at ARSEA to say: ‘right, the department is finished, so and so and so and so, you’ll be finishing on 30 June, and you others are too expensive’. But not a word to say that we have support”* (interviewee no. 49).

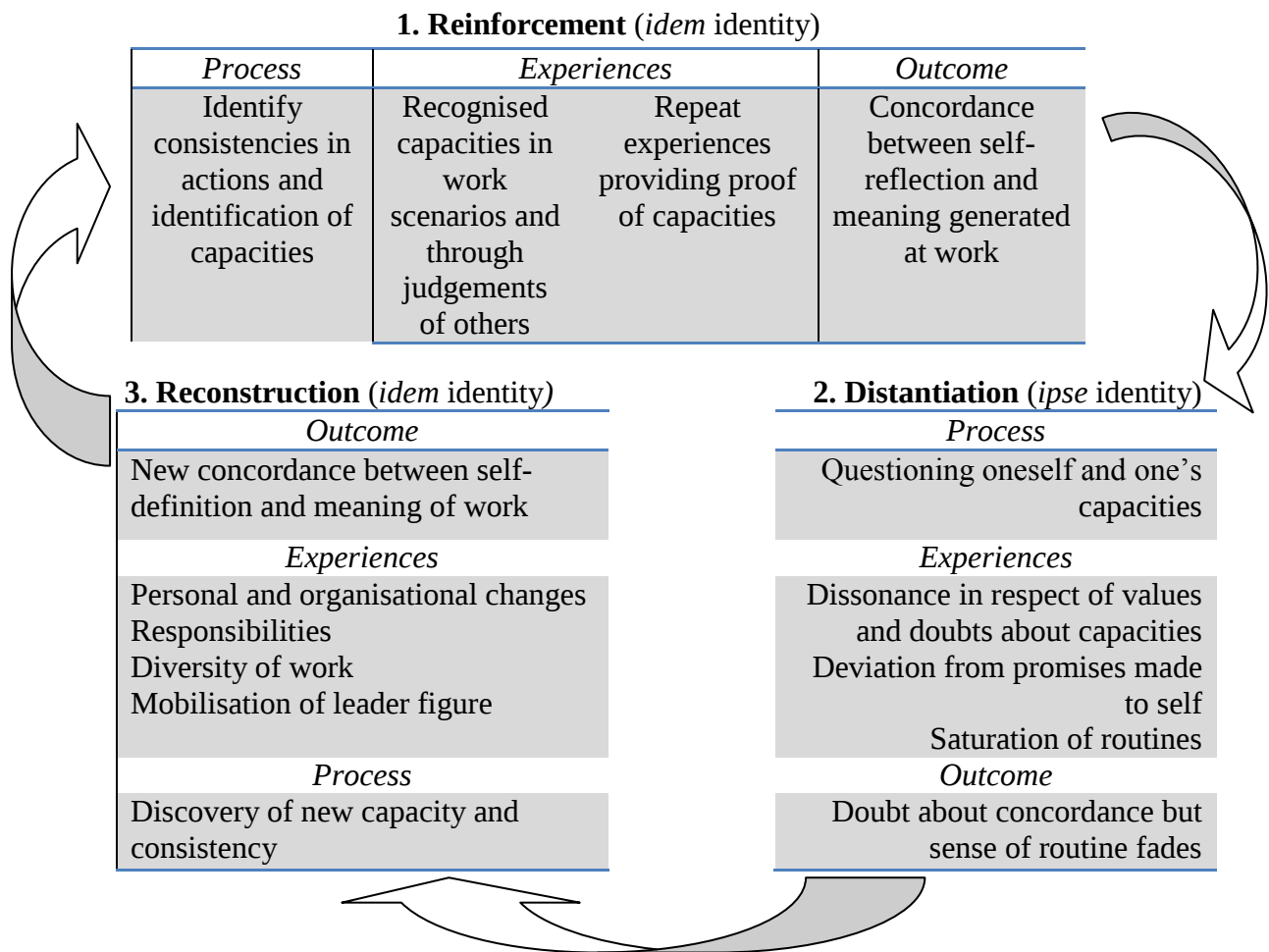
Discussion

The stories of these employees, who enjoyed great stability in their positions at work, actually reveal identity mobility rather than stagnation, contrary to what is often presented through the pejorative notion of career immobility. Applying Ricoeur’s conceptual framework in an effort to understand career choices opens up interesting theoretical perspectives.

The cycle of identity dynamics at work

The first contribution of this article is to propose a theoretical model for the internal cyclical identity construction of individuals, based on the work of Ricoeur (1990; 2005) and our own empirical observations. The succession of the three phases (reinforcement, distantiation and reconstruction) described in the results section, alternating between the *idem* and *ipse* identities, suggests the existence of a cyclical identity construction process in the workplace (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Cycle of identity dynamics at work (according to Ricoeur)



These three phases are characterised by three types of processes: identifying consistencies in one's actions and the identification of capacities; questioning oneself and one's capacities; and discovering a new capacity and consistency. The outcome of these processes is the "concordance" or "discordance" (Ricoeur, 1987) of employees' identities with the meaning generated by their experiences at work. The outcome of one phase initiates the process of the following phase, giving the model a cyclical nature. These different outcomes are achieved based on the experiences of employees:

- in phase 1, the capacities recognised in certain situations and through the judgements of others (interviewee no. 41) and repeat experiences providing proof of one's capacities (no. 71);

- in phase 2, dissonance in respect of values, when the employee does not identify with what he is doing and doubts his capacities (no. 32), deviation from promises made to oneself, and saturation of routines (no. 35);
- in phase 3, out-of-work (no. 22) or organisational experiences (no. 49), new responsibilities (no. 65), motivational leadership (no. 72) or diversity of one's work (no. 38), favouring the reconstruction of a consistent *idem* identity.

These experiences can therefore be provided by the organisation: a project deployed by a leader who uses a discourse that facilitates consistency, colleagues who provide favourable evaluations, and the attribution of diverse missions and/or new responsibilities. They are also produced outside of the organisation, as the identities of employees are formed through their combined experiences in the different aspects of their lives (Rothausen, et al., 2015).

The changing workplace is not necessarily harmful for employees, on the contrary. Although changes may threaten the consistency of one's *idem* identity, experiences of strangeness (*ipse*) also renew one's identity, which is never completely finalised and remains "fragmented" (Ybema, et al., 2009).

This cyclical model of identity dynamics, based on data collected in the social sector, demonstrates the richness of Ricoeur's work. In contrast to Sonsino's model (2005), we more precisely account for the *ipse* process and its link to the notion of *capacity*. We show that the search for consistency is not a goal in itself, rather it is about proving oneself capable in a consistent way, with self-promise. For Ricoeur, the need for self-renewal is linked to the need not to remain confined within an accumulated self-image (Ricoeur, 1990).

Lastly, our presentation broadens the concept of "identity work" by including the *ipse* process, which reveals the "ambivalent" nature of identity dynamics (Kosmala and Herbach, 2004). We show that distantiation is an inherent process in identity construction in the

workplace, which does not take place only in relation to others (Clark et al., 2009). The concept of “ipseity” (Ricoeur, 1987) allows us to account for identity movement at the initiative of the employee, as he seeks to escape identity immobility. The *ipse* process prevents the “feeling of routine” from becoming established. It is this feeling that leads to the departure of employees, a notion that must be distinguished from organisational routine (Brown and Lewis, 2010). Our analysis therefore integrates the dialectic of Ricoeur’s *idem* and *ipse* identity dynamics, yet describes them more accurately than Mallet and Wapshott (2012) do. Indeed, the latter come to analyse them while considering the process of identifying with persons and roles developed in a context of vocational training. In this way they overlook how one is continuously confronted with work content.

This identity development, which is both dialectical and cyclical, does not take place without stress. The loss of a stable self-definition breeds insecurity (Van Buren, 2003). But such tension may be desired by employees in order to avoid the discomfort of identity immobility. Identity tensions and situations involving a lack of well-being are not only due to the actions of the employer (Rothausen, et al., 2015); they are also the result of internal individual processes, whereby people question the convergence between their identity and the meaning generated by their experiences at work. This dual identity movement described by Ricoeur, both contradictory and complementary, can be used to explain the stability of one’s career.

Another explanation for career stability

The second contribution made by this empirical study is to show that stability in one’s job with a single employer is desired by employees because their identity develops based on experiences at work which are rich in vicissitudes and situations in which they are evaluated. Indeed, most of the people in our sample, whose careers are marked by lengthy periods in the same position – which they intend to keep in the future –, provided information that reveal these dynamics at work in their *idem* and *ipse* identities alternately. Long-standing stability of

employees in their job, which is pejoratively presented as career immobility, can therefore be explained by the cyclical development of their identity, which is activated through their daily experiences at work. The succession of experiences of “sameness” and strangeness (Ricoeur, 1990; 2004) is experienced by employees on a daily basis in the workplace. When employees remain in their position, it is because they experienced doubt (*ipse*) and later assurance (*idem*), about what they are, and because they subsequently moved beyond that, into a third phase. This means they have found a “concordance” (Ricoeur 1987) between their self-definition and the meaning of their work, thus reducing contradictions and inconsistencies (Down and Reveley, 2009). Although their careers are marked by stability, the identities of the employees we interviewed display mobility.

Identity change is not necessarily the consequence of a change in one’s job (Conroy and O’Leary-Killy, 2014). It would also appear to be a cause. Employees leave their jobs when it is no longer possible to move through the phases, when the content of their work no longer provides the basis for identity movement through the discovery of strangeness, or when the distance established between the individual and the meaning generated by their work is no longer absorbed by a change in the individual or the content of his work. Identity tensions are therefore an inherent part of employees’ internal reflections about themselves, and are not linked only to the multitude of identification sources (Beech, 2008).

This finding helps us better understand careers characterised by low levels of intra- and inter-organisational mobility (Sullivan and Baruch, 2009). In this case, mobility is an internal part of the individual rather than an external one. It is therefore not easily visible to an observer looking for overarching trends (Arthur, 2008). It is therefore necessary to distinguish social norms, which promote mobility, and the reality of the experiences of employees who question and reassure themselves about their identity through their daily work (Dany, 2003; Rodrigues and Guest, 2010). The dominant ideology favouring mobility may be part of the cognitive

schema of individuals, but can also be in conflict with the identity process at play in the activity at work (Valette and Culli , 2015). The cycles of employees' identity dynamics can run counter to employers' plans to make both jobs (Eldridge and Nisar, 2006; Guest, 2004) and employees' careers flexible (Currie, Tempest and Starkey, 2006).

Cycles of organisational and personal identity tensions are not necessarily in phase with one another. The organisational change that has an influence on identity does not necessarily correspond to the distantiation phase experienced by employees as strangeness is being sought (Ricoeur, 1990).

An additional identification category

The third contribution of the study is to emphasise the role of one's concrete experiences at work in the identity construction process (Pratt et al., 2006). Identifying with the content of one's work deserves to be highlighted as a specific category, although it is absent from existing studies (Miscenko and Day, 2015). There is an abundant literature about identification at work in relation to organisations, professions and individuals (Ashforth et al., 2008). Many of the existing studies were inspired by Tajfel and Turner's theory of social identity, which describes the "connections" that are formed between the way in which the work or identity of an organisation's members are perceived and their self-perceptions (Walsh and Gordon, 2008). For these authors, identification is therefore a mental process that leads individuals to include in their self-definition certain references provided by the social group constituted by their colleagues, but also the organisation as a whole (Ashforth et al., 2008). This identity transformation process leads to a state in which individuals accept the characteristics (values, goals, beliefs, traits, skills) attributed to them by others (Besharov, 2014). They partly think of themselves in terms of the organisation, working group and/or their relationships with colleagues (Cooper and Thatcher, 2010).

Such an approach neglects the identity construction process that is linked to the meaning generated by one's daily experiences at work. Very few authors describe this process, one exception being Pratt et al. (2006). We feel it is useful to distinguish the category of identifying with the content of one's work from other categories, especially as it highlights the unique cognitive processes by which meaning through action is developed (Ricoeur, 1987). This identification is linked to one's daily experiences at work, i.e. "action" in the workplace through which employees construct both their *idem* and *ipse* identities (Ricoeur, 1990).

While it is necessary to separate the categories for the purposes of analysis, links nonetheless exist between the different types of identification (Ashforth et al., 2008). The recognition of one's capacities, an important phase in the cycle of identity dynamics at work, requires the individual concerned to identify with the evaluator (Becker and Casper, 1956). The perspective of others who judge the quality of one's work contributes to this confrontation with the reality of that work (Pratt et al., 2006). The feedback provided by colleagues have an even stronger influence on how employees view their own capacities if they are part of a profession with self-regulation (Hebden, 1975; Leavitt et al., 2012; Nelson and Irwin, 2014), an indication that its members identify with their area of work (Johnson et al., 2006).

However, not distinguishing between the different types of identification makes it impossible to account for the nuances of the reality experienced by employees in their work that would provide an explanation for their decision to leave their jobs or stay on (Hoom et al., 2012). The cycle of identity dynamics can be compared to an alternation between an identification phase and a phase in which the employee distances himself from the concrete content of his work, thus leading to the decision whether or not to remain in the job. This study therefore sheds further light on those aspects of the "retention" and turnover phenomena (Holtom et al., 2008; Hom et al., 2012) not yet explained by researchers.

Conclusion

Immobility in one's career, marked by a long period of stability in the same position, is not synonymous with the absence of identity mobility, on the contrary. This can be deduced from the information collected from employees in a French association in the social sector. The theoretical contributions of this research relate to a more comprehensive reliance on the work of Ricoeur when addressing the themes of identification with one's work and career choices. A model has been developed emphasising the cyclical succession of *idem* and *ipse* identity dynamics via three phases (reinforcement, distantiation and reconstruction), linked to the notion of capacity. This model is applied to work situations.

This research takes a fresh look at the notions of identity work and identification. It also raises questions about managerial practices. The pre-eminence of social norms favouring professional mobility in current managerial thinking is such that this reality is underestimated, sometimes making changes in organisations difficult. The testimony provided by interviewee no. 49 (p. 16), who suffered from a lack of support during a period of change, is indicative of the lag between the cycle of organizational change and that of individual identity development on the one hand, and the weaknesses of managerial practices in this regard on the other. One might suggest that managers should talk to employees to identify which phase in the cycle of identity dynamics they are in and provide them with the resources to engage in an *ipse* process that would favour change. Our research reveals that some of these resources come from the organisation itself. Listening to employees and ensuring the HR director was available, as well as the welcome offered by the future manager, served as positive levers to ensure this social assistant would accept the change. However, not all resources lie in the hands of the company, which encourages a certain amount of caution in this regard.

These suggestions are based on results obtained from a small number of interviews and in a specific area: the social sector. This data constitutes a limitation in terms of the generalisation

of our findings. The context of this sector influences the results in that all the employees we interviewed exert an educational function which aims to enable those accompanied by them to be fully included in society and thus accept dominating social norms. Building of sense is affected by their continuous questioning while they are in contact with people who are in difficulty and suffer from society's contradictions. One must also be cautious about the information provided by our interlocutors, who tend to emphasise the consistency of their own identity. Nonetheless, this study points to promising research avenues by using a theoretical framework that is known to organizational scientists but rarely used in any detailed way. It would be useful to conduct further academic investigations using larger samples with more diverse profiles to explore the issues of identifying with the content of one's work and feelings of routine addressed herein. Longitudinal data will have to be collected in order to better account for the cycle of identity dynamics at work (Rothausen et al., 2015).

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