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# Self-doubt and self-certainty in identity dynamics: From the mundane to the surprising

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## Introduction

Professional identity is more than the fruit of certainties in the workplace, of ‘banal’ truths established by the individual, who no longer needs verification of who he is; it is also the result of ‘surprises’ that cause us to question ourselves. Identity dynamics are ‘fragmented’ (Ybema et al., 2009), alternating between periods of self-certainty and self-doubt that must be approached together (Sonenshein, De Celles & Dutton, 2014). They are developed through evaluations of past work experiences that cause employees to position themselves in relation to future life projects (Brown, 2015). To what extent does this alternation between phases of self-certainty and self-doubt influence the professional life projects of employees?

Surprisingly, this question has received little attention in the literature, although there is recognition of the proximity between the processes underpinning identity-building in the workplace and career-building (Brown, 2015). Furthermore, with the notable exception of Mallet and Wapshott (2012), the literature on employee identity has not drawn on the work of Ricœur (1990), who addressed the alternation – and even entanglement – between the two identity-building processes. The *idem* identity is an affirmation of the self through everyday repetition, reinforcing self-certainty. It is fed by evidence and becomes ‘mundane’ through the repetition of situations. Here, employees ask few questions of themselves, expressing no self-doubt (Alvesson & Robertson, 2016). The *ipse* identity, in contrast, is marked by ‘surprise’ – an expression of self-questioning that generates inner renewal. This awareness is a shock that makes one’s identity foreign, removed from the self, and influences one’s future projections. Employees question their own capacities and ethics in the intimacy of work scenarios by referring to their desired self-image.

Researchers have failed to place sufficient emphasis on the ethical dimension of one’s life projects in relation to the mundanity of one’s activity and the notion of capacity, which from Ricœur’s perspective is at the heart of identity dynamics in the workplace. Furthermore, contrary to the assertions made by several researchers (Alvesson & Wilmott, 2002; Rothausen, Henderson, Arnold & Malsh, 2017), self-doubt is not necessarily brought about by the domination of others imposing a self-definition. Employees also forge their identity by confronting the content of their professional activities, raising questions about the value of

their contribution and therefore about what they are and what they want to become (Mainhagu, Grima & Defiebre-Muller, 2018).

Our research objective is twofold: 1) account for the identity dynamics that link phases of self-certainty and self-doubt as experienced by employees in relation to their work; 2) establish the impact that these processes have on their professional life projects.

Our results were obtained using data collected in the social sector. We were able to describe the three categories of identity deduced from the literature ('self-doubters', 'strugglers' and those with 'no apparent doubts') based on coding that highlights the questions raised about one's ethics and capacities. This is the first time that these categories have been identified in this way, thus building on the work of Ricœur by distinguishing between two *idem* states: renewal and reinforcement. We also establish links between identity dynamics, marked by more or less self-doubt, and one's professional life projects in terms of the desire to remain in one's job or leave it. It emerges that 'self-doubters' display one of these two desires in equal measures. Self-doubt is therefore not systematically associated with career mobility.

## **Workplace identity dynamics and career choices**

### *Self-doubt: a more complex process than it appears*

Ybema et al. (2009) identified a gap in the literature on self-doubt and suggested further exploration of the notion of 'fragmented identity' by drawing on the work of Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003). Self-doubt is described as an expression of distancing from the identities contained in social roles and imposed on employees by their environment (doubt generated by others): colleagues, management, the organization, etc. (Clarke, Brown & Hope Hailey, 2009; Thomas & Davis, 2005). Here, the analysis relates to identity regulations in organizations that provoke identity work on the part of employees. This may take the form of acts of resistance with a view to re-establishing an image that has been altered by others (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). In this literature, doubt, when it arises, is generated by others, shaping one's 'identity for others', which does not correspond to one's 'identity for the self' (Dubar, 2010), i.e. that which is desired and considered by the employee to be authentic and is forged through other roles (Watson, 2008).

Alvesson (2010) develops this representation of 'workplace identity' by distinguishing between the 'self-doubter', deemed open and unstable, and the 'struggler', who seeks to re-establish the coherence and singularity that have been altered by the doubts expressed by others. His conceptualization of self-doubt, however, is not precise enough as he does not

specify whether it emanates from the self or from others, generating a surprise effect. It is not clear whether he considers doubt to be accepted or rejected. While resistance against the doubts of others has been addressed in the literature, there is no analysis of doubts that have been accepted or even initiated by employees themselves.

Mallet and Wapshott (2012) draw on the work of Ricœur to criticize Alvesson's narrative approach (2010). They point out that he neglects the individual's inner dialectic process of self-reflection: the story people tell themselves about what they are. They consider his understanding of identity work to be too linear and coherent and argue that the process is, on the contrary, chaotic and contradictory with constant overlaps between processes that lead to self-certainties and self-doubts. The alternation between rejection and acceptance (for self-security) of one's self-image as generated by others causes an identity fracture (Down & Reveley, 2009). The shift from one identity to the other is at play both in the immediate "mundanity" of everyday challenges to the self and in the accumulation of certainties and doubts (Ricœur, 1990).

#### *Doubting one's capacities and ethics*

Is the mechanism of inner doubt at work not inherent in all identity-building, as Ricœur (1990) points out, which narration can seek to erase? Employees can choose not to express any doubt, thereby avoiding any process of reflection despite a propitious context (Alvesson & Robertson, 2016). But the absence of doubt in a narrative may be the result of a desire to hide one's identity work in order to project a coherent image of a professional.

For Ricœur, doubt is an inherent part of the identity-building process, an endless quest for recognition of the self as a capable being worthy of esteem (Ricœur, 1996). Mallet and Wapshott (2012) do not adequately emphasize the doubts people have about their capacities and ethics, as described by Ricœur (1996). Employees are exposed to their own doubts because they have experience of 'non-power', perceived as a limit on their capacity to be faithful to their life project and personal ethics. The philosopher reveals the existence of an intimate identity in a state of tension between two processes of self-affirmation, which he describes as *ipse* and *idem* (Dailey & Browning, 2014).

The *idem* identity satisfies the need to recognize oneself as the 'same' (identification), as that which is '*similar and therefore immutable, unchanging over time*' (Ricœur, 1987: 356). Professional experiences feed into a coherent representation of the self in the long term. In the workplace, the subject accumulates experiences that relate to the '*identical*', i.e. that which is. In what they perceive as being the 'same', individuals reinforce the affirmation of their power

to exist and identify with the 'I' who acts, with that feeling of power and being worthy of esteem: *'I am that being who can evaluate his actions and, in assessing the goals of some of them to be good, is capable of evaluating himself and of judging himself to be good'* (Ricœur, 1990: 212). This questioning process is therefore ethical since the employee seeks to recognize himself in relation to a life project, which gives value to his actions and status in terms of loyalty to the self (Ricœur, 1990). The coherence between what I do and the principles I try to uphold in order to do good generates a sense that I am in the right place. The process of self-recognition is therefore 'dual' (El Akremi, Sassi & Bouzidi, 2009), insofar as it is at once rooted in one's capacity to do (performative dimension) and one's capacity to evaluate, to judge the value of one's actions (ethical dimension). The accumulation of positive experiences reinforces self-recognition, but constraints are such that the subject must also confront 'non-power' or powerlessness (Ricœur, 1996: 423). The absence of success leads to self-doubt (Collinson, 2003). The *ipse* identity then manifests itself, when the subject feels he is different to the mundane image through which he recognizes himself. The difficulties encountered when carrying out their work places employees on the path towards distantiation of the self from their capacities. Similarly, deviations observed in the application of one's ethical principles can lead to a loss of self-esteem and de-identification (Beech et al., 2012), which can precede career mobility (Conroy & O'Leary-Kelly, 2014).

### *Reflections on what is to come*

Challenges to one's identity can upset professional life projects (which job, employer, status, profession?). Through these reflections on their capacities and ethical positions as experienced in work activities, individuals wonder about their own future (Sonsino, 2005). The links between identity dynamics and career choices have been established by several authors (Brown, 2015). For Rothausen and her colleagues (2017), what provokes the departure of employees is the lack of concordance between the identity they have forged and that which their organization wants for them, thus threatening their integrity. They then project themselves into another job where they will feel more in harmony with the image they have of themselves (Mallet & Wapshott, 2012). Role transition research has shown how this quest for authenticity and loyalty to the self can justify career mobility (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). Ibarra (1999) describes how identities, generated by roles in a new job, are tested via external evaluation (image generated by others) and internal evaluation (comparison against a desired self-concept), which feeds off one's identity in previous roles (Grima & Beaujolin, 2014; Conroy & O'Leary-Kelly, 2014). However, this literature does not adequately explain

how self-doubt favors mobility or why employees decide to stay on even when they doubt themselves. Nor does it sufficiently account for the role of workplace experiences, challenges to one's capacities, or self-renewal through actions. Our research addresses these gaps.

## **Methodology**

To account for the complexity of identity dynamics, data is needed that relates to the two types of self-reflections: certainty and doubt (Sonenshein et al., 2014). The challenge of obtaining data on self-doubt in the workplace has been identified by many researchers, who point out that in their narratives employees construct their identity with an eye on coherence, promoting their own uniqueness compared to others (Ybema et al., 2009). The career narrative method (Alvesson & Robertson, 2016) generates information about a narrative identity and not necessarily about the reality of the individual's intimate identity as he develops a self-image under the gaze of another. Employees interviewed reconstruct their past, always with a certain amount of illusion. Telling a narrative to another person involves hiding certain things, something it is difficult to own up to, whether to others or to oneself.

Yet Ricœur (1990) believes that the narrative serves the dialectic function in identity-building, superimposing coherent, immutable and recognizable images of the self (*idem*) with fragmented, unstable and unrecognizable images (*ipse*). The construction of a more or less coherent narrative involves looking for proof, reinforcing certainties about self-unity, and also distantiation from the self as the narrator discovers inconsistencies while speaking. The narrative serves a repetitive function (Dailey & Browning, 2014), reinforcing one's identification with sameness and distancing oneself from that which is deemed too foreign or strange, and even from one's self-image when it proves inconsistent. Ricœur understands narrative identity as a dialectic between the search for a unifying story that allows the narrator to believe in a unique and coherent identity and the accidents of the narrative in which this coherency disappears. When the person recognizes himself in his narrative, it is his *idem* identity that comes to the fore; when this common thread is undermined, it is the *ipse* identity that manifests itself. Despite the search for unity, narratives contain inconsistencies and ambiguities produced more or less consciously and which the interviewee sometimes discovers (Hoyer & Steyaert, 2015). The narrator cannot always control his story, revealing his doubts about what he is, what he is capable of doing, and what he hopes to become.

A work context can also encourage the narrator to reveal himself. In the social sector, reflection, in which one's practices are questioned, is commonplace and valued, as explained

by one department head: *'You can't do this job if you don't have times when you look at yourself from another angle, when you take a step back from yourself and have something to say about your own practices'* (no. 8). It is customary to organize moments of collective evaluation of the way social workers engage with those in their care; these unsettle the identity of employees in such a way that they can regulate and improve their practices, thus avoiding professional strain.

The research we conducted in the social sector came about through a fortuitous encounter with the HR director of a French company which had 1,037 employees at the time of the study. In 2012 we conducted 75 semi-structured interviews with educational workers (73%), three directors, six department heads and 11 other employees (secretaries, psychologists, chefs and a night watchwoman). By way of introduction, we asked respondents to describe their career. We deliberately asked neutral questions so as not to influence their responses. Most of our interventions were sentences of encouragement or to ask for further details or validate an idea raised by our interlocutors. We asked them to describe what they did at work, encouraging them to talk about their life projects.

The interviews were recorded and then transcribed and coded. We used the Gioia methodology (Gioia, Corley & Hamilton, 2012), resulting in a representation of the data structure (Figure 1), which first describes the codes closest to the data (1<sup>st</sup>-order codes) followed by categories with a higher conceptual level (2<sup>nd</sup>-order themes and aggregate dimensions). Ultimately we were able to deduce five aggregate dimensions (associated with ten 2<sup>nd</sup>-order themes) from this work: distantiation by others from the self (marked by their poor esteem of the individual's capacities and their refusal to recognize his ethical positions), distantiation from others (refusal to behave like others and rejection of their ethical positions), distantiation from the self (doubt about one's own capacities and ethical positions), reinforcement (affirmed certainty about one's capacities and claimed ethical certainty), and renewal (identification of emerging capacities and projected loyalty to oneself). By adopting this procedure, we can ensure the theoretical explanatory model is based on the data (Gioia et al., 2012). For this reason, our results are presented using an arborescent coding schema. This approach allows us to describe the three categories of employees in terms of doubt. Furthermore, our informants also provided indications about the alternation – and even entanglement – between doubts and certainties, especially the 'self-doubters'. For each category, we also identified the impact of identity dynamics on their career projects, with knowledge of their desire to leave or remain in their job.

**Figure 1. Data structure**





## Self-doubt and its impact on professional life projects

Four major findings stem from the data collected. The first is that doubts and certainties (about the self and about others) relate to capacities and ethical positions. The three other findings can be used to describe the identity dynamics in three categories of employees based on doubt and its impact on their professional life projects.

### 1. Doubts and certainties about capacities and ethical positions

In all of the narratives, themes relating to capacities and ethical positions are addressed, whether about doubts or certainties and whether the questions raised are formulated by or about themselves or others. We present the data with ten 2<sup>nd</sup>-order themes addressing the different doubts and certainties about the self and others.

#### Doubts about the self expressed by others

*Three 1<sup>st</sup>-order codes relate to 'others' poor esteem of one's capacities'.*

**The first 1<sup>st</sup>-order code** is 'others challenging one's capacities'. Several employees perceive colleagues and their superiors as negatively judging their capacity to do their work. They perceive doubts expressed by others about their effectiveness when it comes to correctly dealing with the public, i.e. carrying out the missions entrusted to them and which forge their identity as educational workers. They feel others hold them in poor esteem for what they are capable of doing. The situation in one of the association's entities provides a good illustration of this perception.

Several social workers in an organization responsible for rehabilitating desocialized youths described the criticisms expressed by their superiors, which they feel question their capacity to serve as educational workers. Their managers accuse them of being responsible for tensions and even violent situations as a result of their counter-productive actions. We interviewed the department head (interviewee no. 4), who recognized that he had judged the work of his team harshly. He feels that the educational workers place too much importance on 'structure', explaining that their job is to communicate the rules of society to the youths in their care (getting up and going to bed at reasonable hours, participating in collective tasks, etc.). But he feels that the workers in his team behave excessively: *'At times it amounts to retaliation. It's a completely ineffective and endless cycle'*. He gives the example of one youth who was denied access to cigarettes for ten days despite having an addiction and who tried to jump out a window: *'The kid cracked. He didn't understand why. It was a disproportionate punishment. There are other types of punishments that make sense.'* The psychologist also believes that the team is at *'rock bottom when it comes to education'*, that they operate on *'affect'* without

*'taking a step back'* (no. 18). These criticisms are perceived by the educational workers as a challenge to their capacity to do their jobs. We interviewed five members of the team, who reject the doubts expressed by their superiors: *'We were stigmatized. Our managers made really harsh comments without trying to understand why we operated the way we did'* (interviewee no. 8). These educational workers felt they had been judged negatively by others, projecting an image of incapable individuals.

**The second 1<sup>st</sup>-order theme** is 'injustice in terms of consideration'. Doubts about one's capacities are fueled by the refusal to recognize the work carried out by denying those concerned their financial compensation or time off: *'We work hard and all we get is a rap on the knuckles. At some point you realize that maybe what you put in is excessive compared to what you get in return'* (no. 16). These educational workers feel they are not given sufficient recognition for the work they do with the youths in their care and for the organization, working long days with irregular shifts to the detriment of their personal lives (working late in the evening and on weekends with regular timetable changes).

**The third 1<sup>st</sup>-order theme** is 'others criticizing one's absence of self-doubt'. Self-criticism is regularly described as an essential capacity to serve as an educational worker. This is a reproach made by superiors when they observe militant attitudes among educational workers who refuse to take heed and remain entrenched in their position: *'They never asked any questions of themselves or engaged in self-criticism'* (no. 4).

We went on to use these three codes in several interviews conducted in other structures. On each occasion, the employees themselves did not have any doubts; it was others who doubted their capacities. They resist how others define their identity, and the questions raised by others about their capacities are associated with perceived injustice in terms of their compensation.

*Two 1<sup>st</sup>-order codes relate to the 'refusal to recognize one's ethical positions'.*

**The first code** relates to 'others questioning one's educational positions'. These social workers' managers doubt that their employees have the right attitude, that they are in the right place or that they are doing good. In the case of the organization working with desocialized youths, the educational workers felt they were doing good by running an educational project that gave structure to those in their care, but their ethical positions were not recognized: *'People always think we don't reflect on our practices, but most of us went through school, I did my whole dissertation on punishments, so I've asked myself a lot of questions about punishments'* (no. 8). Their ethical and educational position (doing good for the youths in

their care by forcing them to adopt rules of shared living in society) is not recognized by management; worse still, it is actually considered to be detrimental.

**The second code** associated with this theme is ‘isolation and abandonment by management’. The educational workers we interviewed referred to a scenario in which they feel like the only ones who think they are in the right place. They observe colleagues who have the support of management and a different ethical approach (not imposing rules), which creates confusion and a sense that the institution disregards them. One educational worker (no. 11) expressed this feeling of isolation: *‘We tried to put in place some structure, but the other teams don’t have the same educational practices and that creates tensions. A lot of educational workers don’t feel good in their job because of that. They don’t feel supported’*. The doubts expressed about them are then turned back on the doubter: it is others whose position is dubious and not their own.

#### Doubts about others

*Two 1<sup>st</sup>-order codes relate to ‘poor esteem of others’ capacities’.*

**The first 1<sup>st</sup>-order code** is the ‘refusal to behave like others’. Employees sometimes make critical remarks about the effectiveness of the work of others. Those who doubt their capacities are in turn questioned in terms of what they are capable of doing (reciprocal doubt). These criticisms target colleagues who are not capable of applying rules with careful reflection. The capacities of management are also questioned, as expressed by several educational workers from one organization that works with disabled children. They feel that their managers do not punish the children as they should.

**The second 1<sup>st</sup>-order code** associated with this theme is the ‘refusal to lose one’s capacities in contact with others’. One educational worker feared losing her identity due to the poor influence of her department head: *‘I can’t work with people I don’t respect, people who aren’t resources for me. My problem here is that I feel like I’m stagnating or even regressing, I get the impression I’m becoming stupid’* (no. 16). This perceived risk that the attitudes of others lead to a loss of capacities is associated with the fear of developing poor ethical positions.

*Two 1<sup>st</sup>-order codes relate to the ‘rejection of others’ ethical positions’.*

**The first 1<sup>st</sup>-order code** is ‘criticism of educational positions’. We observed that managers sometimes question the ethical positions of their employees, criticizing how they punish the youths in their care. One manager raised doubts about the ethics of an educational worker who she said provoked youths into action, so they would break the rules and could then be punished, but the consequences for them were serious. Conversely, managers can also be

criticized for their own ethical positions. One educational worker criticized the capacity of his managers to impose punishments in a non-arbitrary manner: *'I have a different vision of what it means to be a coach than that displayed by our head of department. Here, one minute it's blue, one minute it's red, the next it's green. One minute you're a friend, the next you're not'* (no. 62).

**The second 1<sup>st</sup>-order code** is 'criticizing recommended changes in the profession'. One medical and psychological worker expressed regret at being removed from the field due to her obligations to spend time explaining the effects of educational work on children. She felt that was not her place and that her priority should be to work closely with those who needed her care to improve their condition: *'I find we spend too much time on paperwork'* (no. 56). *'I try to fight it, to make people understand that the reason we are in social work is to benefit those who need us: I think it's up to us to give something back to them, not to spend our time writing'* (no. 61). This view serves as a way to fend off criticisms from parents and financial backers. This educational worker's (right) place is questioned in terms of being loyal to herself by contributing to the well-being of those in her care.

Ultimately, expressing doubts about others is a way for employees to be combative and put forward another professional model for how to do things and which ethical position to adopt. We recorded no employee testimonies recognizing the fairness of the criticisms expressed by others. It is rare for anyone to provide a positive description of the reproaches made against their practices. However, it is possible for the criticisms made by others to be integrated into the self-doubt expressed by employees.

#### Self-doubt expressed by employees

*Two 1<sup>st</sup>-order codes relate to 'doubts about one's own capacities'.*

**The first 1<sup>st</sup>-order code** relates to the 'limits of one's educational practices'. Several employees raised questions about the relevance of their actions and the limits of their capacity to carry out their work. It is by confronting the reality on the ground and the reactions of the public that self-doubt emerges. Experiencing failure with those in their care gives them a sense of perspective on the relevance of their educational work: *'After six years, we had really reached the limit of what we could offer them, we had no more new ideas; we started going round in circles. We couldn't bring them any further'* (no. 70).

**The second 1<sup>st</sup>-order code** relates to the employees' 'physical and cognitive limits'. These educational workers also question their capacity to make the right decisions: *'We wonder whether our analysis is objective, whether our values and representations play a part'* (no.

31). *'That could pose a danger: a massive lack of objectivity'* (no. 40). Some of our respondents wonder whether they are capable of doing their work, whether they are worn out and out of step with the situations they face: *'When you reach my age, you feel out of step. You no longer understand parental functions'* (no. 44). Such limits are not only down to the professional concerned; the people they deal with are perceived as more difficult, with a higher number of mentally ill patients, bringing social workers face-to-face with their limits. A lack of time, resources or support is also often cited as the cause of stressful situations that raise doubts about their capacity to stay the course and generate the energy they need: *'Doing things badly is stressful, it wears you down and you can no longer find meaning in your work'* (no. 21). Doubts about capacities are often associated with ethical doubts.

*Two 1<sup>st</sup>-order codes relate to doubts about one's own ethics.*

**The first 1<sup>st</sup>-order code** relates to 'questioning one's educational positions'. Several social workers described how they felt they were no longer present, or rather that they were no longer in the right place. Beyond doubting the effectiveness of their educational practices, these employees wonder whether they are in the right place: do their educational positions generate well-being? This loss of the certainty that their work does good is described by one educational worker in reference to his first job: *'From an educational point of view, I wasn't at ease. We used to hit them directly and sometimes the youths would hit the educational workers. I came away physically intact, and professionally I found my place, but from an ethical and psychological point of view it was very negative for me'* (no. 41). This employee questions his ethics and distances himself from what he did, rejecting the educational position previously adopted. These ethical doubts were also expressed by workers in terms of the role played by punishments, as explained by one educational worker: *'I think my biggest dilemma here is in terms of punishments, and there isn't always agreement. I find that we shout a lot. I often face dilemmas in relation to that with the children, and I try to do things differently'* (no. 68). Here she establishes a distance from herself in terms of how punishments are used, reflecting on an approach that might be better for the children.

**The second 1<sup>st</sup>-order code** relates to 'questioning one's life project'. This difficulty of being oneself is a feeling that is also described in reference to plans for the future. Several employees expressed doubts about what they want to become. A change in the social approach in one department led to changes in the educational positions adopted. Employees perceived the new norms as ambiguous, somewhere between punishment and support. They could not identify with the new approach and had doubts about the future: *'The question is,*

*will it be educational? When you're faced with an extreme situation when someone is placed in care, you're supposed to monitor them, but if they see us as someone who committed them to care and they don't understand why, and didn't see the danger for the child, then the relationship is complicated'* (no. 31). Employees feel a disconnect from their mission and their social role.

Two department heads and two employees who had undergone management training also expressed concern about their future roles. They are not sure whether they want to adopt the ethical positions associated with the role of manager. Nor are they sure that it is the right role for them, as they are worried about losing their integrity: *'I don't want to give up the human dimension'* (no. 7). Their ethical certainties lead to doubts about what they want to become.

### Self-certainties

Our recorded testimonies reveal not only self-doubt but also express certainty about their capacities and ethical positions. With varying levels of assertion and assurance depending on the context, they told us they are capable of correctly performing their work and that they recognize their self-image as being faithful to the person they want to be.

*Four 1<sup>st</sup>-order codes relate to 'affirmed certainty about one's capacities'.*

**The first 1<sup>st</sup>-order code** relates to 'promoting one's own capacities'. We recorded several testimonies from employees who highlighted their own capacities to do their work properly, recognizing their own effectiveness. Such certainties relate to their identity: I am someone who is able to do their work and achieve this outcome. They often gave examples of situations that painted them in a positive light: *'Often, when something has to be said, it is said in one way; to unsettle them, I say it in another way, so they have to take some time out and listen to things the other way round'* (no. 64). It is also essential in this profession to have the capacity to respect the right distance: *'One or two of them sort of treat me like a friend, they put their arm around my shoulder. It can kind of lean towards seduction and it's up to us to put things straight'* (no. 57). Promoting one's own capacities is about identifying with results in the workplace, as in the case of this educational worker: *'I know a lot about horse-riding, which allows me to reassure them, to show them, and they really pay attention'* (no. 2). Expressions of recently acquired self-certainty are also used to counter doubts expressed by others: affirming one's capacities is a way to contradict criticisms by demonstrating one's success. **The second 1<sup>st</sup>-order code** is 'recognition of capacities by others'. Others are, in this case, recipients of care. Care providers enjoy this gratitude as an opportunity to affirm their capacities, especially when these are contested by managers: *'Some of the young people were*

*really grateful, sending letters from places they had been to thank us for what we had done'* (no. 6). Reciprocal esteem from those in their care generates self-loyalty. Recognition can also come from colleagues, as explained by this educational worker: *'I was sort of identified as someone who was welcoming, helping new arrivals with their support work at the start'* (no. 26). It can also come from institutional partners: *'The reason we were able to expand is that we had secured recognition in the region. It's the work done by people on the ground that made it possible'* (no. 50).

**The third 1<sup>st</sup>-order code** in relation to this theme is the 'capacity to know one's limits': defining oneself also implies identifying what one is not capable of doing. *'We also have our limits, and there are limits you must not go beyond, you mustn't put yourself in danger'* (no. 57). This worker raises the issue of the right position to adopt: is he in a position to treat other people properly?

*Three 1<sup>st</sup>-order codes relate to 'claimed certainties about ethical positions'.*

**The first 1<sup>st</sup>-order code** is 'being in the right place'. This category describes the narratives of employees who feel confident about their ethical positions, which they consider to be in line with what they are and what they want to be (loyalty to one's life project): *'I think you don't end up in this job by chance. There's something, an experience in my personal life, that is responsible for me being here today'* (no. 55). The purpose of this commitment is to do good for others: *'My mission is to make people happy'* (no. 64). Such self-loyalty is built up over time; individuals may have a sense of accomplishment in their work and find themselves in sync with their life project (concordance with self-promise). Our respondent employees described self-loyalty and demanding professional standards underpinning the self in their role in society. Their educational positions provide responses to ethical dilemmas. The issue of punishment, as a good or bad solution for the well-being of youths, goes unresolved. One's educational position is also used to counter doubts expressed by others: *'They need to be taught to respect the rules like in society, you have to respect the laws, at work there will be rules to respect'* (no. 8).

**The second 1<sup>st</sup>-order code** is 'being fair'. In order to do good for the youths in their care, respondents often referred to the need for fairness: *'I know that one of my strong points is finding a balance whereby I try to be fair, fair with everyone. If I say to myself one day that I didn't spend enough time with one person, I'll do the next day'* (no. 57). Acting fairly in this context means not judging the youths, according to one department head: *'The aim is to try to understand, not judge'* (no. 4). Doing good and adopting a position that is fair also means not

acting in place of others and respecting their freedom to choose: *'We remind them that there is a structure. We try to make do. We're not there to tell them: I know what to do and you don't. We advise them but at the same time we respect what they do'* (no. 22). This narrative underlines the capacity to evaluate the fairness of one's own actions without external monitoring and is linked to values (doing good, being fair, not judging), that relate to one's life project.

**The third 1<sup>st</sup>-order code** is 'shared ethics'. The respondents often explained how their identity develops through their links with others, via shared self-esteem as part of an ethical approach that is built up collectively: *'We're one of the first departments in France to have done it, and it's something we are proud of. What we did was we asked for an analysis of our practices as a team in the presence of a psychologist, and that was an extremely beneficial experience. It taught us a lot'* (no. 40). Ethical certainties can be formalized as part of a departmental project, as explained by one director: *'We identified a path of progress in this department which we called: usage is a person. That's an ethical position. This dimension is important because at times we are seen as the judge's armed wing. But we're not, we're a structure that is supposed to find the right words to understand certain difficulties and to help the families reformulate that in front of the judge. It's not the same thing'* (no. 30). These ethical principles then guide employees, facilitating the identification process by providing self-certainty.

*Three 1<sup>st</sup>-order codes relate to the 'identification of emerging capacities'.*

**The first 1<sup>st</sup>-order code** relates to 'reassuring oneself about one's own capacities'. Several of our respondents explained how they gradually gained assurance and confidence in their capacities following a period of doubt: *'Being able to excel, gain confidence in yourself through practice, the things you can put in place as you progress, a journey that gives you more confidence built on your experience and the skills you have'* (no. 1).

**The second 1<sup>st</sup>-order code** is 'constant experimentation'. Several respondents mentioned the fact that learning is an ongoing process in their job. They regularly experiment in order to adapt, thereby developing new capacities. They value this enrichment of what they are capable of doing, projecting a positive image of who they are. This source of vitality is an expression of professional accomplishment that can be associated with self-renewal in sync with one's life project.

**The third 1<sup>st</sup>-order code** is 'identifying potential'. Several employees pointed to capacities that could potentially be used in the future. One department head (no. 4) explained how his



union activities in the industry revealed capacities that were useful in the social sector as the workers appreciated him for his advice. One night watchwoman developed capacities beyond her professional role and now hopes to build on them and become an educational worker: *'As the years went by I learned to do more than just surveillance. Young people would come down when they weren't feeling well and we would chat. I didn't receive any training but I feel capable'* (no. 27). Identifying capacities in this way allows the person to imagine a better future and develop self-recognition and self-loyalty.

*Two 1<sup>st</sup>-order codes relate to the 'quest for self-loyalty'.*

**The first 1<sup>st</sup>-order code** is 'coherence regained'. Some employees feel they have regained a sense of coherence that they had previously lost in terms of their life plans. They found evidence of a possible alignment between their ethical principles and professional activities. The search for coherence is almost complete for one secretary, who told us she had found herself again following a period of doubt after the arrival of a new director: *'I can see myself in the way he works with families and children, I like it a lot'* (no. 72). Being ethically demanding can be a driving force.

**The second 1<sup>st</sup>-order code** relating to this theme is 'activity in line with one's convictions'. The search for self-loyalty can also be in a state of gestation as part of a professional life project that is being made tangible. Several employees spoke of how they sought a path that would make their life projects correspond to their professional activities. They spoke of their convictions and desire to play a positive role in society, of doing good through their actions at work: *'I think that ultimately I would like a job linked to the problems facing young people because I think in France we are missing something for that age group. With the fall in public financing, a lot of young people are left to themselves. They're not ready to take on an active life'* (no. 24). Their life plans have yet to become tangible realities but they build on their certainties as they continue along their path.

This description of the 1<sup>st</sup>-order codes relating to the ten different themes ultimately reveals the importance in these narratives of the questions raised about capacities and ethics in the workplace in identity dynamics (Figure 1). This is our first finding. Capacities and ethics are perceived either positively, where the individual or others affirm the self, or negatively, thus fueling doubts. First of all, the employees we interviewed spontaneously referred to doubts and certainties in relation to their capacity to do their work, revealing whether they are (or are not) more or less in line with what they want to be. They expressed loss or affirmation of their identity. Several narratives contained indications about the existence (or absence) of

capacities that paint a positive picture of the individual in terms of their effectiveness, the fairness of their actions, the recognition they have secured, and the limits of their practices. Doubts or affirmations in relation to their ethical positions are also frequent in the recorded narratives, revealing their commitment – supported to varying degrees by others – to do good in society and act fairly. These point to plans to develop self-loyalty (individual and collective), plans that are seen through with varying success. These themes are articulated differently from one employee to the next, revealing distinct identity dynamics.

## 2. Identity dynamics and professional life projects

The identity dynamics in the three categories of employee narratives described in relation to doubt are based on the aggregate dimensions taken from the data. We can also reveal indications about the impact of these dynamics on our respondents' professional life projects.

### Three categories of identity narratives

The second result of this research is the description of the three categories of identity narratives based on the five aggregate dimensions in our arborescent coding schema (made up of ten 2<sup>nd</sup>-order themes). The first three dimensions are forms of distantiation: from the self (doubts raised by others and oneself) and from others. The issue of doubt is central to the identity-building process. Several employees distance themselves from their self-image, which they perceive as foreign to the image they have or want to have of themselves. The same mechanism exists to defend oneself in relation to others. The two other aggregate dimensions related to self-certainty, sometimes related to self-doubt and which can be expressed in two ways:

- self-promotion by the individual who has accumulated certainties (reinforcement);
- as yet uncertain self-identification following a period of doubt (renewal).

These five aggregate dimensions can be used to describe the three categories of identity narratives. Those with 'no apparent doubts' are characterized by the expression of self-certainty only (reinforcement), with no distantiation from the self or from others. These employees expressed no doubt (whether their own or expressed by or about others). The directors we interviewed, for example, stuck to a carefully guarded description of their career, providing little information about their identity and even less about their doubts. This makes for well-constructed coherence. In our survey we identified 33 employees belonging to this category, representing more than one-third of all the educational workers in the sample (Table 1). 'Self-doubters' are characterized by distantiation from the self. They themselves question the self, a process mainly driven by their experience of facing up to their work content. They

surprise themselves, referring back to past experiences. ‘Self-doubters’ may describe certainties in relation to ideals or projects that have been put into perspective by their experiences and the impossibility of being faithful to those certainties. Either these certainties related to past experience and have become dampened or they are in the process of being developed (renewal). In our survey, 28 employees belong to this category, representing 43.6% of the educational workers interviewed (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Interviewee types in relation to self-doubt

|                         | <b>No apparent doubts</b><br>( <u>reinforcement</u> ) | <b>Self-doubters</b><br>( <u>distantiation</u> from self and renewal) | <b>Strugglers</b><br>( <u>distantiation</u> by others from self, <u>distantiation</u> from others and <u>reinforcement</u> ) | Total     |
|-------------------------|---|---|--|-----------|
| Educational workers (F) | 12  | 17  | 7  | <b>36</b> |
| Educational workers (M) | 8   | 7   | 4  | <b>19</b> |
| Dept. heads             | 2   | 3   | 1  | <b>6</b>  |
| Secretaries             | 3   | 1   | 2  | <b>6</b>  |
| Directors               | 3   |   |  | <b>3</b>  |
| Other                   | 5   |   |  | <b>5</b>  |
| <b>Total</b>            | <b>33</b>   | <b>28</b>   | <b>14</b>  | <b>75</b> |

Lastly, the category of ‘strugglers’ is characterized by the existence of self-doubt but generated exclusively by others (distantiation by others from the self) and not accepted by the individual concerned. In our survey, 14 employees find themselves in this situation, representing 20% of the educational workers interviewed (Table 1). They often also criticize others (distantiation from others). Others who expressed doubts about them are in turn criticized for their capacities and ethical positions (reciprocal doubt). To defend themselves, strugglers affirm their self-recognition, promoting their capacities and ethical positions (reinforcement) in the absence of recognition or support from others. The defensive battle to remove these doubts actually ensures that they remain present, despite the struggler’s denial. This indicates the possibility of an entanglement between the *idem* and *ipse* identities, an entanglement that is masked yet potent.

#### Alternation and entanglement between self-doubt and self-certainty

In the case of 21 ‘self-doubters’, we also observed an alternation – or even an entanglement – between phases of doubt and certainty (or vice versa), sometimes within the same job and sometimes in the case of career mobility. This is our third finding.

In the ‘strugglers’ category, the revelation by our interviewees of doubts generated by others is countered by the affirmation of their capacities and ethical positions. Here, the narratives were preceded by or ended with a criticism of others in relation to these two aspects. The

alternation between self-doubt and self-certainty can also be observed in employees when referring to professional transitions. One educational worker recalled the well-being experienced in a previous situation after moving to the job she now holds, which allowed her to achieve coherence with the self for a certain period: *‘With the previous management [in her current job], I felt in sync with my values, my vision of the work, respect for people, taking it as a whole, it’s about building things up over time. (...) At Gala [previous job], I noticed that the people in the greatest difficulty were unable to project themselves forward, and I used to ask them, and I didn’t feel at ease about it, I would say to myself: we’re mistaken. (...) Here the notion of comprehensive support suited me, the ethical approach that I sensed in management (no. 47).* The ethical certainties that she built up with the previous management team (reinforcement) stand in contrast with the doubts she experienced in her previous job and those that have emerged with the changes affecting her current position (distantiation): *‘We’re heading towards the compartmentalization of people’s labor, that’s what financial backers want (...) We’re going to lose the comprehensive nature of care (...) I think that makes things more burdensome and skews things because we are here to work up close with people. It’s not a change that is going in the right direction’.* This is why she is trying to change jobs: *‘If all the signals I’m getting point in the same direction, I know there’s an opportunity in another department and I will seize it. Even if the nature of my work changes, I think I’m ready to change’.* She doubts she is being loyal to herself (distantiation) and is projecting herself towards a new position in which she imagines a new sense of coherence with herself (renewal): *‘What comes to the fore for me is to be able to work with a minimum amount of recognition, and to have a coherence and philosophy in which I feel good’.*

This alternation between phases of self-doubt and self-certainty in times of professional transition is not only determined by a context that is imposed on the individual; it is also the result of a life project to which that person hopes to be faithful. Several interviewees spoke of changes in the content of their work that either run counter to or support their ethics. They spoke of their life projects which cause them to project themselves (or not) into a different job in which they hope to find the answers to their questions about the self (renewal).

It is sometimes difficult to distinguish expressions of doubt from expressions of certainty in respondent narratives, as is clear from this educational worker’s comments: *‘Three severely disabled children: torn between nine unbridled teenagers, and the three others who were highly dependent, not much could be done, I felt alone managing those children. (...) What counts is the well-being you can provide for the child, the atmosphere you can create; I managed to do things with the children; impossible in situations with 12 children where I was*

*torn between them and frustrated. Last year, I lost track of myself with all those children*' (no. 63). Here there is an entanglement between phases of distantiation (loss of effectiveness synonymous with loss of the self) and identification (adherence to past successes and the mission at hand: well-being of the children). Self-doubt does not necessarily lead to career mobility.

#### Impact on professional life project

The fourth finding clarifies the links between these identity dynamics, marked to varying degrees by self-doubt, and one's life project. It emerges that 'self-doubters' have (or had) a balanced desire either to stay in or leave their job (Table 2). Some want to leave either because they feel stuck in a routine or because their work missions have been changed. They can no longer find any meaning in their work that is in sync with their identity. They perceive a loss of self-loyalty. Other 'self-doubters' stay on because they feel stimulated by the challenges to their self and hope to secure their capacities and ethical positions. Three doubters remain uncertain, torn between self-doubt and self-certainty. Most of the strugglers hope to leave, while a majority of those with no apparent doubts intend to stay in their job.

**Table 2.** *Breakdown of employee profiles by life project*

|                    | No apparent doubts | Strugglers | Self-doubters | Total     |
|--------------------|--------------------|------------|---------------|-----------|
| <b>Stay</b>        | 25                 | 3          | 14            | <b>42</b> |
| <b>Leave</b>       | 8                  | 11         | 11            | <b>30</b> |
| <b>Uncertainty</b> | 0                  | 0          | 3             | <b>3</b>  |
| <b>Total</b>       | <b>33</b>          | <b>14</b>  | <b>28</b>     | <b>75</b> |

### Main contributions

Our findings contribute to the literature on identity and careers. Our first contribution is to specify the identity representations that have not been correctly described in the literature (Alvesson, 2010). 'Self-doubters' are marked by their acceptance of challenges to the self, whether internal (emanating from oneself) or external (emanating from others). Paradoxically, doubt can become an element in one's identity structure when the individual is open to challenges or has very low self-recognition. When encouraged by one's profession or work experiences, self-doubt can therefore be positive, stimulating self-development, or negative where it is an expression of domination and reflects low levels of assurance. This is not the case of strugglers, who reject the doubts expressed by others and in so doing stigmatize their identity: he who criticizes me is himself worthy of criticism (reciprocal doubt). However,

people can mask their doubts behind outward assurance. The identity of the struggler can be instead seen as an identity in flight when self-doubt appears to be completely absent. This is also true of those with no apparent doubts (Alvesson & Robertson, 2016). This is the first time that these three identity representations have been distinguished in this way. We offer an original description of their characteristics through different *agencements* of five dimensions that include two identity-building approaches: distantiation (by others from the self, from oneself, and from others) and self-affirmation (reinforcement and renewal).

Another contribution of this research is to draw in more depth on the work of Ricœur. The literature does not sufficiently emphasize the ethical dimensions of identity dynamics or explore them in terms of capacities. These are features of Ricœur's writings, yet are insufficiently referred to even by Mallet and Wapshott (2012). We have shown that self-doubt (distantiation) and self-certainty (affirmation) relate to these two aspects and point to the two identity processes to which Ricœur refers: *ipse* and *idem*. The philosopher did not use the term *certainty* but rather *recognition*, which relates to the process of accumulating proof about the coherence of one's identity. In using the word *certainty*, we reinforce the dialectical nature of the two processes, which are fed by regular challenges to the self in terms of capacities and ethics relative to one's self-loyalty.

Furthermore, we have shown how this dual self-reflection is developed in situations of solitary confrontation between employees and their work activities, and not necessarily in response to the identities generated by others, something that has rarely been shown (Mainhagu et al., 2018). This is especially true of the self-doubters, who in our survey can be distinguished from the strugglers by the existence of self-doubt expressed by the employees themselves, whether or not these include the doubts generated by others. There is an alternation – and even an entanglement – between the *idem* and *ipse* identities, in contrast to the other categories. Here, the questions raised about one's capacities are often associated with questions about ethical positions. The employee often initiates the self-doubt, something that has rarely been indicated in the literature. This goes further than the contributions of Senensheim et al. (2014) by linking the doubts and certainties initiated by work scenarios to the process inherent in identity dynamics.

Lastly, we propose new concepts not explicitly mentioned by Ricœur. First, reciprocal doubt (and even contempt) complements the reciprocal authenticity or recognition of identity as described by the philosopher. The absence of reciprocal recognition can lead to reciprocal doubt. There are also asymmetrical situations in reciprocity with others (recognition of others by the self/non-recognition of the self by others and vice versa). In this more or less balanced

relationship, others represent the hierarchy (or even the institution) or the user (in this case, the people in the care of the educational workers). The hierarchical other is often seen by our respondents as a representative of the organization and as a source of constraint, recognition or disregard. In contrast, the other-as-user is referred to both in terms of what is at stake in the proximity between them (requirement of distance from the user as a fellow human being) and as a source of humanistic idealization and an ethical mission that underpins the *idem* identity. Second, we extend the work of Ricœur by distinguishing between two *idem* states: renewal and reinforcement. The testimonials enable us to identify two specific ways in which the self is affirmed (*idem* identity). Employees more or less explicitly value their capacities and ethical positions based on past experiences:

- where this construction of the self is hesitant, we refer to the “renewal” phase, which is marked by the search for proof of effectiveness and recognition;
- where certainty is consolidated through repetition, without any doubts expressed, we refer to the “reinforcement” phase.

Reinforcement of the self is rarely addressed in the literature (Beech, Hibbert, MacIntosh & McInnes, 2009); the renewal process even less so. Yet these two processes give us a more refined understanding of identity dynamics. We achieve this by combining the different aggregate dimensions described above, with a cyclical alternation between three phases: reinforcement (*idem*), distantiation (*ipse*), renewal (*idem*) and so on. Sometimes, the cycle of identity dynamics highlights an entanglement between doubts (*ipse*) and certainties (*idem*) – more or less pronounced depending on the work context – experienced in the past and present, especially by self-doubters.

As regards the second finding of this research, we also contribute to the literature on careers: by distinguishing between two forms of doubt – internal (either initiated by the person or acceptance of doubts expressed by others) and external (emanating from others) – we can reveal the different ways they impact on life projects. We provide a more precise explanation than Rothausen et al. (2017) of the nature of doubt and its nuanced effects on the decision to leave one’s job, since this is a decision not only driven by one’s environment but also as a result of the confrontation with one’s work content, something that has rarely been addressed by the literature (Mainhagu et al., 2018).

Furthermore, self-doubt is not systematically associated with career mobility. This aspect is overlooked in Rothausen et al. (2017) and in the literature on careers more generally, which pays little attention to employees who wish to remain in their job (Mainhagu et al., 2018). It might be argued that employees leave their jobs when they feel isolated in the face of doubts

expressed by others which they reject, thus generating within them doubts about the identity of others. However, the acceptance by employees of self-doubt does not necessarily mean they plan to remain in their job; everything depends on the nature of that doubt and the support they have to overcome it or accept it as a source of enrichment or as a path towards progress. In contrast, the absence of doubt in our employee narratives is associated with career stability. We believe it is unlikely for employees to be characterized by a single identity state ('self-doubter', 'struggler' or 'no apparent doubts'), and that it is more likely for self-doubt to be more or less present in their career depending on the context in which they perform their work activities (experienced intimately) and the context of their relationships with others. Following 'mundane' periods, in which identity is affirmed (reinforcement), employees can be 'surprised' by themselves and question what they are (distantiation from the self). There are several possible configurations of career dynamics. Certainties can be rebuilt (renewal) within the same job or following a career move. Ultimately, these original assertions, new to the literature, require verification. Our research is not without limitations, given that the data was collected in a specific sector, one in which doubt is encouraged. Indeed, it is because of this characteristic that we were able to obtain such rich information about self-doubt. Yet there is nothing to suggest that such processes do not exist in other sectors. One possible extension of this research would be to test our findings in the context of industrial activities where innovation is valued, thus leading to the recognition of doubt as a virtue, which might make it easier for respondents to speak about this issue. This could point to a distinction between the attitudes of 'strugglers', who hide their doubts, and those more open to discussion, facilitating a smooth transition between the *idem* and *ipse* identities.

Several managerial implications can be identified. First, it would appear that recognition favors identity-building among employees. Managers seem to have an important role to play they avoid as considering skills, only in a factual manner. It is through their capacities that the identity of employees is evaluated. Management can also extricate their employees from harmful isolation by encouraging collective reflection on ethical positions. Lastly, even though individual paths do not always converge with the collective path, there is nothing to prevent management from adopting an ethical approach where they support the careers of their employees (even those that stray) and avoid negatively judging their identity. One may not agree with them, but it is unethical to denigrate them. These various theoretical and managerial contributions stimulate further research on identity dynamics in the workplace despite the methodological pitfalls. Our study shows that it is possible to obtain intimate data by circumventing the artifice of language.



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