

## **An Ethnographic Approach to the School-to-Work Transition: Constructing Identities in the Workplace**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Transitions, such as the school-to-work transition, are of particular interest to developmental science research because they mark different periods in life where a person moves from one period to the next. Using data from an ethnographic study with young women who recently moved from school to work, the researcher examines how the women construct identities through narratives and position themselves vis-à-vis others and vis-à-vis dominant discourses in both ethnographic interviews and participant observation. Making use of a fine-grained analytic approach referred to as the narrative practice approach, the researcher showcases how the women position themselves as having transitioned from the individual identities they had before moving into the workplace to more of a collaborative identity after having connected with others in their new work environment. With the analysis, the researcher also delves deeper into the uncertainties and the ambivalence of identity changes that the women claim having experienced. By investigating how the women actually experienced their school-to-work transition in situ and in vivo, and by studying the nuances and complexity of their experiences, the article makes contributions to both narrative research and psychology. It also informs organizations how they can train their employees and improve individual, team, and organizational performance by infusing collaboration into the organizational culture.*

**KEYWORDS:** ethnographic approach, identity construction, narrative practice approach, positioning, school-to-work transition.

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Transitions are of particular interest to developmental science research because they mark different periods in life where a person moves from one period to the next. One example of a transition that is of importance to young people across the world is the school-to-work transition (STWT), which is defined as transitioning from school to stable and/or satisfactory employment (Shehu & Nilsson, 2014). The STWT is often associated with uncertainty, instability, and change (Brunila & Lundahl, 2020; Marshall & Butler, 2015; Ryan, 2001), and is considerably longer, more complex, and involves more risk for young people nowadays compared to previous generations (Kovacheva & Pohl, 2007; Lundahl, 2011).

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According to the biopsychosocial model (BPSM) of challenge and threat, a developmental transition such as the STWT can be interpreted as a *challenge*, that is, a positive motivational state in which the individual experiences having the necessary resources to deal with situational demands, or as a *threat*, that is, a negative motivational state in which the individual experiences having insufficient resources to handle the situation (Blascovich & Mendes, 2000). Blascovich and colleagues (2004) found in a study on college athletes that those who experienced a challenge motivational state performed better than those who experienced a threat motivational state, which may suggest that individuals who interpret the STWT as a challenge would experience greater success in their transition than those who interpret the transition as a threat. Gaining deeper insights into how individuals transitioning from school to work make meaning of the uncertainties and ambivalence that they may experience is of great interest to psychological research, especially during a transition that nowadays tends to be inherently ambiguous and unstable (Brunila & Lundahl, 2020; Lundahl, 2011). As part of this transition, individuals may also be in the process of producing identities, and transitioning from one identity to another, which is investigated in this article.

Transitions, such as the transition from school to work, are typically studied using quantitative methodology (see Hirschi, 2010; Kuron et al., 2015; Piquart et al., 2003) or by using a qualitative approach in which individuals are asked to retrospectively make sense of their life experiences (see Masdonati et al., 2010; Tilbury et al., 2009). Quantitative methodology fails to take into account some of the nuances and complexity that are possible to investigate using qualitative methodology, but simply relying on retrospective sensemaking also has its shortcomings because it allows individuals to reframe and straighten out their experiences instead of giving the researchers a glimpse into their actual experiences. This calls for a different type of qualitative approach to investigate individuals' experiences during transitions such as the STWT, and one such approach is ethnography. Through, for instance, participant observation, ethnographic interviews, and ethnographic maps (Murchison, 2010), researchers would be able to investigate how individuals actually experience the STWT in situ and in vivo, or in other words, immerse themselves in situations in which people interact (Holstein & Gubrium, 2008), as well as generate snapshots of their moment-by-moment experiences. It would also allow researchers to study the nuances and complexity of individuals' experiences, which warrants the approach taken in the present study. Using data from an ethnographic study with young women who have recently made the transition from university to a management consulting firm in Stockholm, Sweden, in this article, I report on an investigation of how the women construct identities through narratives and position themselves vis-à-vis others and vis-à-vis dominant discourses in both ethnographic interviews and participant observation. By using a type of discourse analysis to analyze ethnographic data, this research contributes to the body of work on sociolinguistics, especially the research conducted by influential anthropologists such as Gumperz (1982) and Heath (2012). Gumperz (1982) coined the term "contextualization cues" to refer to how both verbal and nonverbal cues could be interpreted within the context of social interaction, and Heath (2012) investigated how culture influences the use of language through her work in linguistic anthropology, which emphasizes the importance of linking ethnography and discourse analysis.

The conceptual framework adopted in this article is referred to as *identity in interaction*, which views identity as a construct that emerges in and through social interaction; specifically, in the way that individuals "perform" identity when interacting with others, and here particularly through their use of language (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998; Bamberg et al., 2011; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; De Fina, 2011). This kind of framework is broadly speaking called *the social*

*constructionist view of identity*, which has the potential to provide insights into developmental processes through the identity construction that individuals engage in. This view of identity can be contrasted with a more traditional view of identity, which suggests that it is a construct that is personal and resides within the mind of an individual (Erikson, 1968, 1980; Marcia, 1966).

In order to study identity as a construct that emerges in and through social interaction it is necessary to use an approach to analysis that focuses on investigating narrative practices and thereby takes into account the discursive and performative nature of identity. Focusing on studying narrative practices as they are performed in social interaction (Bamberg, 2006; De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2008; Gubrium & Holstein, 2008) leads to the analysis of *small stories* that are practiced in everyday, ordinary situations (Bamberg, 2006). What is central here is the focus on the ongoing and fluid meaning-making that individuals engage in when they tell these small stories in everyday interactions, and simultaneously construct various identities.

In this article there are two types of identities of focus, namely individual and collaborative identities. Examples of individual identities are (a) college student identity (Jones & Abes, 2013; Kaufman, 2014), (b) graduate identity (Holmes, 2001, 2015), and (c) career identity (Fugate et al., 2004; LaPointe, 2010), which are all temporally-connected identities that tend to be constructed during the STWT. I define a collaborative identity as a non-temporal identity that is shared between individuals with whom one collaborates, and it emerged from the data collected in the present study.

Through analyzing small stories, and thus taking into account various identity dilemmas described in detail in “The Present Study” section, it is also possible to provide insight into individuals’ identity changes, specifically how they interpret spaces of uncertainty and ambivalence during the STWT as either challenges or threats.

The purpose of this article is to examine how young women who have recently moved from university to the workplace construct more of a collaborative identity in their verbal accounts in ethnographic interviews and their practices in the workplace. In addition, I provide insight into the uncertainties and the ambivalence of identity changes that these women perceive having experienced. These combined goals enable me to investigate the nuances and complexity of the women’s experiences, which as mentioned above, is made possible by conducting ethnographic research.

## **The Present Study**

The present study is an ethnographic study based on fieldwork in a mid-sized management consulting firm in Stockholm, Sweden from 2019 to 2020. The process of gaining access to the consulting firm took several months in early 2019, and it involved identifying and reaching out to several dozen companies to eventually gain access to the firm under study. With the help of the firm’s HR Manager, I was able to successfully recruit two participants in June 2019, whom I would follow in their work for weeks to come, as they interacted with their colleagues and managers. During the first phase of the study, I conducted participant observation and ethnographic interviews with the participants for 20 hours over the course of two weeks in the summer of 2019 and subsequently transcribed and analyzed the data that I had collected. During the second phase of the study, which took place over the course of two weeks before and after the holidays in the winter of 2019/2020, I conducted additional participant observation and ethnographic interviews, and afterward transcribed and analyzed that data as well. The following subsections provide details

about the participants under study, the procedure of data collection, and the approach to analysis taken to analyze the data.

## **Participants**

The two participants recruited for the study were two young Swedish women who had worked in the consulting firm for approximately 11 months. Both (who were given the pseudonyms “Louise” and “Anna”) were white, middle-class, heterosexual women, in their mid-twenties at the time, and they had been identified by the firm as the highest performing employees who had recently started at the firm after completing their university studies. Their school performance had also been taken into account and judged as excellent by the firm since they were among the top of their class.

Other members of Louise’s and Anna’s team, who surface in the excerpts analyzed in the Data and Analysis section, were given the pseudonyms Daniel, Emil, Nick, Sara, and Mikael. Daniel was the manager of the team, Emil was a senior project manager, who was also part of the leadership group, Nick was a project manager (being replaced by the new project manager Sara), and Mikael was a junior team member, but not quite as new to the firm as Louise and Anna.

## **Procedure**

### ***Participant Observation***

During my participant observation in the summer of 2019, and before and after the holidays in the winter of 2019/2020, I took detailed notes of the behaviors and rituals in which Louise and Anna engaged, interactions they had with their colleagues and managers at the firm, and what they shared verbally, as they carried out their individual work and participated in various team meetings. I took notes by hand in a notebook in Swedish to capture the nuances of the culture and to be able to write down direct quotes as they spontaneously occurred; and shortly thereafter I typed these notes in English and expanded on them. I asked early on during the participant observation if I would be allowed to record my observations, but due to what I assumed to be confidentiality issues, I was asked to just take notes in my notebook. I also made sketches of the office area and the seating arrangement of the individuals I was observing, including where I was sitting in relation to them (also referred to as ethnographic maps).

### ***Ethnographic Interviews***

During my time observing at the firm, I held three ethnographic interviews individually with Louise and Anna. The first interview took place during the last days of the first two-week period during the summer of 2019 and lasted for approximately 1 hour. The first half of the interview inquired about Louise’s and Anna’s experiences at university, their transition from university to the workplace, and their experiences at the firm up until that point. In the second half of the interview, they were asked to make sense of specific behaviors and interactions that they had engaged in, and what they had expressed verbally, during my observations. When asking these questions, I would try to take them back to the time when the behaviors or interactions took place, or the verbal accounts were shared, so they could express their understanding of what had taken place.

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I held the second individual interview with Louise and Anna during the two-week period in the winter of 2019/2020, after the first week of participant observation, and the third interview after the second week of participant observation, after they had returned to work after the holidays. These interviews lasted for approximately half an hour each, and Louise and Anna were asked in the same way as in our first interview to make sense of specific behaviors and interactions that they had engaged in, and verbal accounts that they had shared, during the participant observation. The interviews were in English because the women were also fluent in English, and they were recorded with an audio recorder and transcribed for analysis.

### Approach to Analysis

- The data from the present study were analyzed using the narrative practice approach (Bamberg, 2020), which allowed me to investigate how identities were discursively and performatively co-constructed and navigated by the women in the study. I conducted a fine-grained analysis of how the women positioned themselves and constructed a sense of who they were through the stories they told. This was achieved by investigating how they navigated three identity dilemmatic spaces (Bamberg, 2020) in their narratives:
- *Agency vs. Passivity*: I analyzed how the women positioned themselves as either *agentive* individuals who had a sense of control over the world and who took responsibility for producing and changing the world, or as *passive* individuals who were controlled by the world and to whom things just happened.
- *Sameness vs. Difference*: I analyzed the ways in which the women positioned themselves as the *same, similar, or different*, with respect to others.
- *Constancy vs. Change*: I analyzed how the women positioned themselves as either the *same person* over the course of their STWT, or as *having changed* over the course of this transition, either marginally or radically.

When adopting the narrative practice approach researchers also engage in an analytic procedure referred to as positioning analysis, which has been demonstrated to take place at three levels of positioning (Bamberg, 2020):

1. *Positioning Level I*: At the first level of analysis, I analyzed how the women sequentially positioned characters in their stories, such as themselves, their colleagues, and their managers, in relation to one another. In this analysis I worked with the three dilemmatic spaces outlined above: (1) agency vs. passivity, (2) sameness vs. difference, and (3) constancy vs. change. When analyzing the verbal data from the participant observation I also examined the non-verbal behavior that the women engaged in.
2. *Positioning Level II*: At the second level of analysis, I investigated how the women positioned themselves in relation to me when narrating their stories, taking into account that our interviews were co-constructed at a particular place and time.
3. *Positioning Level III*: At the third level of analysis, I examined how the women positioned themselves in relation to dominant discourses, which allowed the participants to communicate a sense of who they were to me and to themselves.

The three positioning levels have been presented in a particular sequence in this section, and this is typically the order they are analyzed in. However, it should be noted that when

conducting the analysis of the various excerpts in the following section, they were considered in the order that was most appropriate to each specific excerpt.

## Data and Analysis

Two excerpts from the ethnographic interviews and two excerpts from the participant observation were selected for presentation of the analysis because they provide good illustrations of a prevalent theme that occurred throughout the data: Both women positioned themselves as having transitioned from the individual identities they had before moving into the workplace to more of a collaborative identity after having connected with others in their new work environment. Another reason for selecting these particular excerpts was that they present simple but comprehensive examples in terms of how the women constructed and enacted their school-to-work transition identities.

### Analysis of Excerpts from Ethnographic Interviews

The following two excerpts (transcribed with the Jeffersonian transcription notation illustrated in the Appendix) stem from two ethnographic interviews held with Louise and Anna in which they position themselves as having transitioned from individual identities to more of a collaborative identity in their new work environment. In both excerpts they describe working in a supportive, collaborative environment in which their colleagues play a large role in helping them develop and perform highly.

#### *Excerpt 1*

The first excerpt comes from the first ethnographic interview with Louise, held toward the end of the first two-week period of participant observation at the firm after I had been observing Louise and Anna daily in their new work environment, including various team meetings. The particular exchange followed after Louise and I had been talking at length about her college years—for which she positioned herself as a hard-working, determined, and well-rounded student—and were moving into her transition into the firm. In this excerpt, she claims to have changed her way of thinking after realizing that all her colleagues were working together, helping and supporting each other instead of working on their own, something she claims she used to do while at university. With my analysis, I illustrate how Louise positions herself in terms of Bamberg's (2020) three positioning levels and how she navigates the three identity dilemmatic spaces (1) agency vs. passivity, (2) sameness vs. difference, and (3) constancy vs. change, and what we can conclude from this for her self-understanding.

#### **Excerpt 1; August 21, 2019**

##### **Participant: Louise**

- 1 *Researcher:* So could you tell me eh (.) more about
- 2 the transition into the workplace?
- 3 so after your Master's and starting here at the company
- 4 *Louise:* Yeah as you know
- 5 we're having this trainee program

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6 and I think that gives you a really like easy overlap from college to (.) to your work  
7 because we were like 13 people who started at the same time (.)  
8 all of us are new  
9 we are like new with being a management consultant  
10 but we're also new in like a work role (.)  
11 I have been working beside my studies on my Master level  
12 but I think that was very different  
13 because you know that ok this is only a (.) for a short period (.)  
14 of course you wanted to like show then  
15 that you were able to do the job  
16 and that you like were performing great  
17 but I think this was like really the first situation that really matters for you (.)  
18 but I think that when we have this first really intense introduction week  
19 it really helps you to (.) a little bit change your mind  
20 I think what was totally new for me was that ok  
21 I will not be graded on everything I do  
22 people actually want to help you and support you  
23 and we always had that like climate in my (.) with my friends  
24 that of course we help each other and support each other  
25 before like an examination  
26 but I think here it was so clear that we are doing this together all of us  
27 the whole company  
28 use our like structure capital  
29 use the intranet  
30 ask people  
31 you don't (.) almost never have to build something from the start  
32 and I think that was like a new way of thinking  
33 that ok I will not be graded for everything I do  
34 but I (.) I think the transition was (.) that was like in some ways a relief  
35 to understand ok that I'm in a safe zone  
36 but I (.) in some point also a little bit hard  
37 because you were like used to getting these like grades  
38 and something to say like you're great  
39 you're doing great  
40 you're doing the right progress  
41 and sometimes it's hard to see like ok what's the long-term goal (.)  
42 we already had like a lot of these development plans this spring  
43 and I think that helped me to really like  
44 ok where do I wanna go?  
45 not just take like (.) ok now I will be here at work  
46 and have the same life for four years  
47 I think it's important for me to set like these milestones also for my work life

In line 4, in response to my opening request, Louise aligns herself with me as the interviewer/researcher who has been following her in her work for almost two weeks. With lines 5-6, she alludes to the significance of the trainee program, which—in her words—facilitates a smooth

transition into the workplace. She uses the inclusive first-person plural pronoun “we” to align herself with the other trainees in line 5 and switches to using the generalized second-person pronoun “you” in line 6. In lines 7-10, she switches back to the inclusive first-person plural pronouns “we” and “us”, thereby aligning herself with the rest of the trainees in that they all are new in the management consultant role and a work role in general. Louise mentions in passing her previous work experiences in lines 11-17 and emphasizes (in line 17) how important her current role is to her compared to her part-time work during her Master’s studies. She positions herself as agentive in lines 14-17 when emphasizing that she wanted to perform highly in her part-time work during her Master’s studies, but especially when starting at the firm which she claims mattered more to her personally. The fact that she brought up her work performance in lines 14-17 could have been influenced by her knowledge that I was at the firm to investigate her transition from a high-performing student to a high-performing employee, and by us talking about her academic performance while at university earlier during the interview. The switch from the first-person pronoun “I” to the second-person pronoun “you” in lines 13-17 indicates on one hand some distancing of her evaluation of herself and her individual work performance, but on the other hand how a generalized other might be behaving as well. In line 18, however, she again uses the inclusive first-person plural pronoun “we” in reference to herself and the other trainees, making them relevant to the change that she refers to in the following lines.

In line 19, Louise claims to have developed a new kind of thinking, orienting the interlocutor toward the discourse of self-development. In lines 20-22 she explains that, while at university, she expected to be graded on everything she did. However, going through the introduction week at the firm made her realize that her colleagues just want to help and support her. The use of the generalized second-person pronoun “you” in lines 19 and 22 is different than in lines 13-17 in the way that she is not only distancing her evaluation of herself, but she is using this pronoun as a way to include her trainee colleagues, whom she referred to in lines 7-10, and herself in her evaluation. Using the second-person pronoun here, she again aligns herself with her colleagues and positions herself as belonging to them. In lines 23-25, she positions her friends at university as different from her colleagues at the firm seeing as they did not have the same level of support or feeling of doing something together. This becomes more evident in lines 26-31 when she details how her colleagues at the firm are there to help and support one another through building on each other’s work and asking each other questions, to quote (line 26): “...we are doing this together all of us,” calling to mind the dominant discourse of “together we are stronger.” The use of the inclusive first-person plural pronoun “we” in line 26 suggests a more intimate way of aligning herself with her colleagues than her previous use of the second-person pronoun “you” in reference to herself and her colleagues. This can be interpreted as her considering herself and her colleagues as a unit, or a team, which further calls attention to how she positions herself as having transitioned into a more collaborative sense of self.

In line 32, she again refers to this transition as something new, again calling up the discourse of self-development and suggesting her new sense of self as part of a more collaborative identity. In line 33, she repeats what she said in line 21, emphasizing the difference between being graded for everything she did which was the case during her college years and not being evaluated or judged in that way, but just getting support from her colleagues and the firm. She describes this change as both a relief to be in a “safe zone” (lines 34-35), and also as a bit difficult, due to not getting clear affirmations about performing well and making good progress (lines 36-40). Here, she displays some uncertainty and ambivalence between her individual and collaborative identities in the way that there is instant gratification in the form of a sense of belonging, but she is missing



the experience of satisfaction that comes from getting good grades and knowing that she is on the right track. In lines 33-36, she uses the first-person pronoun “I” to talk about her own transition from being graded to being in a “safe zone,” but then switches to the second-person pronoun “you” in lines 37-40, somewhat externalizing her evaluation of herself as performing well. In line 41, she again touches upon the struggle she describes when making the transition to no longer being graded on her work, but quickly focuses on how she has learned to think about the future and set milestones for her work life with the help of the firm (lines 42-47). In these lines, she again displays an ambivalence between her individual and collaborative identities in the way that she was previously told what her goals were supposed to be, but along with embracing more of a collaborative identity comes the difficult task of having to define their long-term goals themselves, both individually and as a team.

Louise displays agency in lines 43-47 when talking about the milestones of her work life and simultaneously positions herself as a *can-do girl*, that is, a self-driven, empowered, and a high-performing individual who is striving for self-actualization (Harris, 2004). Other people at the firm, referred to through the inclusive first-person plural pronoun “we” in line 42, are again brought into her storyline as being there to help and support her (lines 42-44). By use of this pronoun, she aligns herself as similar to others at the firm, including her manager—calling up a bottom-up organizational culture as a reference frame in which people collaborate to reach a common goal.

### ***Excerpt 2***

The second excerpt originated during the first ethnographic interview with Anna. This interview was also held toward the end of the first two-week period of participant observation in the firm. This excerpt was situated right after she had talked about her experiences in college—where she had positioned herself as a high-performing, responsible, and well-rounded student; and from where we moved into talking about her transition into her new work environment. This excerpt documents how Anna, similarly to Louise, positions herself as having transitioned into more of a collaborative identity. She claims having come from focusing on her individual achievement, and needing to prove herself to her colleagues, to now being a part of her trainee group—due to various team-building activities and working with her colleagues for a year. In the analysis, similar to that of excerpt 1 above, I exemplify how Anna positions herself in terms of three positioning levels and how she navigates the three identity dilemmatic spaces (1) agency vs. passivity, (2) sameness vs. difference, and (3) constancy vs. change (Bamberg, 2020).

### **Excerpt 2; August 22, 2019**

#### **Participant: Anna**

1. *Researcher:* So moving on to the transition from college to the workplace
2. could you tell me a little bit more about what your experience was like?
3. *Anna:* Mhm. First, of course, I was su:::per nervous
4. but when I applied for this job
5. I really had a good gut feeling about it
6. and when I came here it was (.) really (.)
7. we did things, like exercises
8. and team-building activities

9. and group developing activities as well that really felt like
10. I don't know
11. fast forwarding into a very long-term relationship with people (.)
12. so I went so quickly from being nervous and new
13. to feel that we were a part of something (.)
14. and that something that was our trainee group then
15. and then after that
16. when we were introduced to the rest of the company
17. then there was again like this nervousness
18. and I felt like I wasn't enough
19. and I felt like I had to prove myself
20. I don't think that I really needed (.)
21. but being new
22. and I don't know
23. wanting so much
24. so it was not too hard I think
25. but it was tiresome and eh (.)
26. but in a positive way (.)
27. but I also felt many times
28. I think it's first now when it's been a year
29. that I feel more on the same level
30. or equal to my colleagues (.)
31. when I came here the first day
32. this year then
33. I really felt for the first time like I'm a part of the company
34. and before that I felt like I was new
35. and I didn't really (.)
36. could give to them as much as I wanted to

In lines 1-2, I give Anna the floor by asking her to tell me about her experience of transitioning from college to the workplace. In line 3, she shares that she was “super nervous” when first entering the management consulting firm, elongating the pronunciation of the “u” in “super” to emphasize her tension. She claims that this feeling changed after engaging in various exercises, team-building activities, and group developing activities with her colleagues (lines 7-9). Through these activities, she was able to develop a long-term relationship with her trainee group (line 11) and quickly felt part of the group (lines 12-14), which is a way of positioning herself as forming a collaborative identity. In lines 13-14, she switches to the inclusive first-person plural pronouns “we” and “our” after having used the first-person pronoun “I” to talk about transitioning into the firm. She claims: “we were a part of something” (line 13)—referring to the trainee group—and thereby asserting herself as similar to the rest of the trainees.

In the second part of the excerpt, Anna starts out admitting that she again felt nervous (line 17), like she wasn't enough (line 18), and like she had to prove herself (line 19) when being introduced to the rest of her more experienced colleagues in the firm. She affirms herself as different from her colleagues and as not feeling confident in her abilities due to being “new” (line 21). However, in hindsight she hints at having realized that she did not need to prove herself (line 20), but she tried to anyway because of recently starting at the firm and wanting to show everyone

that she could perform well (lines 21-23). When looking back, she claims that she did not find it difficult to prove herself (line 24), even though it seemed to have demanded energy from her (line 25), and that she got something positive out of it (line 26). She shares in lines 27-30 that she started feeling on the same level as her colleagues first after a year at the firm and that she recently started feeling like a part of the company (line 33). Here, she begins to specify herself as transitioning from viewing herself as different from them a year earlier to now identifying herself as being part of, and belonging to, them. In lines 34-36, and partly echoing lines 18 and 21, she emphasizes the change of her sense of self from being new and not included to feeling a part of, and able to add value to, the company. Throughout lines 17-36, she speaks in the first-person (pronoun “I”) and uses the third-person pronoun “them” when talking about herself in comparison to her more experienced colleagues, marking a clear distinction between the way she uses the inclusive first-person plural pronouns “we” and “our” to talk about herself in relation to her trainee group. This indicates that even though she positions herself as the same as her more experienced colleagues toward the end of the excerpt, she—in the context of the ethnographic interview with me—talks about herself and the trainee group as a unit and herself and the rest of her colleagues as different and separate.

### **Analysis of Excerpts from Participant Observation**

With the following two excerpts from my observation notes I show how both Louise and Anna, in different ways, collaborate to create a team spirit: through an explicit discussion (in excerpt 3), and within an informal interaction with one another (excerpt 4).

#### ***Excerpt 3***

The following excerpt originated during an afternoon team meeting on August 12, 2019, with the whole team present. The interaction took place toward the end of the meeting after the team had engaged in a bonding activity, and Daniel was giving a PowerPoint presentation and group discussion about their work with their client. This excerpt was selected to provide an explicit discussion about how the team members view themselves as having to act in order to work together successfully, and collectively reflect on this.

#### **Excerpt 3; August 12, 2019 at 3-4:30 pm**

**Individuals present at the team meeting: Louise, Anna, Daniel (manager), Emil, Nick, and Sara (project managers), Mikael**

Daniel starts talking about the work they have done for the client in a cloud-based system that they have been working in: “We are offering something unique here. The client wants to create a high-performing team and we need to make her successful in this role. We want to make her good at her job.” He also mentions the importance of making clear to the client how they are saving money based on the team’s work. “What do we think about this? Is this in line with what we want to do in the fall?” Daniel asks the team as he pauses his presentation. Emil shares an idea after a brief moment, but no one else around the table contributes further to the conversation. The next slide that comes up on the screen has the title “Our collective representation of HOW we need to act to be successful together” and it has seven bullet points: (1) Openness, honesty, and consideration, (2) Ownership and syncing expectations, (3) Courage and resolution, (4) Power-duos, (5) Target

and adaptation, (6) Zoom out and reflect, (7) Positivity. Daniel starts the conversation by saying about the last bullet point: “It hasn’t been super easy and we’ve had to talk smack about the client with each other, but then we’ve tried to be positive.” He asks everyone to take a few moments to think about these bullet points. Nick goes first: “I think we’re open with each other in the team” and Louise goes second: “We’re good at keeping each other in the loop and we communicate with each other.” Emil says: “We need to have a sense of community in the leadership group now,” and Daniel says “We’ve been working under the radar... we shouldn’t have any other goals than the ones they set.”

Daniel starts out taking the floor, referring to the team’s work with their client. He uses the inclusive first-person plural pronoun “we,” referencing himself and the rest of the team, thereby building toward a sense of intimacy and the impression that they are a unit. With the following two questions: “What do we think about this? Is this in line with what we want to do in the fall?” he uses the non-inclusive “we,” thereby giving me, the outsider, the impression that the team members habitually use the pronoun “we” even when the team leader is not part of it. In other words, whether more authoritative members of the team are present or not, the team is still the “we-team”—seemingly speaking with one voice. This impression was only strengthened as I continued my fieldwork at the firm.

When Daniel gives the team the floor, there is a moment of silence before Emil makes a bid in, which I interpret to constitute an attempt to break an awkward silence. Since no one else follows up on his bid, Daniel continues with a slide entitled “Our collective representation of HOW we need to act to be successful together.” The use of the words “collective,” “we,” and “together” again seem to underscore a sense of them being a team that needs to act in a certain way in order to work successfully with one another. Seven bullet points form the guidelines for that work, and, given that Daniel does not elaborate further and jumps directly into a discussion about how they have been applied in their work with the client, I inferred that the team is familiar with them. Daniel starts out by reflecting on how it has not been easy to be positive in their work with the client, but that they have successfully turned to each other for support. He uses the inclusive first-person plural pronoun “we” when referring to his work experiences when helping their client, and the other team members who make a bid for the floor follow suit. Nick refers to the openness they have in the team, and this is where Louise concurs that they communicate well in the team. Emil brings up his own experience working in the firm’s leadership group using the inclusive first-person plural pronoun “we” to refer not to the team, but to the leadership group. He mentions a sense of “community” from which it could be inferred that they have not had that sense, but are working toward it. I interpret Emil bringing up his work with the leadership group in that particular moment as expressing his belief that this information is relevant to the team’s work with their client, and that a sense of community in the leadership group would help them work together as a team as well. In Daniel’s last turn of this excerpt, he successfully brings the focus back to the team’s work with the client, insinuating that they have had other goals than the client, but that their goals now needed to be aligned with their client’s goals in order for the team to be successful.

Overall, excerpt 3 showcases how the members of the team, including Louise and Anna, construe each other and themselves as a collaborative team that is governed by their goal—which also is identified as the goal of the leadership group—namely to serve their client to be successful. While this is relatively explicitly worked up in the interaction captured in excerpt 3, in my analysis of the following excerpt I show how the same kind of collaborative identity may be generated in more indirect and subtle ways.

*Excerpt 4*

The following excerpt comes from a team meeting in the morning of August 14, 2019, with most members present, though with Daniel and the project manager Sara on speakerphone. I was sitting together with the team in a circle taking notes in my notebook. The interaction in this specific excerpt took place toward the beginning of the meeting after Louise had set up the speakerphones for Daniel and Sara to attend the meeting virtually. Daniel, who was traveling for work, had asked each of the team members to tell everyone what they had been planning to do during the rest of the day right before the following interaction took place:

**Excerpt 4; August 14, 2019 at 8:40-9:05 am**

**Individuals present at the team meeting: Louise, Anna, Daniel (on speakerphone), Emil, Sara (on speakerphone), Mikael**

Each of the team members briefly start going over the specifics of what they will be doing throughout the day and as Emil is discussing his daily schedule, we hear a sound coming from the speakers which could be interpreted as horse hooves, or a suitcase being rolled on cobblestone. Emil asks Daniel jokingly: “Are you taking the horse to work?” and everyone around the table—including Louise and Anna—laughs. “No, it’s the suitcase,” Sara answers. As Daniel is talking to Mikael, who is sharing information about a client, the sound is still coming from the speakers and Emil pretends to be riding a horse. Louise and Anna make eye contact with Emil and smile and laugh companionably, and the rest of the team laughs in unison. Daniel, who has not shown in any way that he is amused with the situation, signals that he is about to hang up: “Does anyone want to bring up anything else?” “No” the team says in unison and Daniel says “See you later” before he hangs up.

In this excerpt, my focus is mainly on the nonverbal communication between the team members. The sound coming through Daniel’s phone while he is traveling could be interpreted in a number of ways, but Emil jokingly asks if he is taking the horse to work, to which all the team members in the room—including Louise and Anna—laugh. Sara provides a more reasonable explanation, but Emil continues jokingly and pretends to be riding a horse, which results in Louise and Anna making eye contact with him, smiling, and laughing companionably, and the rest of the team laughing in unison. What this encapsulates or demonstrates to me as the outsider is that Emil shows he is comfortable enough in this environment to joke, and Louise and Anna, as well as the rest of the team members, join in and show that there is a kind of intimacy and camaraderie between them. This kind of interaction between the team members can be viewed as working toward building a team spirit that will enable them to grow closer and enable one another to collaborate more successfully, which, as demonstrated in excerpt 3, is the stated goal of the team. Daniel shows with his deadpan response that he is not part of the process of demonstrating this kind of camaraderie and that he is trying to maintain the seriousness that a morning team meeting would typically bring. Toward the end of the excerpt, the team members respond “No” in unison to Daniel’s question if they wanted to bring up anything else, which further shows how the team works as a unit when interacting with one another.

Even though there is not many conversational data to analyze in this excerpt, for some reason, I must have found it to be note-worthy because it stood out from the rest of my field notes. Retrospectively, I take this to be a special display of how the team members interact with one another and exhibit a camaraderie and team spirit, that is, as a situation that symbolizes their mutual

goal to collaborate successfully. I consider this to be a way of not only telling but also showing how they work well together as a team.

## Discussion

With my analysis of the ethnographic data in this article I was able to showcase how two young women who had recently moved from university to the workplace construct more of a collaborative identity in their verbal accounts in ethnographic interviews and their practices in the workplace. I was also able to gain deeper insights into the uncertainties and the ambivalence of identity changes that these women claim to have experienced during their STWT. These aspects of identity change can be interpreted in terms of the biopsychosocial model (BPSM) of challenge and threat (Blascovich & Mendes, 2000) as having experienced both a positive motivational state when going through a smooth transition and quickly becoming a part of a team and a negative motivational state when at times feeling anxious and uncertain during this transition into more of a collaborative identity.

By using an ethnographic approach when collecting my data, I was able to go beyond quantitative methodology or a qualitative approach that solely focuses on investigating individuals' retrospective accounts. I was able to investigate how the women actually experienced their STWT in situ and in vivo, and generate snapshots of their moment-by-moment experiences. I was also able to study the nuances and complexity of their experiences by more clearly realizing their uncertainties and ambivalence as part of their identity change. Making use of a fine-grained analytic approach, such as the narrative practice approach, to work with ethnographic data, I was able to take into account the discursive and performative nature of identity, and study identity as a construct that is fluid and resides in social interaction. This seems to go beyond using more traditional approaches to narrative analysis in which *big stories* (Josselson & Lieblich, 2009; McAdams, 2013) typically are the focus, or venturing outside the realm of qualitative methodology into, for instance, surveys, experiments, or the like, which are less likely to study identity as a construct that emerges in and through social interaction. By using a type of discourse analysis to analyze ethnographic data, this research contributes to the body of work on sociolinguistics, especially the research conducted by influential anthropologists such as Gumperz (1982) and Heath (2012), which emphasizes the importance of linking ethnography and discourse analysis.

A limitation of the present study is that it is based on a limited amount of ethnographic data. The original plan was to visit the management consulting firm one more time in May 2020 to collect more ethnographic data, but due to the outbreak of COVID-19 this was not possible. Because of using a fine-grained approach to analysis, however, such as the narrative practice approach, it was possible to make up for this shortcoming of the study. By analyzing small stories that are practiced in everyday, ordinary situations, and focusing in detail on the process of the women's identity constructions, there was an abundance of data that can be analyzed from both angles, as ethnographic interviews and as participant observations.

The present study makes an important contribution to narrative research in the way that it, through the use of an ethnographic approach, elaborates on the narrative practice approach that tends to focus exclusively on individuals' verbal and non-verbal accounts shared in interviews. There is a great benefit to studying how individuals actually experience changes, such as the STWT, as they are taking place in vivo and in situ, and create snapshots of their moment-by-moment experiences. The article that the study is based on also makes a significant contribution to psychology in the way that it focuses on how transitions can be interpreted as either a challenge

or a threat, and thus takes into account the complexity and nuances of individuals' sense-making capabilities. In addition to this, there are important implications for human resource development in the way that the article informs organizations how they can train their employees and improve individual, team, and organizational performance by infusing collaboration into the organizational culture.

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### Notes on Contributor

*Felicia Wolontis* is a PhD candidate in Developmental Psychology at Clark University in Worcester, MA. Her dissertation research takes a discursive approach to investigate how young women who have recently made the transition from university to the workplace construct their career identities over developmental time. She aspires to find a postdoctoral position in which she can continue to pursue qualitative research.

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## Appendix

### *Transcription notation*

Each line in the transcripts from the ethnographic interviews was numbered in order to allow for specific points in the interactional units to be referenced in the analysis. The following transcript symbols from the Jeffersonian transcription notation (Jefferson, 2004) were used when transcribing the excerpts from the ethnographic interviews:

- (.) Short pauses between utterances were marked by a dot in parentheses
- ::: Colons refer to the prolongation of the sound that was just uttered

Other transcript symbols from the Jeffersonian transcription notation were omitted because they were not mentioned in the analysis of the excerpts.

The excerpts from the participant observation were transcribed as narratives because they contained both observational and verbal data. These excerpts illustrated the sequence of events, and participants' utterances were transcribed verbatim from the expanded field notes.