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# The terms of “becoming empowered”: How ascriptions and negotiations of employee identities shape the outcomes of workplace voice activities

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## ABSTRACT

While empowerment practices have been the subject of considerable debate, little attention has been paid to how employees shape the outcomes of these practices through their active participation. Through analyses of interactions in workplace voice activities, this study shows how developing initiatives to improve the local organization of work is complicated by the fact that supporting initiatives as an employee can lead to undesired identity ascriptions from other participants, especially in relation to employees' organizational identification or disidentification. By drawing on the method of membership categorization analysis, it is argued that the appeal of voice activities for employees depends on how the terms of “becoming empowered” are negotiated in practice, and that these negotiations shape the employees' participation in the practices.

## 1. Introduction

Empowerment practices (Conger & Kanungo, 1988), such as employee voice and participation in organizational decision-making (Busck, Knudsen, & Lind, 2010), self-managing work teams (Kuipers & de Witte, 2005) and total quality management (Quist, Skålén, & Clegg, 2007), are highly common in modern organizations. However, there has been considerable debate over the effects of engaging in these practices for organizations and employees. From a mainstream perspective, involving employees in workplace decision-making is thought to be beneficial for both the organization, in terms of improved performance, innovation, and quality, and for the employees, in terms of increased self-efficacy, work motivation, and organizational identification (Crowley, Payne, & Kennedy, 2013; Humborstad, 2013). In contrast, critical theorists have pointed out that since empowerment practices are typically controlled by the management, employees rarely find themselves sufficiently empowered to implement suggestions on their own without the managers' support (Boje & Rosile, 2001; Hardy & Leiba-O'Sullivan, 1998; Wilkinson, 1998), and that empowerment practices might replace more comprehensive efforts to democratize the workplace (Taylor, 2001; Johnstone & Ackers, 2015). Furthermore, the use of empowerment practices to promote organizational identification has been regarded as an attempt to regulate employees' identities, due to how this identification implies disciplining one's work effort and avoiding criticizing the management (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002;

Appelbaum, Hébert, & Leroux, 1999; Hardy & Leiba-O'Sullivan, 1998). As a result, empowerment practices might ultimately shift the balance within the employment relationship to the employers' advantage (Thomas & Davies, 2011).

The debate between mainstream and critical empowerment perspectives has been said to be locked in a “dualistic either–or opposition” (Boje & Rosile, 2001; see also Humborstad, 2013). However, only limited attention has been paid to how employees shape the outcomes of empowerment practices through their active participation (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992; Greasley, Bryman, & Dainty, 2005; Pohler & Luchak et al., 2014). This is surprising since empowerment practices cannot function without employees' cooperation. Because most employees are “neither class-conscious revolutionaries nor passive docile automatons” (Jermier, Knights, & Nord, 1994: 9), the way they engage in empowerment practices is likely to reflect the benefits, costs and risks perceived by the employees in the situation, rather than the general optimism or skepticism espoused by the dominant empowerment perspectives outlined above (Crowley et al., 2013; Johnson, 1994; Pohler & Luchak et al., 2014).

One area within the empowerment literature where employees have arguably been viewed as especially “passive” and “docile” is in how the employees' identities are typically either seen as shaped by participating in empowerment practices (within the mainstream perspective) or as a result of managerial identity control (within the critical perspective). However, in interaction, identities and identifications are

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also a subject of continuous negotiation (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998; Sacks, 1992; Schegloff, 2007), and the way identities are negotiated can shape the organizational outcomes of the interaction (Coupland & Brown, 2012; Larsson & Lundholm, 2013; Whittle, Housley, & Gilchrist, 2015). One important social threat that not just employees, but people in general work to manage is that of avoiding undesired identity ascriptions. Among other things, such ascriptions are made relevant by the actions one takes, motivating us to account for our actions (Jayyusi, 1984) or simply avoid actions which could give “the wrong impression”.

For empowerment practices which contain elements of voice, an important outcome is the concrete initiatives for changing the organization of work which are developed, initiatives which employees shape by choosing which initiatives to suggest and support. If employees do not make such suggestions or are not willing to put in the effort to see them through, it seems doubtful that the purported benefits of empowerment practices mentioned above will materialize. However, suggesting or supporting certain change initiatives as an employee can entail identity ascriptions from others, depending on the character of the initiative. For example, since managerial approval is typically needed in order to implement suggestions from empowerment activities, employees might increase their chances of attaining improvements to their working conditions by prioritizing initiatives which are conceived as especially likely to be supported by the management, by presenting these initiatives to the management in a persuasive manner, and by indicating a willingness to go beyond their formal obligations in order to help the organization (Dutton & Ashford, 1993). When an employee displays such efforts to accommodate the management, the action can be seen as an indication of organizational identification. Among the reasons why employees might wish to avoid such identity ascriptions is the risk of social sanctions from other employees who take a more oppositional stance towards the management, for example because they feel that the problem should be addressed by the management itself.

The present study thus aims to further the overall debate surrounding the empowering or disempowering potential of empowerment practices by exploring how the participants' attempts to avoid undesired identity ascriptions shape voice activities and their outcomes in the form of initiatives to change the organization of work. In contrast to how identities and identifications are typically understood in the literature, this study presents membership categorization analysis as a novel approach to studying identification as a discursive phenomenon that is negotiated in interaction. Inspired by ethnomethodology, membership categorization analysis describes “culture in action” on the basis of the participants' visible concerns (Hester & Eglin, 1997), specifically how categories and their associated predicates are used to perform a number of important social actions in talk (Stokoe, 2009). An in-depth analysis is presented of audio-recorded interactions from employee voice activities, demonstrating how organizational identification or disidentification is ascribed to the employees based on their stances towards proposed initiatives, as well as the strategies that employees use to resist such ascriptions. These ascriptions might be resisted even if it means passing on an opportunity to implement a potentially relevant initiative. However, under certain conditions, voice activities were found to enable the negotiation of strategies for how employees can avoid undesired identity consequences when attempting to influence their working conditions. The study thereby suggests that whether empowerment practices constitute an attractive arrangement for the employees depends on how such trade-offs are managed.

## 2. Empowerment practices and identity

In the organizational literature, empowerment is understood as the process of bestowing power to the employees, though this power is

typically limited to certain purposes, such as actions that are of value to the organization (Appelbaum et al., 1999; Humborstad, 2013). Within the mainstream empowerment literature, the focus has typically been on the employees' subjective experience of feeling empowered. For example, Conger and Kanungo define empowerment as a “process of enhancing feelings of self-efficacy among organizational members through the identification of conditions that foster powerlessness and through their removal by both formal organizational practices and informal techniques of providing efficacy information” (Conger & Kanungo, 1988). As a subjective state, empowerment is claimed to decrease the alienation employees feel working in Taylorized and bureaucratic workplaces (Wilkinson, 1998), instead increasing employees' experience of organizational identification; that is, they perceive themselves as “psychologically intertwined with the fate of the group” (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Thereby, the organization's values, norms, and interests are thought to become incorporated in the employees' self-concept, leading them to feel intrinsically motivated to contribute to the collective (van Knippenberg & Sleebos, 2006). Organizational identification can be said to promote the shared interests between the employees and managers within the organization, and thereby what has been called a *unitarist* frame of reference for the employment relationship (Fox, 1966). Besides increasing employees' motivation and individual capabilities, such as their skills or knowledge, the mainstream empowerment literature has typically focused on empowerment as an expansion of employees' formal rights and access to information and decision-making settings (Hardy & Leiba-O'Sullivan, 1998), aspects which however have been claimed to only change very little within actual empowerment practices (Humborstad, 2013; Wilkinson, 1998).

Within the critical management studies literature, formal voice activities and other types of empowerment practices are rather thought of as managerial techniques which promote a certain form of managerial control over employees, that of identity regulation, while deemphasizing more traditional disciplinary means of control (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Barker & Tompkins, 1994; Knights & Willmott, 1989). Identity regulation occurs when the management proffers identity constructions comprising a high level of identification with the goals championed by the management, such as increased productivity and profitability (Fleming & Spicer, 2003; Knights & McCabe, 2000). When such identity constructions are internalized by the employees, it may lead to employees disciplining their own work effort and taking on additional tasks as a form of “unobtrusive control” (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985; Whittle, 2005). Through such forms of ideology, managers might try to shape employees' understanding of the world, and these attempts can result in empowerment practices that are in practice disempowering (Boje & Rosile, 2001). Ideology, it is argued, is rarely resisted by the employees because of the risk of being labelled a “Neanderthal” or “dinosaur” who won't accept progress (Appelbaum et al., 1999) or the difficulties in formulating alternative understandings to those of the management (Hardy & Leiba-O'Sullivan, 1998). While the interests of employees and managers are seen as at least partly opposing within the critical empowerment perspective, corresponding to a *pluralist* frame of reference in Fox's framework mentioned above, identity regulation can be seen as an attempt by the management to deliberately blur the lines between their interests and those of the employees, thereby pre-empting overt forms of workplace resistance and conflict.

Within both the mainstream and critical empowerment perspectives, employees are thus described as susceptible to internalizing identification with the organization on the basis of participation in empowerment practices. However, employees do not mindlessly take on the identities and identifications proffered by the management (Thomas & Davies, 2011); for example, identity regulation might fail when employees resist the proffered identities through acts which indicate disidentification with the organization and the management,

such as loafing, ironicizing, or engaging in *svejkism* (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992; Costas & Fleming, 2009; Fleming & Spicer, 2003; Thomas & Davies, 2011). Such disidentifying acts might even be designed specifically to avoid detection or mitigation by the management (Ezzamel, Willmott, & Worthington, 2001), while also serving as strategies for displaying identification with the employee group (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001). Furthermore, it is common for employees to experience tensions between their collective identifications relating to the organization, employee collective, or profession (Kuhn & Nelson, 2002; Pepper & Larson, 2006; Whittle, 2005). Therefore, employees will often seek to strike balances, such as a balance between identifying with the employee group and with the goals of the organization, depending on the demands of the situation (Bisel, Ford, & Keyton, 2007).

Thus, the ongoing negotiations and struggles over employees' identification with the organization, the employee group, or other collectives is likely to be a key concern for employees in relation to empowerment practices (Thomas & Davies, 2011). However, the above studies suggest the relevance of developing a more dynamic understanding of identity and identification that is sensitive to how these identifications are negotiated on an ongoing basis within activities related to empowerment practices. In the following, I will first present an interactional perspective on organizational identification which will subsequently be applied in an analysis of employees' and managers' discussions in employee voice activities.

### 3. Identity as an interactional phenomenon

Within interactions, studies have shown how identification talk is "varied from moment to moment depending on the participants' interactional goals" (Wetherell, Stiven, & Potter, 1987: 64), with the rhetorical context playing an important role for how people express their attitudes and identifications. A key framework for studying identity and identification as an interactional phenomenon is that of membership categorization analysis, or MCA, (Sacks, 1992), whose central idea is that "for a person to 'have an identity' – whether he or she is the person speaking, being spoken to, or being spoken about – is to be cast into a *category with associated characteristics or features*" (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998, their italics). Thus, being ascribed to a certain membership category in interaction means that various rights, obligations, actions, and other *predicates* associated with that category are also ascribed to the category incumbent. A classic example of Sacks's demonstrating how categories and predicates work in practice is an utterance from a book of children's stories: "The baby cried, the mommy picked it up" (1992). Most would likely infer that the baby is picked up by the mommy *because* it cries (rather than the events being causally unrelated), and furthermore, that the "mommy" is in fact the mother of the child. As members of a culture, we share expectations about how mothers are to act, meaning that more is understood than is explicitly expressed. As exemplified by the mother's action being accounted for by the baby's crying, examining category attributions in interactions can also shed light on the moral implications interpreted by the interlocutors (Jarryusi, 1984). However, it is important to stress that the meaning of categories and predicates is always *occasioned*: their meaning at any given moment depends on the discourse context, such as the utterances preceding the categorization, and they should be studied in order to determine their "consequentiality in the interaction" (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998), such as how they are used to achieve various interactional goals. The moral reasoning underlying in-situ categorical expressions may be quite specific to the interactional setting.

While many studies about collective identification tend to rely on organization members' self-descriptions, the MCA framework can also be applied in order to understand how descriptions of the collective identifications of organization members who participate in or are the subject of conversations are negotiated. For example, descriptions using categories such as "company (wo)man" suggest that those described identify with the organization and the management, and similarly, shop stewards are expected to identify with the employee collective whom they represent. In interactions, category- or predicate-based references to collective identification can be used to perform a number of actions, such as accounting for one's own actions or calling into question the actions of another person. However, such accounts are not always taken up by the other participants, suggesting that organizational identification is not simply claimed or ascribed, but negotiated in the interaction through both the speakers' claims and the recipients' responses. As a result, whichever identifications the participants privately feel or do not feel, these may be inconsequential for the interaction if they are not made relevant somehow.

In practice, explicit categorical descriptions are found intermingled with descriptions which are merely "category-resonant" (i.e., descriptions which can be heard as referring to some category; Schegloff, 2007) because of the predicates that are used. Furthermore, category incumbents can be framed in various more or less favorable ways depending on the predicates used to describe them. This type of *predicate work* is a powerful device for interlocutors with the potential to influence both the immediate interaction and its long-term consequences, for example by impacting decision-making in the setting (Whittle et al., 2015). In situations where certain categories are recurrently relevant to the interaction, or omni-relevant (Fitzgerald, Housley, & Butler, 2009), such as is the case for the categories of employees and managers in a work setting, explicit mentionings may be less common; instead, the categories can be inferred on the basis of the predicates mentioned or displayed in the interaction, such as through the category-bound actions performed (Mayes, 2015).

The remainder of this article is devoted to illustrating the relevance of an identity-in-interaction perspective for understanding how negotiations of collective identification shape social situations. While collective identifications, especially in relation to the organization, have received some attention in relation to empowerment, most work has focused on identities and identifications as internalized by individual employees and relatively stable. In contrast, the empirical section, which follows after a presentation of the data and the analytical strategy employed in the article, demonstrates how employees' identifications can also be seen as a subject of negotiation in interaction, making them potentially highly dynamic. These negotiations are intimately tied to the more ostensive agendas of the empowerment practice setting, such as soliciting and discussing employees' suggestions for change initiatives.

### 4. Methodology

As mentioned, the use of formalized activities where employees can exercise voice has become increasingly common in recent years (Busck et al., 2010). Formal voice activities are pre-arranged and regular events, where employees are invited to influence decisions about the organization of work by problematizing existing work practices and suggesting potential solutions (Marchington & Suter, 2013). The data for this study was collected in connection with a research project in which such activities were conducted in various Danish manufacturing organizations between 2013 and 2015. The activity targeted blue-collar

employees with tasks related to production or maintenance, some of which were highly physically demanding. Among the activities were three three-hour workshop sessions for each work team, in which the employees were invited to voice problems and suggestions about how to improve their working conditions with regard to health, safety, and well-being. The analysis for this study draws on an overall corpus of approximately 98 h of audio recordings from 36 meetings within two of the participating organizations that produced pharmaceuticals and plastic packaging. I had become familiar with these organizations through participating in project activities as either a non-participant observer or workshop facilitator (see description below). However, the focus of this paper is not on the facilitator's contribution to the conversation, which in many instances included mainly the employees and their team leader, as displayed in the analysis.

Following an abductive approach (Svennevig, 2001), the data were first reviewed and situations where participants discussed how to influence their working conditions through the activity were identified, since these were expected to reveal the employees' orientations towards how their actions signalled organizational identification. A number of research memos were kept in which analytical observations about these sections were registered along with relevant data segments and notes from the relevant literature on empowerment and voice. Suggested courses of action which involved soliciting approval from middle- or high-level managers and others which could be implemented by the employees themselves were both found throughout the data. However, after repeated readings of the data it seemed that committing to the latter type of initiative was rarely oriented to by the employees as implying organizational identification; on the other hand, identification with the organization or with the employee group was often topicalized explicitly or alluded to in relation to actions which involved approaching the management, indicating a specific orientation in the employees' and managers' actions which was not well accounted for in the literature. In order to understand how this reflexivity influenced the unfolding discussions, the identified discussions concerning identification were analyzed through an approach based on conversation analysis (e.g., Lehtinen & Pälli, 2011) and especially MCA, as this approach enables one to study how social action develops through the meanings displayed by the participants (ten Have, 2007). For example, the excerpts were analyzed through the "next turn proof procedure" (Peräkylä, 2011), which involves examining how utterances are responded to in order to determine what meanings they are given by the participants in the setting, rather than those intuitively ascribed by the analyst. This allows for the basis of analytical inferences to be traced in the transcript, thereby increasing transparency (ten Have, 2007).

Because of the space constraints of a journal article, three episodes among those that were analyzed in-depth were selected for the present discussion, each illustrating an important aspect of how identities were ascribed and negotiated that was observed throughout the overall analysis. Although ascriptions of organizational or other forms of identification to employees did not consistently evoke resistance or hesitation from the employees, the excerpts presented here focus on such "breakdown" situations (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007) in order to highlight how employees' orientation towards the identity consequences of their actions in empowerment practices have consequences for the outcomes of these activities. From an ethnomethodological perspective, order is always produced locally in the setting, but the mechanisms and practices by which the order is produced are likely to be found in other situations where the participants' concerns are similar (Sacks, 1992). Thus, the excerpts featured here shed light on a general mechanism, which simply might not manifest itself as clearly in other cases (Bryman, 2003). The excerpts are presented here in a simplified version of the Jefferson transcript system (2004; see

**Table 1**  
Participants in the excerpts and their formal work roles.

Excerpt 1		Excerpt 2		Excerpts 3 and 4	
Name	Role	Name	Role	Name	Role
Lee	Line manager	Eliza	Employee	Ann	Line manager
Eric	Employee	Frances	Employee	Mark	Employee
Steve	Employee	Dean	Employee	Dan	Employee
Michael	Employee	Miriam	Employee	Simon	Employee
James	Employee	Tom	Employee	Frank	Employee
Joe	Workshop facilitator	Naomi	Employee (part-time with another team)	Tim	Employee

appendix for legend). All names presented are pseudonyms, and the transcripts have been translated from Danish.

5. The setting

The excerpts presented in this paper are all taken from workshop meetings which involved action planning aimed at improving the employees' working conditions. The procedures of the formal voice activity did not increase the employees' formal decision-making authority, but there were no formal limitations regarding which initiatives could be suggested, as long as these could realistically be approved and funded by the organization. The meetings were planned to take three hours, followed the same overall format and were held in meeting rooms at the worksite. The meetings were attended by employees from the same team (typically five to eight employees participated) who were joined by their line manager and a workshop facilitator who had the role of guiding the participants through the workshop program. The meetings would typically also be attended by one or two non-participating observers from the research group that was collaborating with the participating organizations in implementing the formal voice activity.

During the meetings, participants would be seated around a table, with the facilitator and the line manager sitting together at one end. Issues which had been identified by the participants at a previous workshop meeting were reviewed, and ideas for how the employees' working conditions could be improved were discussed. Ideas which the participants found feasible were identified as action plans. One or more employees would then be selected to take responsibility for implementing the action plans and were to report back to the other participants on their progress at a later follow-up workshop meeting. Typically, six to eight action plans would be developed by the group in each workshop meeting. Table 1 lists the pseudonyms and formal work roles of all participants featured in the analysis.

6. Analysis

In the following, three episodes are presented, of which the last spans two excerpts. While the richness of the data means that a number of themes could be taken up, each episode was chosen for how it illustrates the employees' orientation to the identity consequences of their actions, and how this orientation shapes their decisions about whether to support or assume responsibilities for suggested initiatives. Thus, it is this theme on which the analysis will focus.

6.1. Resisting identification with the management

Excerpt 1 shows different ways in which employee's identifications can be framed in interactions relating to a change initiative: one depicts

the employee as being willing to go beyond formal responsibilities, implying identification with the organization, while the other highlights socializing with other employees or self-interest as the motivation. In the excerpt, the participants discuss whether a proposed initiative should be carried out and by whom. The initiative involves inviting a newly employed middle manager to visit the team's

production area to hear about various problems whose resolution could potentially reduce the employees' physical strain and speed up the production. Lee, the line manager for the participating employees, argues that the employee Michael, who is currently a trainee in the team, could take responsibility for implementing the initiative.

### Excerpt 1:

1 Lee Surely he would be proud if eh Michael sent him an email  
 2 saying now I've been to a ((formal voice activity))  
 3 workshop meeting, let me tell you, I would like to invite  
 4 you down, I have a task, I would like to tell you a little  
 5 about the department and I want to tell you a little about  
 6 the things we're currently dealing with  
 7 Eric I'm entirely sure of that as well=  
 8 Lee =he would, I promise you, he would become  
 9 [8 feet tall]((meaning very proud))  
 10 Steve [he could come around on Sunday afternoon], there'll be  
 11 both=  
 12 ((other participants start laughing))  
 13 ?? =cake  
 14 Steve there'll be both strawberry cake and apple cake=  
 15 Lee =rather than it being Edie and me, right, then he would  
 16 say damn, that's a department and those are employees who=  
 17 Joe =what do you say about that ( )  
 18 Lee it's only an example, now  
 19 Michael it's only an example, right=  
 20 Lee well, I'm saying Michael could very well  
 21 Michael yeah=  
 22 Lee =Michael has, we have our ((kaizen board)) out there, he  
 23 knows the things we're currently dealing with, Michael  
 24 could very well invite ((the middle manager)) down, he  
 25 could talk to ((the middle manager's secretary)), when  
 26 does ((the middle manager)) have an hour or two, come  
 27 down, see who we are, show what's going on  
 28 James while you're at it, you could tell him when you will be  
 29 through with your apprenticeship (.) and that you don't  
 30 have anything after that  
 31 ((participants start laughing))

We first see Lee present an assessment that the middle manager would be proud to receive an invitation from Michael. The way in which Lee's assessment presents its acceptance or rejection as relevant marks it as an indirect proposal for Michael to assume responsibility for the initiative. Lee's formulation of the middle manager's expected reaction is backed by Eric (l.7) and restated in other words by Lee himself (ll.8–9); however, it is not made explicit why the middle manager would be proud or how his reaction would be relevant for Michael. An explanation surfaces in the next lines: Steve's turn (ll.10–11) is formulated as another proposition ("he could come around on Sunday afternoon"), which the other participants react to with laughter. The humor in Steve's proposal is revealed in the next lines, where both an unidentified employee and Steve himself describe that the employees will have cake on Sunday (ll.13–14). The described scenario implies a disidentification with the organizational goals of achieving a high work output in favor of enjoying oneself with colleagues, setting up a counterpart to Lee's proposal in the form of a situation which is unlikely to make the middle manager "proud." The fact that the other employees start laughing before cake has even been mentioned highlights the shared understanding of the joke and thus of the inferable reference to organizational identification in Lee's previous turns.

Next, Lee takes the floor and again describes how an inquiry from an employee would lead to a positive response from the middle manager (ll.15–16), after which Joe, the workshop facilitator, prompts Michael for a response (l.17). However, Lee mitigates his proposal as targeting Michael specifically ("it's only an example, now"), a description which Michael repeats in line 19 rather than accepting or declining Lee's proposal, thereby resisting assuming responsibility for the initiative. After another response from Michael which does not clearly accept or refuse Lee's proposal (l.21), Lee again describes Michael as being capable of executing the various tasks that the initiative is comprised of (ll.22–27). In response, the employee James makes another mock proposal, suggesting that Michael also notify the middle manager of his precarious job situation. In doing so, James can be seen as ironicizing Lee's proposal by suggesting that Michael's might choose to feign organizational identification in order to get a permanent position. Again the other employees start laughing.

Shortly after the conversation in this excerpt, Joe called a break. After the break, Joe asked Michael whether he had decided to take action on the proposal or not, to which Michael stated that he and Steve had agreed to instead wait for the middle manager to visit the production area on his own initiative and notify him then of the problematic work practices. By waiting for the middle manager to approach the employees instead, Michael and Steve can be said to opt for a strategy for voicing the problem to the middle manager which does not project as strong an identification with the management.

Overall, the excerpt shows two very different lines of moral reasoning about what employees and managers should do in the face of problems of the type discussed in the excerpt: on the one hand, Lee's directing his suggestion at Michael, and his claims about the middle manager's likely reaction to Michael, frames the act of assuming responsibility for the suggestion as an employee as laudable, but not beyond reasonable expectations. The basis for the middle manager's positive appraisal of Michael in Lee's talk is their shared identification with the organization. On the other hand, through their jokes, the employees construct themselves as basically self-interested, but cognizant of the management's attempts to enroll them in the organizational agenda, suggesting that both employees and managers are driven by instrumental concerns rather than a common emotional attachment. Thus, one hearable implication of the employees' talk is that the moral status of Michael's decision is not tied to the management's opinion, but to whether it provides a sufficiently advantageous situation for himself and potentially the other employees. The excerpt shows how the participants distinguish between whether the employees and managers hold shared interests (as implied by Lee) or different interests (as suggested by the employees' jokes) and subtly reference these understandings in their talk. These two understandings are parallel to what have been called unitarist and pluralist frames of reference in the literature (Fox, 1966), but while these frames are normally invoked in academic discussions in order to reference different theoretical understandings of the employment relationship, here the distinction is important at a much more "micro" level for the participants through how it shapes their ongoing discussion.

## 6.2. Resisting disidentification with management

In contrast to Excerpt 1, the next excerpt illustrates how employees also orient to the possibility of problematic identity ascriptions if they implement initiatives which project disidentification with the management. The excerpt is taken from another workshop meeting in which a group of employees<sup>1</sup> are discussing how to avoid having to rush to finish their tasks. Previously, rushing could be avoided by keeping a normal pace and registering extra worktime through a flexible work-time agreement, but this arrangement had been cancelled. If the team

<sup>1</sup> Both a team leader and a facilitator were present for this workshop meeting, however the team leader was absent for this part of the discussion.

did not finish its tasks on time, it would become a bottleneck for other teams.

appropriate stage-of-life category would be “adult” suggests that such denigrating identity ascriptions could be made to the employees if they

## Excerpt 2:

28 Tom =that we [must work like normal ] =  
 29 Miriam [you become a little like a teenager hehe]  
 30 Tom =instead [and it and it]  
 31 Dean [but perhaps we] should just let them try their  
 32 own medicine right, we now have an inflexible management  
 33 who says you must do such and such and such=  
 34 ((Dean knocks on the table three times))  
 35 Dean =that's fine then I WILL DO such and such and such and  
 36 then we'll do like such and such and such  
 37 Miriam [I just feel I get negative doing that]  
 38 Tom [well that's what I would like to do ] but I don't feel  
 39 like it=  
 40 Miriam =no it gets me negative and tha:t [tha::t]=  
 41 Dean [I also get negative]  
 42 Miriam =and then I'll feel bad when I'm going home, when I have  
 43 to go home with that kind of (.) [negative] feeling  
 44 inside=  
 45 Tom [but you ]  
 46 Miriam =me and I am annoyed over those kinds of stupid things  
 47 right so  
 48 Naomi I can tell you that I have just talked to ((another  
 49 employee)) who I share my office with and they are in the  
 50 midst of, both ((in the chemical and microbiological  
 51 teams)), looking into some kind of planning tool, actually  
 52 ((abbreviated))

After arguing that the flexible worktime agreement is unlikely to return, Eliza proposes changing how the team plans their work (ll.1–3, 5, 7–8), and Dean articulates that Eliza's proposal means limiting the work pace (ll.9, 11). Frances, who has otherwise expressed agreement for the other's comments, then describes the employees' problems as stemming from their identification with their work (“it's hard for us because we really want to”). Miriam overlaps with Frances with a proposal that regulating the work pace should be done by a member of the team “who's good at” refusing extra work tasks, thereby implicitly affiliating with Frances's description that limiting the pace would be challenging to most members; a description which is taken up again by Eliza, Miriam, and Frances over the next few turns (ll.17, 20, 22).

In line 21, Tom describes Dean's earlier suggestion as a “rebellion,” which Miriam seconds laughingly (“yehes”), describing herself as becoming “a little like a teenager” in the face of the increased workload and the loss of the flexible workhours arrangement (l.29). Miriam's tying the employees' actions to the category of “teenager” when the

were to take a confrontational stance towards the management (Sacks, 1992). As an effect, Tom and Miriam distance themselves from Dean's suggestion through their use of categories.

Next, Dean further argues that taking an inflexible stance towards the increased work load (ll.31–36) is warranted due to how it mirrors the management's stance towards the employees. Both Miriam and Tom raise the objection that doing so would lead to them becoming negative and annoyed (ll.37–40, 42–44), to which Dean concurs (l.41). Here, the discussion continues instead with Naomi relating how other teams in the company are considering a planning tool in order to lessen work pressure, a candidate solution which would likely not be seen as taking an oppositional stance towards management.

Compared to the first excerpt, the employee and managers categories are constructed differently here, with accordingly different moral statuses. While the management is described as inflexible and implicitly as authoritarian (ll. 33–34), employees are constructed as highly committed to their work, leading them to try and meet unreasonable demands. Eliza and Dean's suggestions imply that assertively refusing to

accept too high demands would be justified, but Miriam and Tom's objections (to which Dean concur) outline the affective stance associated with this strategy as strenuous. By not following Dean's suggestion, the employees avoid being cast (and casting themselves) as "rebels" and "teenagers", along with the moral judgments these categories imply, instead maintaining a higher moral status by remaining mindful of their work even in the face of steps by the management which have been constructed as unreasonable.

### 6.3. Negotiating instrumental identification with management

The final two excerpts illustrate yet more subtle ways in which participants in empowerment practices discuss and negotiate which identity ascriptions are made relevant by their actions. The excerpts feature a third work team discussing how to present a middle manager with a suggested new method for repackaging raw materials used in the production process, as the current method is both time-consuming and physically strenuous. The method was suggested by the employee Mark who further suggested trying to convince the middle manager of the benefits of the new method by confronting the middle manager and stating that all of the approximately 50 members of the team support the suggestion. However, the viability of this strategy is questioned by some of the other participants.

are not likely to accept his suggestion, which he claims to be supported by many employees, thereby framing the management as being dismissive. This leads Ann to question the way Mark suggests presenting his proposal to the management. Ann's repair (ten Have, 2007) of an aborted 'speak' ("sp-") and 'hear' ("he-") into "understand" (l.4) is noteworthy since a failure to speak on Mark's part or a failure to hear on the management's part could be criticized on moral grounds, while referencing a language gap suggests a problem of a technical nature that does not place blame on either party. In this respect, Ann describes Mark as speaking Chinese; by inference, a language incomprehensible to management. Dan's suggestion of the management's language being Russian is referring to an equally incomprehensible language for the employees, thus indicating his affiliation with Ann's use of a language metaphor. Despite describing the problem as one of understanding, Ann next claims that it is Mark who must speak in a way that the management can "see and hear" in order to be heard (ll. 12, 14–15). However, Mark states that he is not able to do as Ann suggests. Simon's comment that Mark should "see (him)self as a director" supports Ann's suggestion, but Mark rejects this suggestion as well. Thus, the management is constructed by Ann in this excerpt as being entitled to being approached in a certain manner. But while the middle manager's expectations are not called into question by the line managers, Mark's claims to lack competence imply that he cannot be made morally re-

### Excerpt 3:

- 1 Mark: but sometimes one can get a little angry that they won't
- 2 (.) won't listen to such a good suggestion when so many
- 3 feel it is necessary
- 4 Ann: because you don't sp- they he- they don't understand your
- 5 language=
- 6 Mark: =no=
- 7 Ann: =you speak Chinese=
- 8 Mark: =yes=
- 9 Ann: you must learn to speak (.)
- 10 Dan: Russian=
- 11 Mark: =yes (.)
- 12 Ann: you must learn to speak their=
- 13 Mark: =it's because it's in=
- 14 Ann: =language with what they need to see and hear then you will
- 15 be heard (.) but if you speak Chinese=
- 16 Mark: =but I'm not that good at that
- 17 Ann: then
- 18 Simon: you must see yourself as a director when you talk to those
- 19 people ((laughs))
- 20 Mark: I can't I'll never be that

The third excerpt can be seen as a negotiation over whether employees or managers are ultimately morally responsible for facilitating the employees' transmission of ideas and suggestions to the management. Mark first expresses frustration that "they" (i.e., the managers)

are not likely to accept his suggestion, which he claims to be supported

by many employees, thereby framing the management as being dismissive. The final excerpt (4) shows how Ann attempts to negotiate the meaning of displaying organizational identification as being merely a strategy for potentially increasing the chances of suggested initiatives being successfully implemented. In the short span of time since the

previous excerpt, Ann has offered to help present Mark's proposed solution to the middle manager, and she, Dan, Simon, and Frank have discussed how a business case could be developed on the basis of Mark's suggestion. The excerpt begins with Mark again suggesting confronting the manager.

#### Excerpt 4:

- 1 Mark: ((abbreviated))...then we serve it to him and we'll be  
 2 sitting there, the whole gang  
 3 Ann: I'm just thinking you s- (.) sometimes one has to be a  
 4 little eh strategic and smart and manipulative in order  
 5 to ((laughs)) achieve what one wants (.) and then one  
 6 doesn't say hey buddy, now get the hell over here and  
 7 listen to us, then it's us who have to like gather all  
 8 the stuff and then do it, I mean THINK about how he would  
 9 like to be approached if he's to (.)  
 10 Frank: act on the project=  
 11 Ann: =if it's to be a success for us, what we want  
 12 Tim: mm  
 13 Mark: if if he was invited up here without knowing beforehand  
 14 what this is about  
 15 Ann: I would ask him to (.) no I wouldn't do that  
 16 Simon: gee that would really make him balk=  
 17 Ann: =I would never do that

The way Mark formulates his suggestion draws upon the category of the employees as members of a gang, suggesting loyalty between the employees rather than towards those outside the gang (i.e., the middle manager) and highlighting the differences in interests between the employees and the manager. Ann argues that this strategy is inferior to her strategy of satisfying the expectations of the middle manager by stating the need for a contrasting approach of being "strategic and smart and manipulative" (ll.4–5). As in the previous excerpt, the matter of who is to accommodate whom is topicalized. In contrast to how Mark's strategy for approaching the management is rooted in identification with the employee group, contending that the management should hear the employees out, Ann's proposal places the obligation on the employees, arguing that it is the employees who need to approach the management in a certain way. However, Ann also downplays the potential threats of being ascribed organizational identification as an employee if one follows her strategy, both by describing her strategy as necessary (e.g., through stating what "one doesn't say" and what the participants "have to" do, ll. 5–6, 7) and as a display of being "strategic and smart and manipulative" as an employee, whereby assuming responsibility for the initiative is framed as a display of astuteness. Ann's use of the deictics "us" (ll.7, 11) and "we" (l.11) implies that Ann herself is ready to help plan out how to approach the middle manager and that she and the employees hold a shared interest. Still, Mark returns to his previous statement by again suggesting that they surprise the middle manager (ll.13–14), with which both Ann and Simon

disaffiliate strongly (ll.15–17). In the end, the participants decided to further research the technical aspects of their proposed solution before approaching the management with it.

While her proposal was not accepted, Ann suggests that claims to identify with the organization can be employed by the employees on a

case-by-case basis where it is considered beneficial, rather than as a requirement imposed by the management. Thereby, she constructs employees who engage in the empowerment practices as holding choice and being tactically competent, rather than simply submitting to the management's (unreasonable, according to some employees) expectations, thereby reframing their moral status. Yet the employee that Ann constructs here is still dependent on their resourcefulness if they are to be empowered rather than submitted. As a contrast, Mark's construction of the employees as united outlines a strength-in-numbers form of empowerment against the management, rather than empowerment on the management's terms. However, the other employees do not clearly support Mark's construction of the employee group as united, instead seemingly supporting Ann's suggestion.

#### 7. Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore how the outcomes of empowerment practices are shaped by how employees participate in these practices, a participation which is argued to be oriented towards the prospects and risks faced by employees when "becoming empowered" (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992; Greasley et al., 2005). Specifically, the study attends to how employees manage and negotiate the identity ascriptions that might be made to them on the basis of the initiatives they choose to support in workplace voice activities. In all of the excerpts provided here, the employees resisted responsibility for carrying out proposed initiatives. Instead, alternative strategies for changing

**Table 2**

Key category- or predicate-based descriptions used in identity claims and ascriptions in the excerpts.

Membership category described and theme	Type	Source
<i>Excerpt 1</i>		
Middle manager: being proud to receive email from Michael	Predicate, action: implicitly describes employees who send inquiries about the production as indicating organizational identification	Lee, ll.1-6
Employees: having cake on Sunday afternoon	Predicate, action: identifying with the employee collective/ disidentifying with team's performance	Steve (primarily), ll. 10-14
Employee: finishing his apprenticeship without a job	Predicate, motive: presenting oneself as an engaged employee in order to receive future employment	James, ll. 28-30
<i>Excerpt 2</i>		
Employees: "hard for us because we really want to"	Predicate, motive: unwilling to leave work unfinished due to identification with responsibilities	Frances, l. 14 (see also l. 21)
Employee: choosing someone to plan the team's work who is "good at" lessening the workload	Predicate, personality: being able to put off work when under pressure to perform it	Miriam, l. 15-16
Employees: "one gets carried along every time"	Predicate, action: trying to perform the work even when time is insufficient	Eliza, l. 17
Employees: "it is a rebellion"	Predicate, action: employees refusing to do extra work	Tom, l. 21
Employees: becoming "like a teenager"	Category: when used in relation to "rebellion" it suggests connotations of being contrary	Miriam, l. 29
Employees: getting "negative doing that"	Predicate, personality: gets emotionally affected by refusing extra work (supports description as identifying with work)	Miriam, Tom, Dean, ll. 37-47
<i>Excerpt 3</i>		
Managers: "won't listen"	Predicate, personality: being dismissive of the employees' viewpoints	Mark, ll. 1-3
Managers: "don't understand your language"	Predicate, personality: managers do not understand the employees' viewpoints when presented in the employees' terms	Ann, ll. 4-5
Employees: speaking Chinese/Russian/"their language"	Predicate, action: employees should voice problems or suggestions in a way which the management can identify with	Ann/Dan, ll. 7, 9-10
Employees: seeing oneself "as a director" when talking to managers	Predicate, action: emulating managers' talk when presenting employee viewpoints	Simon, ll. 18-19
<i>Excerpt 4</i>		
Employees: "the whole gang"	Category: evokes an image of identification and unanimity between employees	Mark, ll. 1-2
Employees: being "strategic and smart and manipulative"	Predicate, action: taking the necessary steps in order to gain recognition of viewpoints	Ann, ll. 3-5
Employees: not saying "hey buddy now get the hell over here and listen to us," "gather all the stuff" instead, thinking about "how would he like to be approached"	Predicate, action: presenting viewpoints to the middle management in a collected rather than a confrontational style	Ann, ll. 5-9

work practices which were not expected to carry with them the undesired identification inferences were decided at a later time.

While it is not within the scope of this article to provide a comprehensive account of the aftermath of the studied empowerment practices, managers in both of the two organizations studied here chose to continue conducting workshop meetings on a recurrent basis after the study period with only relatively small modifications to the format. This decision was made in spite of the fact that the researchers were not able to demonstrate that the research project had had a positive effect on the employees' working conditions or well-being. Instead, the managers' comments suggest that their decisions were at least partly motivated by how the setup of the intervention project suggested new ways for employees and managers to cooperate in relation to improving issues in the workplace, including an expanded role for the employees.

The key category- or predicate-based descriptions identified in the excerpts are presented in Table 2.

Some might note the relative paucity of explicit category use in the excerpts relative to predicates, an imbalance which can be explained by the employee and manager categories being "omni-relevant" (Fitzgerald et al., 2009) in the work context and thus easily inferred from the use of relevant predicates. As a result, the participants' "predication work", that is, attending to and drawing "distinctions within the categories in terms of the types of activities or attributes upon which they are predicated" (Whittle et al., 2015: 400; my emphasis), emerges more prominently.

Furthermore, it can be argued that given the moral content of the participants' category and predicate work, keeping claims about these categories inferable rather than explicit potentially provides the speakers with deniability if the interactional consequences of their talk become problematic (Stokoe, 2009). Jayyusi writes that "categorization work is embedded in a moral order" that "operates practically and

pervasively within social life" (1984: 2; italics in the original), and Wowk has called categorization "one cultural procedure for doing and recognizing" instances of politics in interaction (Wowk, 1984). Overall, the analysis does highlight the moral aspect of category and predicate use in interaction. In the excerpts, the way the participants in the excerpts construct the categories of employees and managers displays various lines of reasoning in relation to themes such as the expectations colleagues and team leaders have towards the individual participants (especially in Excerpts 1, 3 and 4), how employees would be perceived if they were to go against the management (Excerpts 2 and 4), and who should be responsible for changing problematic work practices (Excerpts 3 and 4). Central to the activities studied here are asymmetries among the participants (Thornborrow, 2002) in two areas: on the one hand, the line managers are privileged in their ability to formulate which types of actions will have to be taken in order for the employees' suggestions to become accepted. Because of the line managers' access to the middle managers, compared to the employees' relative lack of access, the necessity of meeting this requirement is not easily challenged by the employees. The employees, on the other hand, are oriented to as having a right to refuse responsibility for approaching the management. As demonstrated in the analysis, these two rights can produce a stalemate of sorts which can challenge the participants' ability to reach consensus about how to address the identified issues, potentially undermining the relevance of the activity for improving the employees' working conditions. Finding a solution to this stalemate that is attractive to the employees is not necessarily easy. For example, projecting identification with the organization is oriented to by the participants as a potentially effective strategy for swaying managers, as exemplified by Lee's statements in Excerpt 1 and Ann's and Simon's comments in Excerpts 3 and 4. Yet, Michael and Mark's resistance in the two situations displays how the strategy of projecting identification is seen by the

employees as potentially problematic. On the other hand, signaling strong identification with the employee group and disidentification with the management might evoke negative descriptions from others and go against one's self-descriptions as being committed to one's work, as stated by Miriam and Dean in Excerpt 2.

The study thereby contributes to our understanding of power in empowerment practices by suggesting that empowerment practices are not per definition empowering or disempowering, but that engaging in empowerment practices as an employee is likely to involve a trade-off between potentially attaining the power to change one's working conditions on the one hand and potentially losing power over which identities and identifications one is ascribed by others on the other. While it might seem somewhat paradoxical for employees to resist committing to actions that could potentially improve their working conditions, this resistance could be seen as a form of "micro-emancipation" (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992), whereby employees protest or subvert an overall managerial agenda of promoting organizational identification. Because the participants' discussions implicitly or explicitly feature reasoning about which identities and identifications one might be ascribed if supporting an initiative to change one's working conditions, employees are helped to consider potential identity consequences before assuming responsibility for the initiatives. Furthermore, by resisting committing to initiatives which are found to potentially have undesired identity consequences, employees can keep the discussion going so that more appealing strategies have a chance to emerge.

The findings of this study thus suggest that strategies *are* available to the employees for promoting their own interests while managing identity ascriptions within the empowerment practice, rather than simply submitting to the interests and identity regulation of the management. Alvesson and Willmott have claimed that in order for identities in the workplace to be negotiated in a way that mitigates management regulation, conditions such as "a space as well as resources, for critical reflection" and "a supportive form of social interaction" must be in place (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002, p. 637), and it could be argued that those conditions were at least partially met in the voice activities analyzed here, providing the employees the possibility to resist. However, the case could also be made that the line managers' contributions in Excerpts 1, 3 and 4 are indicative of how empowerment practices are a vehicle for diffusing managerial ideology through the proffering of 'committed' employee identities, and even that the employees in Excerpt 2 hold on to such an identity in the absence of their manager (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Thus, the dynamic seen here does not seem on of either/or, but more of a struggle. Because empowerment practices necessarily project certain constructions of the employee category, the outcomes of the practices are shaped by employees' willingness to publicly subscribe to these constructions, considering the potential gains and the expected moral implications of doing so.

The analysis also shows the relevance of considering interests from an emic perspective. Despite verbal opposition (such as Mark's comments in excerpt 4), the prevailing idea in the workshops studied were that proposed initiatives should fall within the interests of both the employees and the management if the initiatives were to be approved for implementation by middle managers. This requirement can be seen as a document of how the management's reasoning structures empowerment practices, and similar criticisms have often been raised in the literature on empowerment practices (Boje & Rosile, 2001; Hardy & Leiba-O'Sullivan, 1998; Wilkinson, 1998). But in terms of studying actual empowerment practices, the participants are clearly oriented towards constructing what the employees' and managers' interests are in relation to the matter at hand, including how employees can potentially present themselves as acting in the interests of the management in order for their ideas to be accepted, as Ann even suggests doing "manipulatively" in excerpt 4. The very practical and situational consideration of the relationship between employees' and managers' interests displayed by the participants is lost in the larger debate on

current empowerment practices when positions are taken on the basis of unitarist and pluralist frames of reference, or discussions of whether the practices predominantly favor the interests of one or the other side (Heery, 2015; Humborstad, 2013).

Finally, the analysis offers various contributions to identity research. For one, it heeds the call to consider the role of identities in research related to the employment relationship, where, as argued by Thomas and Davies, struggles over employees' identities have an important although perhaps subtle role in "shifting and transforming meanings and understandings within work organizations" (p. 162). By focusing on identities and identification as an interactional phenomenon, the analysis presents an approach to studying how these are negotiated in more or less mundane conversations in the workplace, which can supplement the existing focus on analyses of identity work and regulation that focus on the internalized mental aspects of identities (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Brown, 2015). While others have studied identity work in conversations (e.g., Beech, Gilmore, & Cochrane, 2012; Brown & Coupland, 2015; McInnes & Corlett, 2012), MCA as it is applied in this study lets us see how identification can work as a "functional" form of social positioning that is performed in relation to shifting interactional goals, rather than in relation to the individual's overall identity project (Ainsworth & Grant, 2012). For example, while some have argued that presenting oneself as holding incoherent identifications indicates a lack of reflexivity (Costas & Fleming, 2009; Whittle, 2005), the strategy proposed by Ann in excerpt 4 illustrates a practice of projecting different identifications at different times as a form of roleplay for one's own gain. The availability of such practices can explain why organization members might express quite different patterns of collective identification(s) at different times (Brown, 2015; Hoyer, 2016), highlighting why studies of situated identity work should also attend to the pragmatic aspects of the participants' talk. For example, as the analysis presented here shows, the negotiations of identities and identifications of participants in empowerment practices are shaped by other concerns such as reaching consensus on courses of action which could improve one's working conditions, avoiding conflicts, and, with Michael from Excerpt 1 in mind, simply staying employed.

## 8. Conclusion

Empowerment practices cannot function without the active participation of the employees, yet few have explored *how* they participate. Through a microsociological approach focusing on discourse, this study demonstrates that employees show concern for the identities and identifications they are ascribed on the basis of how they engage in the empowerment practices, and this concern shapes whether and how they attempt to improve their working conditions. In relation to whether formal voice activities that defer little formal decision authority to the employees can still be considered empowering, the study suggests that the answer depends not only on whether the activity provides an opportunity for the employees to negotiate initiatives which are likely to gain the support of the decision makers but also on whether the employees see the collective identifications that can be inferred from their actions as acceptable. The study suggests that greater attention should be paid to the interactions that take place within formal voice activities and how the conditions of the activities contribute to shaping these interactions. This would include, for example, examining which actions are oriented to as appropriate or inappropriate in the setting, and investigating the degree to which the format of the activities or the participating managers support and facilitate participants' exploration of different options and their associated identification risks.

The study also presents an approach to studying identities and identification as interactional phenomena based on membership categorization analysis. Employees' identities have increasingly become an object of struggle between the forces of managerial control and employee resistance, struggles which are easily identified in workplace

interactions. Therefore, the identity-in-interaction approach holds considerable promise for furthering our understanding of how the employment relationship is negotiated in modern organizations. Specifically, the article demonstrates the importance of considering the practical work done through categorization and predication in organization members' discussions, especially in relation to collective identification.

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## Appendix A. Transcription legend

(.)	audible break
[]	overlapping speech
=	no pause between speaker turns
:	elongated speech
° °	phrase spoken at low volume
(O)	transcription comments
CAPITALS	sounds are louder than those surrounding it
-	speech is cut off

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