

M.Sc. Thesis in Business & Management
Stockholm School of Economics

A Play of Several Acts

A Case Study on Identity Work At and Across Levels
of Analysis – and its Implications on Actions
in an Organizational Context

Linn Bergström (50573)
Alexander Eriksson (23862)

Supervisor: Wiley Wakeman
Presentation: Spring 2022

Abstract

Identity work has gained much scholarly interest in social- and management studies. Previous research acknowledges that the multitude of identities inherent in a subject may create conflicts in case the balance is threatened. Thereby, in understanding how subjects arrive at a new temporary steady-state helping them to make sense of the threatening situation and subsequently act on it, researchers recognize the importance of studying the identification process; identity work; in detail. However, previous studies have largely taken a particular theoretical standpoint, while neglecting the several levels of identities that a subject balances, in favor of simplifying matters by only studying the identity work process at respective levels. The organizational context, where each employee simultaneously occupies one or several roles, belongs to one or more groups as well as the larger organization, implies that the overarching identity of a subject is in fact the result of identities across several levels. This study explores how identity work occurs at and across levels; individual, group and organizational; simultaneously following an ambiguous situation, exemplified by a personal data breach, as well as what its implications are on actions, exemplified by an external response to customers. In doing so, a multi-theoretical single-case study approach is adopted wherein data is collected in a qualitative manner through both in-depth interviews and an experiment. Findings reveal that the identity work process is subjective and diverse, influenced by contextual factors. With the context in mind, this study shows that, at the individual level, subjects engage in identity work by using the tactic(s) of *distancing themselves from the role, suppressing their personal selves*, or by *seeking to find an optimal balance between their personal selves and their roles*. At the group level, subjects engage in identity work by *maintaining and strengthening the group*, or by *suppressing their group identity*. At the organizational level, subjects use the tactic(s) of either *clinging onto certain values* or *separating themselves from the organization*. Given the nestedness of levels in the organizational context, however, the study concludes that subjects engage in identity work across levels by *revising the identity hierarchy* that fits the ambiguous situation. The study yields important implications for managers, since it shows that identity work impacts employees' actions. However, given that identity work is highly subjective, the actions likewise differ. Although there are tendencies within groups of similar subjects to arrive at the same perception of how to act, unitary action across the entire organization is inhibited, given that identities are interpreted differently, based on each subject's standpoint. In illuminating the *how* of identity work, at and across levels, and its relatedness to actions, this study contributes by giving clarity to an ambiguous research area, while providing practitioners with the understanding needed to reduce dissonance experienced within the organization.

Keywords: ambiguous situation, action, identification, identity, identity conflict, identity hierarchy, identity work, identity work tactics, levels of analysis

Acknowledgement

We would like to start off by expressing our gratitude to our supervisor at Stockholm School of Economics, Wiley Wakeman, for providing us with invaluable support in making sense of the identity work research area, and for believing in us throughout the thesis process.

Moreover, we want to say thank you to the case company for giving us the opportunity to study your organization from the inside. Without the multitude of perspectives you enabled us to capture, the study would not have been the same. Building upon this, we want to say thank you to the anonymous interview subjects for sharing your experiences and showing interest. That said, we would like to express extra gratitude to our supervisor at Organization X – we appreciate the uncompromised time and advice you have provided us with.

Lastly, we want to thank all our fellow thesis students at Organization X, who have provided us with energy and inspiration every day. Without you, the work would not have been as fun!

Alexander & Linn

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	9
1.1. Background	9
1.2 Purpose & Expected Contribution	10
1.3 Research Question	10
1.5 Delimitations	10
2. Theory	11
2.1 Literature Review	11
2.1.1 Identity Work	11
2.1.2 Identity Work in Organizational Contexts	13
2.1.2.1 Collective Identity	13
2.1.2.2 Role Identity	13
2.1.2.3 Personal Identity	14
2.1.2.4 The Collective-, Role- and Personal Identities Exist in a Hierarchy	14
2.1.3 Identity Conflicts in Organizational Contexts	15
2.1.4 Identity Work in Response to Identity Conflict	16
2.1.4.1 Outcomes of Identity Work	16
2.2 Synthesis & Research Gap	17
2.3 Theoretical Framework	18
3. Methodology	20
3.1 Scientific Research Approach	20
3.1.1 Methodological Fit	20
3.1.2 Research Design	20
3.1.3 Research Case	21
3.2 Scientific Research Process	21
3.2.1 Preparatory work	22
3.2.2 Main Study	23
3.2.2.1 Phase I: In-Depth Interviews	23
3.2.2.1.1 Interview Sample	23
3.2.2.1.2 Interview Design	24
3.2.2.1.3 Data Processing	24
3.2.2.2 Phase II: Quasi-Experiment	25
3.2.2.2.1 Experimental Sample	25
3.2.2.2.2 Experimental Design	26
3.2.2.2.3 Data Processing	27

3.3 Quality of the Study	27
3.3.1 Quality Considerations	27
3.3.2 Trustworthiness	27
3.3.3 Ethical Considerations	28
4. Empirical Results	29
4.1 The Case Company: Organization X	29
4.2 Phase I: In-Depth Interviews	29
4.2.1 The Nested Organizational Context	30
4.2.1.1 Individual Level	30
4.2.1.2 Group Level	30
4.2.1.3 Organizational Level	32
4.2.2 Managing Identities in Conflict	32
4.2.2.1 Intra-Unit	33
4.2.2.2 Inter-Unit	34
4.2.2.3 Inter-Level	36
4.3 Phase II: Quasi-Experiment	36
4.3.1 Action: Response to a Personal Data Breach	36
4.4 Summary of Empirics	38
5. Analysis	39
5.1 Levels of Analysis	39
5.1.1 Individual Level	39
5.1.1.1 Identity Conflict at the Individual Level	39
5.1.1.2 Identity Work at the Individual Level	40
5.1.2 Group level	41
5.1.2.1 Identity Conflict at the Group Level	41
5.1.2.2 Identity Work at the Group Level	42
5.1.3 Organizational Level	43
5.1.3.1 Identity Conflict at the Organizational Level	43
5.1.3.2 Identity Work at the Organizational Level	44
5.2 Crossing Levels of Analysis	45
5.2.1 Identity Conflict Across Levels	45
5.2.2 Identity Work Across Levels	45
5.3 Implications of Identity Work on Actions	47
6. Conclusion	48
6.1 How Actors Engage in Identity Work at and Across Levels of Analysis	48

6.2 Implications on Actions	49
6.3 Adapted Theoretical Framework	49
6.4 Theoretical Contributions	50
6.5 Practical Implications	51
6.6 Limitations of the Study	51
6.7 Future Research	52
7. References	53
8. Appendices	63
8.1 Appendix A. Interview Subjects (Preparatory Work)	63
8.2 Appendix B. Interview Guide (Preparatory Work)	64
8.3 Appendix C. Interview Guide (Main Study)	65
8.4 Appendix D. Interview Subjects (Main Study)	66
8.5 Appendix E. Quasi-Experiment	67
8.6 Appendix F. Participants (Quasi-Experiment)	69
8.7 Appendix G. Subjects' Identification With Different Levels of Identities	70
8.8 Appendix H. Identity Conflicts at Several Levels	71
8.9 Appendix I. Critical Factors in an External Response	76
8.10 Appendix J. Results From the Experiment	77

List of Figures

Figure 1: Theoretical Framework	18
Figure 2: Research Process Outline	21
Figure 3: Example of data processing	24
Figure 4: The adapted version of the theoretical framework	49

List of Tables

Table 1: Identity Work Perspectives	11
Table 2: Overview of Research Gaps	16
Table 3: Identity Work Tactics Identified	45

Definitions

<i>Term</i>	<i>Definition in this study</i>
Ambiguous Situation	An event that is uncertain, or that can be interpreted in more than one way.
Discourses	Dominant narratives such as rules, principles, and norms that influence prescribed identities and, consequently, behavior (Kuhn, 2006). Discourses and institutional forces provide boundaries as to how freely identities can be shaped and developed.
Identification	Identity as an ongoing process. Here used interchangeably with “identity work”.
Identity	The subjective interpretation of who one is, consisting of a set of values, beliefs, norms, and demands, guiding behavior and perceptions (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).
Identity Conflict	The tensions triggered by opposing values, beliefs, norms and demands between identities (Horton et al., 2014).
Identity Hierarchy	The composition and order of identities that helps the subject determine which to attend to and which to ignore (Stryker & Serpe, 1994).
Identity Work	An ongoing process individuals undertake “[...] with the goal of forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening, revising, or rejecting collective-, role-, and personal self-meanings within the boundaries of their social context” (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 895). Thereby, it refers to the emergent process of becoming rather than being, in which subjects try to make sense of themselves and their identities, to reach a stable sense of self in a given situation (Caza et al., 2018).
Identity Work Tactic	A certain way of engaging in identity work, observed among several subjects.
Levels of Analysis	The different entities studied, i.e. individual, group, and organizational.
Personal Data Breach	Examined as an ambiguous situation and a trigger for identity work in the case organization. Per se, it refers to a security breach that leads to an accidental or unlawful destruction, loss, alteration, unauthorized disclosure of, or access to, personal data.
Salience	The degree to which an identity is activated prior to others in a situation. Higher-salient identities are more consequential for behavior than lower-salience.
Subject	Refers to an individual person studied.
Trigger	The event that initiates identity conflict, and subsequently identity work. In this study, the trigger is an ambiguous situation, exemplified by a personal data breach.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

“Balancing identities in the organization is almost like acting; there are several characters, and you have to try to play them all – however difficult that might be.” – Employee, Organization X

How do employees make sense of themselves when there is no clear manuscript of how to act? Employees in organizations, like actors in movies, need to have a reasonably clear idea of who they are and how they fit into the setting to be able to play their parts successfully. However, unlike actors in movies, who know how the course of events following the climax will unfold beforehand, employees often face ambiguous situations where they have no script to turn to, and where they are forced to make sense of themselves anew in deciding how to act. The organizational setting, moreover, problematizes this identification process since employees do not just have occupational roles and personal values to balance, but also the demands of one or more larger collectives, such as a group and the organization. Consequently, the identities an employee balances might, at times, extort contrasting expectations – making the organizational setting interesting for identity studies (Caza et al., 2018).

Before jumping too far into how employees balance identities, we acknowledge the need to establish what we mean with identities. Identity is defined as an individual's subjective interpretation of who one is, consisting of a set of values, beliefs, norms, and demands – guiding behavior and perceptions (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Thus, identity helps the subject to answer the questions “who am I?” and “how should I act?” in different situations, making it central in understanding behavior, commitment, decision-making, relationships, and motivation (Löwstedt & Räisänen, 2014; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Although the term identity might sound constant, like something that the subject possesses, scholars argue that identity formation should be interpreted as the dynamic process of identity work; a becoming rather than being – without a final end (Ashforth & Mael, 1998; Löwstedt & Räisänen, 2014; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Whilst identity work most often happens unconsciously, there are situations that warrant a higher level of awareness. In particular, scholars suggest that identity work is intensified following ambiguous situations, by helping subjects to reach a stable sense of self, subsequently guiding them in how to act (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Caza et al., 2018). That said, although identity work has gained much interest within managerial and social studies, there are gaps as to what we know.

Having established that identities change, what we are less certain about is how identity work occurs at and across levels. Previous research guides us to believe that subjects are the result of a combination of several identities – such as occupational and personal – as opposed to one separate (Ashforth et al, 2008; Brown, 2015; Hoyer 2020; Löwstedt & Räisänen, 2014). However, although recognizing that identities are multidimensional, the existing contributions have been bound to particular theoretical assumptions (Brown, 2017; Caza et al., 2018). Hence, by conveying only one perspective, findings mainly cater to others also active within the same school, hampering a holistic understanding of identity work. Extending upon this, there is a tendency amongst

identity work scholars to study identities at one level in isolation, although acknowledging that the organizational context implies that subjects are composed of identities across levels (Ashforth et al., 2011). As identities at and across levels may exert contrasting demands and expectations on subjects (Caza et al., 2018), the identity work process can be interpreted as complex, but necessary to tap into further in order to understand how subjects make sense of themselves (Leroy et al., 2022). That is exactly what this paper will do, through exploring how subjects in one and the same organization engage in identity work following an ambiguous situation, to subsequently decide how to act.

1.2 Purpose & Expected Contribution

The purpose of the study is two-fold. Firstly, we aim to provide the reader with a deep and nuanced understanding of the identity work process in an organizational context, by studying how subjects balance multiple identities, at and across levels of analysis, following an ambiguous situation. Secondly, we aim to convert a holistic understanding of identity work by taking the full sequence of events into account, including its outcomes. We do this by studying a real-life ambiguous situation and trigger, a personal data breach, in a selected case organization. In doing so, the identity work tactics it sparks within the subject are studied, as well as how the process influences and guides her towards a perception of how to act, showcased by how she responds externally to customers (Caza et al., 2018; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). With this in mind, the study is expected to contribute to scholars by clarifying an otherwise ambiguous research field (Alvesson et al., 2008; Brown, 2017), and to practitioners by providing them with an understanding of the importance of identities in creating a workplace free of tensions.

1.3 Research Question

Inspired by Leroy et al. (2022), and with the aforementioned research purpose in mind, the following research question has been formulated:

How do subjects engage in identity work at and across levels of analysis in response to an ambiguous situation, and what are the implications on actions?

1.5 Delimitations

In order to fulfill the purpose of this study, delimitations have been enforced. Firstly, this study takes a single-case approach, investigating one organization. Although studying only one case allows for a deep and nuanced picture of the selected organization, it may affect the applicability of the findings to other contexts. Secondly, this study investigates identity work connected to ambiguous situations, in particular, to narrow the scope and to enable the investigation of a real-life trigger for intensified identity work. However, as this study examines only one type of an ambiguous situation, namely a personal data breach, it may misrepresent the identity work process following other types of triggering events.

2. Theory

This chapter provides a review of the relevant literature (2.1), followed by a synthesis highlighting the research gaps identified (2.2), after which the theoretical framework developed is presented (2.3).

2.1 Literature Review

2.1.1 Identity Work

It has been widely acknowledged that identity work is an ongoing process individuals undertake “[...] with the goal of forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening, revising, or rejecting collective-, role-, and personal self-meanings within the boundaries of their social context” (Caza et al., 2018, p. 895). Whilst identity work most often happens unconsciously scholars suggest that it is intensified following ambiguous situations that create tensions, often referred to as an identity conflict (Section 2.1.3), within the subject in question (Caza et al., 2018; Horton et al., 2014; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003).

Depending on the theoretical lens applied when studying identities, however, the *hows*, *whens* and *whys* of identity work somewhat differ. In particular, Social Identity Theory (SIT), Critical Theory (CT), Identity Theory (IT), and Narrative Theory (NT) are prominent perspectives that offer somewhat different explanations to identity work (Table 1). Whereas SIT and CT focus on collective identities, where the individual defines herself as a part of a social group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel, 1978), IT, in contrast puts focus on the individual’s experiences of role identities and social prescriptions at the center, that, in turn, shape the individual’s identities (Brown, 2021). Lastly, NT explains identity as a construction of a narrative, i.e. a set of stories, based on experiences of the individual – the identity is thus a result of the past (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Watson, 2009). Despite different standpoints, however, we, in line with more contemporary researchers such as Brown (2021), argue that these cannot be separated from one another in studying identity work in an organizational context – where multiple identities across levels guide behavior. Consequently, we aim to leverage synergies across perspectives, by drawing upon the multiple streams of research available to facilitate a greater understanding of *how* subjects engage in identity work and the subsequent outcomes it yields.

Table 1. Identity Work Perspectives. Adapted from Caza et al. (2018).

Theoretical Lens	Identities	Identity Work	Critique
Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979)	Collective	How subjects partake in categorization, stereotyping and depersonalization, to assign themselves and others to social groups (e.g., Lucas, 2011).	Preoccupation with social identity formation, neglecting the issues of role and personal identities.
Critical Identity Theory (Foucault, 1980)	Collective	How subjects accept, but also appropriate, modify and resist attempts at identity control (i.e., discursive forces) (e.g., Alvesson & Willmott, 2002).	Preoccupation with power.
Identity Theory (Stryker & Serpe, 1982)	Role	How subjects adapt to the role, change the role and/or the perception of the role (e.g., Jain et al., 2009).	Takes personal identities for granted, ignoring its influence on the role, while neglecting the collective.
Narrative Theory (Bruner, 1991)	Personal	How subjects construct self-narratives based on stories and discourses, to make sense of themselves (e.g., Wright et al., 2012).	Largely ignores the social world, reducing complex relations into a story of the subject.

Although differences prevail depending on the theoretical lens applied, there is a shared perception of *where* identity work occurs; at the intersection between the individual subject and the external environment. Hence, although subjects to some extent choose their identities, they are influenced and constrained by internal and external forces (e.g. the larger social context) (Brown & Toyoki, 2013; Costas & Kärreman, 2016; Marlow & McAdam, 2015). Diving deeper into the *where* of identity work, scholars most often portray it as a cognitive process involving the mental efforts wherein subjects make sense of, interpret, design and evaluate identities. Since there might be several possible identities at play in a given situation, the cognitive process helps organize and categorize which identities fit when, how they interplay, how to change in between them, and how to address inter-identity conflicts (Carollo et al., 2017; Ramarajan, 2014). The identity work process is not limited to cognition, however, but also refers to the actions individuals take to maintain, build and revise their identities (Ashforth et al., 2007; Carrim & Nkomo, 2018). Apart from being a cognitive and behavioral process, identity work also covers how individuals verbalize their identities, i.e. how they talk about themselves (Allen, 2005; Courpasson & Monties, 2017; Snow & Andersson, 1987). In addition, our review suggests that the *where* can take place at several levels within the subject – that in tandem are worked upon to create a meaningful overarching identity in an organizational context (see section 2.1.2).

2.1.2 Identity Work in Organizational Contexts

Researchers have argued that the types of identities present in an organizational context can be grouped into three broad categories that individuals draw upon – namely collective-, role- and personal identities (Ashforth et al., 2008; Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Caza et al., 2018; Thoits & Virshup, 1997). With the multitude types of identities and context in mind, and the few researchers that study them in tandem, in favor of simplifying the matter and studying only a specific identity type (e.g., Creary et al., 2015; Ramarajan & Reid, 2013), we propose that the complete view of the self cannot be understood in isolation – and that the respective type of identity should not solely be connected to a particular theoretical lens.

2.1.2.1 Collective Identity

The vast majority of the research conducted within the field of identity work has adopted the view that identity in an organizational context has a collective nature (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In particular, researchers have explored how subjects create meanings and ties to the organization in which they are members (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Dutton et al., 1994). This process is often referred to as “organizational identification”, involving the desire of individuals to be part of something larger than themselves (Brown, 2017). It should be highlighted that collective identity is not limited to the organizational level as such, but includes how the subject derives meaning from its occupational work group, as well as the interplay between the organization and the work group. Organizational identification is of importance since researchers have shown that individuals who identify themselves with their organization and/or work group are more likely to be similar to it and thus act unitarily to it, while it increases the support of, and participation in, the collective (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tyler & Blader, 2001). That is not to say, though, that full conformity to, and within, a collective is desirable. Rather, it can result in excessive homogeneity – thereby inhibiting innovation and creativity within the organization (Dukerich et al., 1998; Glynn, 1998). With this in mind, how individuals derive meaning from collectives is a complicated process (Edwards 2005; He & Brown, 2013). This study treats the collective identity as the extent to which members embody the organization’s and/or work group’s beliefs, values, norms, and demands as their own, and seek to become prototypical members (Ashforth et al. 2008; Elsbach 2004; Tajfel & Turner 1979).

2.1.2.2 Role Identity

Role identity is understood as the positions employees take in relation to each other (Stryker, 1987; Sluss & Ashforth, 2008). Taking into account that organizations often are structured around job specialties, organizational members are largely known for their roles and tend to identify themselves accordingly at the individual level (Trice, 1993; Van Maanen & Barley, 1984). In particular, scholars have explored how individuals professionalize themselves to reinforce and meet normative expectations related to discourses concerning their roles (e.g., Clarke & Brown al., 2009; Cuganesan, 2017; Epitropaki et al., 2017; Sims, 2008). Furthermore, even though an individual might possess just one work role on paper, Ibarra (1999) laid the foundation of provisional selves, arguing that roles change and that each individual, in fact, has a set of selves or temporary solutions that they use to bridge the gaps between expectations and possible occupational identities.

The role identity construct is of particular relevance in an organizational context, since all employees have one or more work roles under which they operate. It should be noted, however, that the role construct is often seen to contrast the collective identity, since having a role identity means acting in a somewhat more individualistic way, based on what is expected with regards to the responsibilities of the distinct role (Brewer, 2001). Nonetheless, we – in line with Stets & Burke (2000) – argue that they are connected since “[...] one always and simultaneously occupies a role and belongs to a group, in the sense that role identities and [collective] identities are always and simultaneously relevant to, and influential on, perceptions, affect, and behavior” (p.228).

2.1.2.3 Personal Identity

Personal identity is, at the individual level, the most elementary type of identity and concerns the self-descriptions of the subject, derived from their own biography of experiences, narrated into identity stories (Owens et al., 2010). Individuals also use demographic characteristics, such as ethnicity and gender, as well as personal attributes or qualities, such as extroversion, as a source of personal self meaning (Brown, 2021). Markus and Nurius (1986) extended the literature on self-knowledge by introducing the concept of possible selves, referring to “[...] individuals’ ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming” (p. 954). Hence, they argued, in line with the provisional selves from IT, that an individual does not have just one, but several possible identities – which can both provide obstacles and opportunities when put in an organizational context (Caza et al., 2018). With this in mind, we acknowledge that personal values play an important role in understanding the complete view of identity work, also in an organizational context.

2.1.2.4 The Collective-, Role- and Personal Identities Exist in a Hierarchy

Whereas collective-, role-, and personal identities all co-exist in an organizational context, they are not equally salient for all subjects. Rather, the identities of a subject can be described to exist in a hierarchy where salience represents the degree to which an identity is activated prior to other identities in a particular situation (Stryker & Serpe, 1994; Bataille & Vough, 2022). Higher-salience identities are more consequential for behavior, whereas lower-salience identities may have little to no impact on the subject’s actions. The identities are, however, not static such that a particular identity will guide an individual in all circumstances. Instead, an identity’s salience in the overall hierarchy may be called into question (Bataille & Vough, 2022). For example, if the role is a highly salient identity in everyday work, but the individual faces a situation where the role does not prescribe guidelines as to how one should act, the individual may seek to decrease the salience of the role identity to allow other identities, such as the personal- and/or collective identities, to steer her behavior.

That said, changing the salience of identities is a complicated process of identity work (Bataille & Vough, 2022). On the one hand, the organizational context might provide challenges with regards to discourses an individual has to oblige to. On the other hand, individuals oftentimes have pre-established meanings about who they are and who they want to be, which can make it difficult to decrease the salience of identities that the individual identifies highly with (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Bataille & Vough, 2022). Furthermore, whilst identity

hierarchies can decrease the distress associated with a threatened situation by allowing the individual to determine which identity to attend to and which to ignore (Pratt & Kraatz, 2009), it can also result in the creation of a “feared possible self” as the subject might have to attend to an identity that she does not wish to associate herself with (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman & Markus, 1990).

2.1.3 Identity Conflicts in Organizational Contexts

As subjects seek to make sense of who they are and what they stand for in a given situation, the simultaneous activation of values, beliefs, norms, and demands inherent in collective-, role-, and personal identities, may create tensions when the identities are not compatible with one another (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Caza et al., 2018). These tensions can provoke an identity conflict, which, in turn, can trigger more intense identity work. In an organizational context, conflicts can arise within units, between units, and across levels (Horton et al., 2014).

At the intra-unit level (e.g. intra-individual, intra-group or intra-organizational), extant studies to a large degree show differences between subjects’ personal identities, i.e. core values and beliefs, and their perception of the external expectations set by their work role(s) (Leung et al., 2014). The struggle becomes even greater in cases where individuals are expected to carry out several roles at once and are influenced by subjects of differing perspectives. In his study, Alvesson (2000), for instance, showed that employees with a high degree of client contact were more influenced by the client company’s organizational identity, and thus acted in line with their interests, prior to the “home” organization’s. Moreover, as identities and discourses are subjectively interpreted, they may have different meanings and yield contrasting expectations, and with that behavior – even within tightly knit groups (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

At the inter-unit level, in contrast, conflicts may arise between subjects, groups and organizations (Horton et al., 2014). For example, Hekman et al. (2009) showed how different groups may have differing perspectives, by drawing upon administrators of a hospital emphasizing issues of “efficiency and profitability” in their work, whereas professional service employees at the same hospital emphasized “professional excellence” – thereby resulting in tensions between the groups. Moreover, Löwstedt and Räisänen (2014) showed how subgroups “[...] resisted what it deemed as being outside its self-defining core, content, and behavior” (p.30). Consequently, when individuals position themselves relative to social groups and distinctions between in- and out-groups become salient, groups are pushed apart (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). This can, in turn, result in a self-reinforcing loop, where groups become more positive to the views of themselves (in-group) compared to other groups (out-groups) – increasing inter-group differences (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Horton et al., 2014).

Given the structure of organizations, it can furthermore be difficult for subjects and collectives to establish and maintain a stable sense of self across levels – especially when identities are interconnected, or nested (Horton et al., 2014). The subject often has a perception about their role- and personal identities, which may or may not contradict the collective identities at the group and organizational level. Hence, in some cases, a subject may identify herself with the organization, but still disagree with its values, beliefs, norms and demands (Ashforth &

Mael, 1989; Elsbach, 1999). Subsequently, the tensions experienced may result in the subject tying weaker ties, and lower commitment, to the organization – in the worst case even leading her to exit it altogether, through disidentification (Alvesson, 2000). Therefore, in a nested context, congruence between identities at several levels is important in order to foster joint identification, and with that action.

2.1.4 Identity Work in Response to Identity Conflict

Based on cognitive dissonance theory, subjects can be assumed to strive for balance, comfort and correspondence between identities and situations, which is why identity conflicts are so central in relation to identity work (Hinojosa et al., 2017; Winkler, 2018). Without a stable sense of self in a given situation, subjects do not function as effectively, or feel as aroused, as they do when in balance (Ibid.). For subjects experiencing an identity conflict, the objective of the identity work is, thus, to reduce the tensions experienced in order to establish a temporary sense of self, which facilitates action (Löwstedt & Räisänen, 2014; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). In order to shed light on *how* subjects deal with conflicts, previous scholars have identified various identity work tactics to ameliorate the process of identification. Selected tactics are presented below.

Firstly, Bataille & Vough (2022), argued that individuals, following a threatening experience, are particularly likely to deploy the identity work tactic of disidentifying with the identity that is perceived to be conflicting, thus strengthening previous arguments presented by Alvesson (2000) in response to identity conflicts. Secondly, Boucher et al. (2016) and Proulx (2012) both argued that individuals might seek to use the tactic of revising the meanings associated with their identities in conflict. Recently, Mausz et al. (2022) built upon these arguments by showing how paramedics used the tactic of reframing their roles and what was expected of them when they were unable to fulfill the perceived requirements. Thirdly, scholars have argued that individuals may engage in identity work by changing the ties between identities in conflict by seeking to align them. Kreiner et al. (2016), for instance, showed how priests drew upon elements of their personal selves in shaping their roles to reduce the tensions experienced and to find an optimal balance between their personal- and role identities. Lastly, researchers have presented that individuals might rely on the salience of identities when engaging in identity work, by strengthening those identities that are not perceived to be in conflict with the situation at hand (Pratt & Kraatz, 2009). With the aforementioned tactics in mind, we acknowledge the methodology of using tactics as a way to explain the *hows* of identity work. That said, previously identified tactics have generally focused on one level of analysis (i.e., most often the individual level) and have been derived from a certain context. Thus, we see a need to explore how subjects engage in identity work in an organizational context, composed of multiple levels.

2.1.4.1 Outcomes of Identity Work

Having acknowledged that there are multiple identity work tactics the individual can deploy to decrease the tensions experienced, we turn to the outcomes of identity work, which previous scholars have largely tended to neglect (Caza et al., 2018). It has been suggested that successful identity work enhances coherence between the varying and multiple identities, which may function as a buffer against a threatening and diverse external world (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Consequently, in an organizational context, given that identity guides actions,

subjects and levels may become more aligned in terms of their subsequent actions. However, even though previous research provides hope in that identity work should positively address identity conflicts and with that decrease the feeling of discomfort, there is no guarantee that the outcome solves all problems (Beech, 2011). Zanna & Cooper (1974), for example, concluded that drawing upon a particular salient identity, prior to another, might not provide a feeling of arousal, but rather of dissonance and distress. They argued that this is especially the case when the enacted identity is forced upon the subject and contradictory to the values of strong, but suppressed, identities. Furthermore, the effect of the newly triggered conflict is particularly apparent when the action is irrevocable and instant, forcing the subject to reassess themselves and justify the actions taken.

2.2 Synthesis & Research Gap

Having conducted a comprehensive and critical review of relevant literature, identity work can be concluded to be a quite mature research area. That is not to say that it is saturated, since three empirical research gaps have been identified, which this study aims to bridge. An overview of the areas of the identified gaps, as well as the researchers supporting the lack of focus on them, is highlighted in Table 2.

Table 2. Overview of Research Gaps.

Research Gap	Amongst Others Highlighted By
Multi-Theoretical Perspective (1)	Brown, 2021; Caza et al., 2018; Creary et al., 2015; Leroy et al., 2022; Ramarajan, 2014; Ramarajan & Reid, 2013; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003
Crossing Levels of Analysis (2)	Ashforth et al., 2011; Brown, 2021; Caza et al., 2018; Creary et al., 2015; Kozlowski & Klein, 2000; Leroy et al., 2022; Ramarajan, 2014; Ramarajan & Reid, 2013
Implications of Identity Work (3)	Alvesson et al., 2008; Brown, 2017; Caza et al., 2018; Cuganesan, 2017; Leroy, 2022; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003

Starting with the first research gap, as previously stated, empirical research lags sorely behind as much of the organizational research is conducted on identities in isolation using single theoretical lenses (Creary et al., 2015; Ramarajan & Reid, 2013), despite the fact that it has been acknowledged that people are influenced by several factors, not all pertaining to the same theoretical lens. This is especially the case in an organizational context where collective- (SIT & CT), role- (IT), and personal identities (NT) all are relevant (Brown, 2021). Pioneering research in the field further shows that the prevalence of multiple perspectives shapes important and somewhat differing organizational outcomes and implications (Ramarajan, 2014). Consequently, there is a need for researchers to address the multiple identities inherently present – disconnected from narrow theoretical standpoints (Caza et al., 2018). This may well influence and change the picture of identity work that we thus far have received.

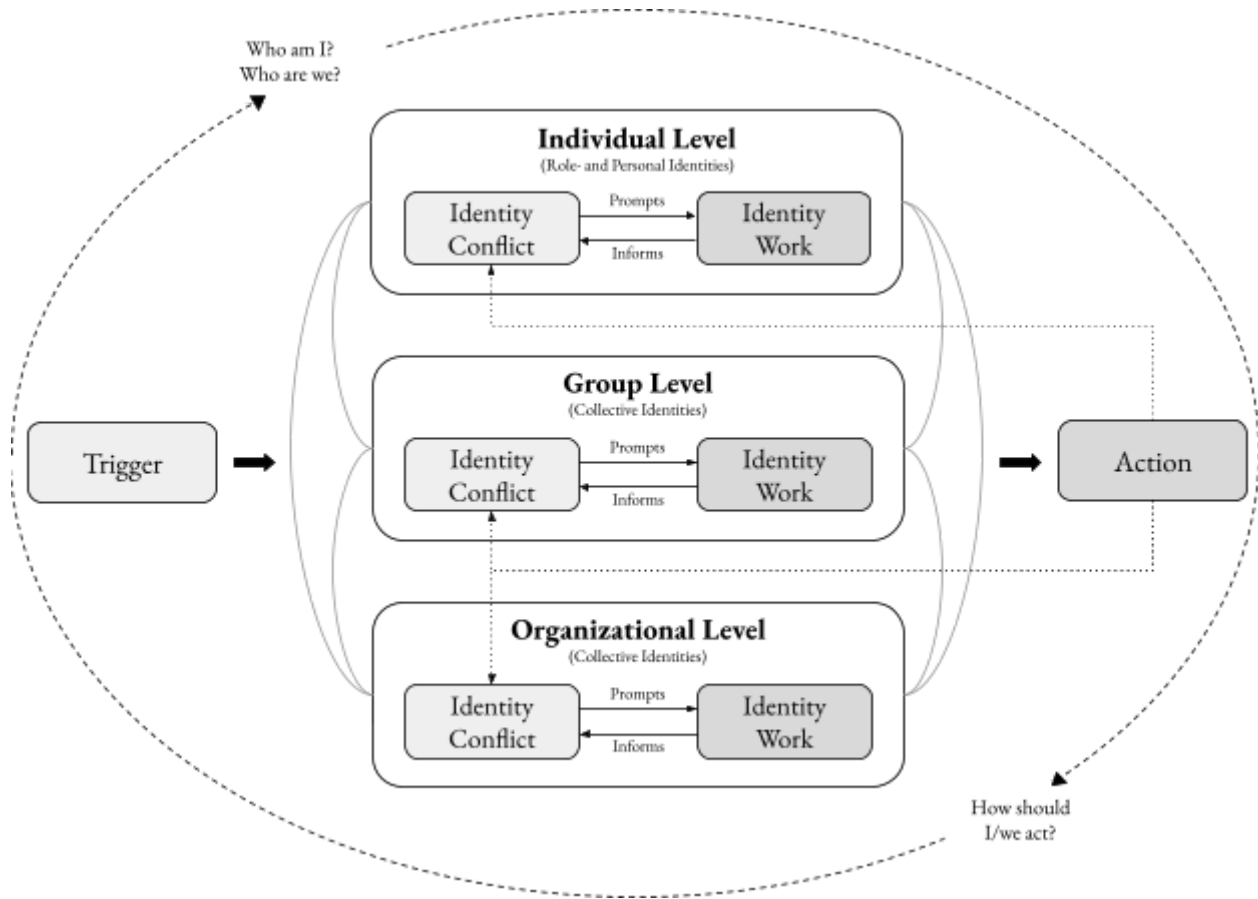
Secondly, the literature review reveals that most research on organization-based identities focuses on a single level of analysis (i.e., the individual, group, or organizational identities). Whereas this is understandable due to the complexities associated with shifting the level of analysis, it reinforces a static view of identity and leaves important questions regarding dynamics across levels largely unanswered (Ashforth et al., 2011). Kozlowski & Klein (2000) argued that while identity conflicts and identity work can be more prominent at one level, it might also impose spillover effects to other levels, thereby initiating identity work across levels. Thus, there is a need to further explore the identity work tactics deployed in dealing with identity conflicts – not just at separate levels, but also across levels (Leroy et al., 2022).

Finally, the literature review conducted suggests that using a multi-theoretical lens when studying identities at and across levels might generate additional insights into the identity work process that other scholars have neglected. In particular, with regards to its subsequent implications on actions. As many authors have noted, there is a connection between identity and behavior, but yet there is a lack of in-depth studies of how specific situations initiate identity work, taking the full sequence of events into account, including subsequent actions (Alvesson et al., 2008; Brown, 2017; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003).

2.3 Theoretical Framework

In order to fully grasp the process of identity work and close the identified research gaps, a theoretical framework has been developed based on insights from the literature review (Figure 1). The framework has been designed with the two overarching questions surrounding identification in mind; “who am I (we)?” and “how should I (we) act?” (Löwstedt & Räsänen, 2014; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Thus, it seeks to explain how these concerns are resolved, by illustrating the relationship between a triggering event and a subsequent action. Consequently, we take the full sequence of events, including outcomes into account, thereby satisfying the third research gap identified (Table 2). In between the trigger and action, all levels inherent in the identity work process in an organizational context are illustrated in parallel, to shed light on the importance of each, as well as their interrelation, thereby covering the second research gap (Ashforth et al., 2011). Thus, we acknowledge the nested organizational context, where an individual simultaneously occupies one or several role identities, multiple non-work-related identities (i.e, personal identities), while being part of one or more larger collectives such as a group, and the organization at large, thereby aiming to fill the first research gap.

Figure 1. Theoretical Framework.



Walking the reader through the sequence of events outlined in Figure 1, we postulate that the triggering event, an ambiguous situation, here exemplified by a personal data breach, initiates identity conflicts at one or several levels as the subject seeks to balance competing values, beliefs, norms and demands. To resolve the conflict experienced, the subject engages in identity work, at and across levels, to establish a temporary sense of self. The outcome of the process is a subsequent action, hereby exemplified by an external customer response. Noteworthy, the outcome does not denote an end state, based on arguments by Hinojosa et al.'s (2017) and Zanna & Cooper's (1974), but a loop is triggered in case the subject still experiences tensions.

3. Methodology

This chapter guides the reader through the scientific research approach (3.1), and the scientific research process applied, including preparatory work and main study (3.2). The chapter ends with a discussion regarding the quality of the study (3.3).

3.1 Scientific Research Approach

3.1.1 Methodological Fit

The study was conducted with an exploratory purpose, by gathering preliminary data which could help set the direction for future research (Makri & Neely, 2021). As such, a qualitative approach was taken, in line with Yin's (2003) recommendations, arguing for its fit in this study given that the aim was to examine themes in a partly unexplored, ambiguous research field. Furthermore, the qualitative research approach taken aligned well with the area of focus since previous scholars within the field have noted that the dynamic concept of identity work is difficult to capture via quantitative measures (e.g., Caza et al., 2018). Thus, the study sought to provide rich descriptions of the experiences of the employees, their groups, and the case organization. Studying all entities in-depth, thereby allowed for the discovery of new concepts that could help explain how subjects engage in identity work at and across levels, including its implications on actions (Bell et al., 2019).

3.1.2 Research Design

At the start, the study took an inductive approach, meaning that theory was developed in a “data-driven manner” using data collected through interviews (Bell et al., 2019). Thus, we made a point of not knowing the literature in detail in advance, because “[...] knowing the literature intimately too early puts blinders on and leads to prior [confirmation] bias” (Giola et al., 2012, p. 21). However, as the research progressed, we moved beyond induction and adopted an abductive logic, to enable theory-building through engaging with the insights gathered in interviews (Charmaz, 2009).

Taking into account that we sought to understand the organizational reality and the interpretation of it by its employees, the epistemological position adopted can be described as interpretivist (Bell et al., 2019). As such, we acknowledge that the employees constructing their organizational realities may have viewed things differently from the way we, as researchers, perceived them (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2020). Drawing upon the subjectivist ontology, to which the interpretivist paradigm is underpinned, the subjects' *Lebenswelt* were the starting point of investigation. In other words, subjects' meanings are core to our understanding and we sought to (i) produce descriptive accounts of their meanings; and (ii) to uncover a deeper meaning than what was expressed in pure words (Giola et al., 2012).

3.1.3 Research Case

The organizational setting implies a need for employees to define and redefine themselves constantly (Caza et al., 2018; Caza et al., 2017; Ibarra, 1999). As such, the case study approach was deemed appropriate to study how subjects engage in identity work at and across levels of analysis as well as to gain an understanding of its implications on actions in real-life. This further aligns with Yin's statement that case studies are preferable when "[...] the focus is on a contemporary phenomena" (2009, p. 2).

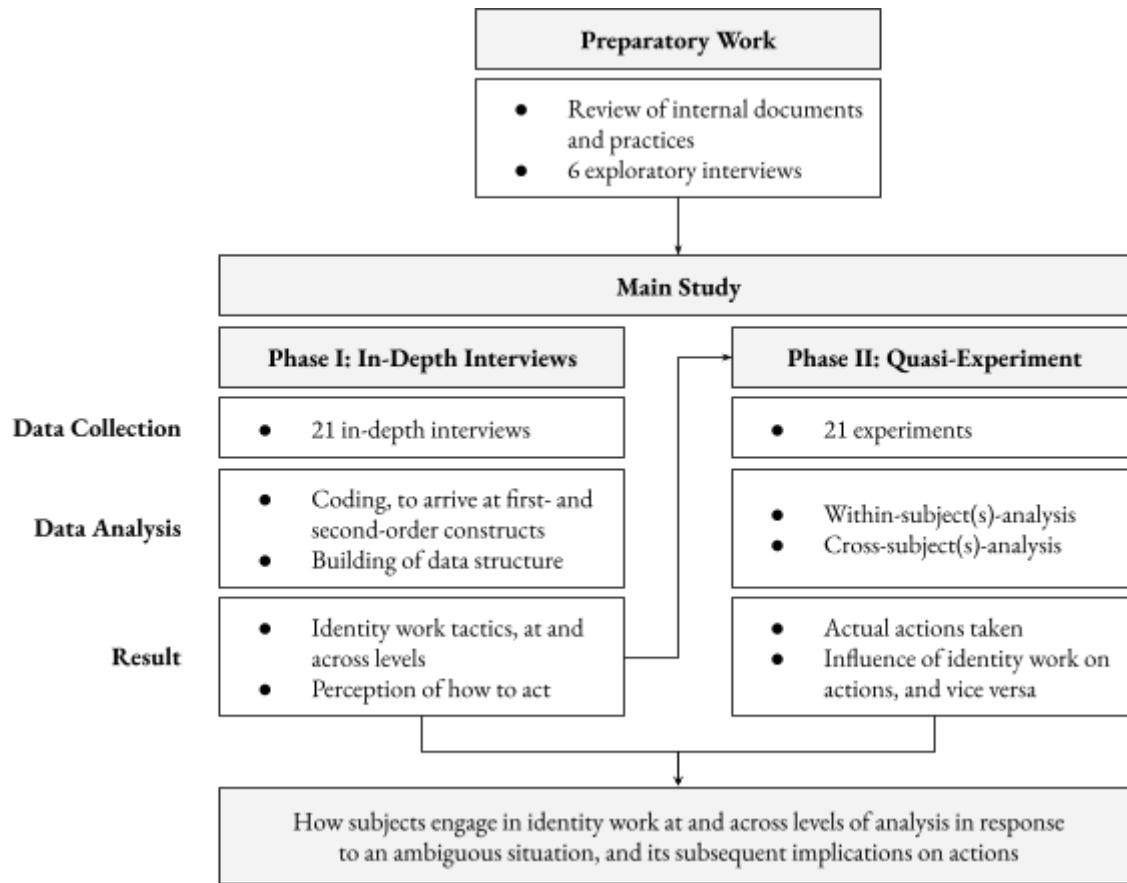
Bearing in mind that we aimed to provide an in-depth elucidation of the identity work process, we conducted a single-case study. This approach aligned well with our desire to gather empirically rich contextual descriptions of the process, based on the expressed reality of the subjects (Bell et al., 2019). In choosing a case to study, a particular anonymized company caught our interest, hereafter referred to as Organization X. The reason for why Organization X was perceived to be suitable was given that they, about a year ago, experienced a personal data breach that put strain and pressure on employees to make sense of a situation they had not been faced with before, and to subsequently make sense of themselves anew in deciding how to respond externally to customers. As such, studying Organization X provided us with the opportunity to deep-dive into a real-life ambiguous situation that challenged existing ways of working, and to investigate the identity work process of employees' who were directly involved in it (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Furthermore, examining the personal data breach that occurred in Organization X, as a trigger for identity work, was desirable since it was the first time a personal data breach had occurred within the organization. Moreover, since there were no best practices in place of how to handle it, the personal data breach represents an ambiguous situation. By studying an extreme case like this, the dynamics of identity work were, further, more visible than the parallel dynamics would have been in an organizational context that had not been challenged (Eisenhardt, 1989; Pettigre, 1990).

Noteworthy, Organization X chose to employ us during the study. This enabled us to study the case from the inside, allowing for first-hand collection of data. The set-up, furthermore, made us part of the organizational reality of the employees, which enabled us to bond with them – thereby increasing the likelihood of us hearing their true thoughts concerning the area of study (Barnard et al., 1999). Moreover, it made it possible to gain a deeper understanding of Organization X, as well as how the personal data breach that occurred was handled.

3.2 Scientific Research Process

After selecting the case company to study, the scientific research process was developed. The process is visually illustrated in Figure 2. As can be seen, the research process was divided into two stages; the preparatory work (3.2.1), and the main study, divided into two phases (3.2.2).

Figure 2. Research Process Outline.



3.2.1 Preparatory work

Prior to initiating the main study, we sought to gain a deeper understanding of Organization X by reviewing internal documents related to the personal data breach that occurred. This provided valuable information, without us having to ask background questions in the interviews (Bell et al., 2019). From the review, it became evident that a particular area of discussion was how to formulate the external response to customers following it. Thus, going forth, we kept the external response in mind when exploring the implications on actions by identity work. In addition, we conducted 6 exploratory interviews with employees directly involved in the personal data breach (see selection criteria in section 3.2.2.1.1, and interview subjects in Appendix A). The interviews concerned employees' identification with different organizational entities, their perception of the incident management process and the actions taken following the situation, as well as critical factors to take into consideration when formulating a response to customers (see interview guide in Appendix B).

The insights gathered showed that employees answered differently to the questions asked depending on how they made sense of themselves, and what entity of the organization they drew upon – i.e. the individual-, group- or organizational level. Thus, the exploratory interviews confirmed a need to further look into how subjects

engage in identity work following ambiguous situations in order to make sense of them, by examining the relationships between and across identities at several levels within the selected case organization (e.g., Ashforth et al., 2011; Brown, 2021; Caza et al., 2018; Creary et al., 2015; Leroy et al., 2022). Based on the findings, the research question was specified and an interview guide was adapted for the main study (Appendix C). Moreover, since the interview guide was adapted, the interview subjects from the exploratory interviews were invited to partake in the main study as well.

3.2.2 Main Study

3.2.2.1 Phase I: In-Depth Interviews

Taking into account that meanings are mostly communicated through language, in-depth interviews were conducted to gain a greater understanding of the phenomena of interest (Bell et al., 2019). Below follows a discussion of the interview sample (3.2.2.1.1), the interview design (3.2.2.1.2) and the data processing (3.2.2.1.3).

3.2.2.1.1 Interview Sample

In deciding what interview subjects to include in the main study, we sought to cover a multiplicity of perspectives by interviewing employees from various work areas in Organization X. Interview subjects were selected by virtue of their relevance using *a priori purposive sampling*, meaning that criteria for inclusion were established at the off-set, with relevance to the area studied (Bell et al., 2019). In particular, criteria for inclusion was based on (i) full time employment within the organization; (ii) involvement in the personal data breach that took place, bearing in mind that it is used as an ambiguous situation in this study; (iii) involvement in the construction of the organizational response following the personal data breach that occurred, given that we look at the full sequence of events, from trigger to action; and (iv) diversity, where we aimed for an equal split between interviewees with direct customer contact, and those without. This resulted in a final sample of participants belonging to communications-, incident management-, and legal work areas (see list of interview subjects in Appendix D).

The number of interviews were, however, not established at the off-set. Rather, we relied on theoretical saturation to guide the total number of interviews (Bell et al., 2019). That is, sampling continued until conceptual themes were fully developed and relationships accounted for, meaning that no new insights seemed to be emerging (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). After having conducted 18 interviews, only one new insight was generated, and after the 19th interview, no new insights were arrived at, making us confident that we had established saturation. However, we concluded that we had to go beyond the point of saturation to ensure that the emergence of themes was exhausted (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). This led us to conduct two additional interviews, thereby resulting in a total of 21 interviews (9 in communications, 7 in incident management, and 5 in legal work areas).

3.2.2.1.2 Interview Design

The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured approach with open-ended questions in order to enhance the opportunity of genuinely revealing the perspectives of the people being studied (see interview guide in Appendix C) (Bell et al., 2019). The interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and covered themes related to personal data breaches and the relationship between and across identities. However, the content of the interviews were partly adapted throughout the interview process to fit the respective interviewee and her work area (Bell et al., 2019). Consequently, although the themes provided the interviews with a focus, it was deemed important to remain alert on what was being said to gain a genuine understanding of the interviewee's meaning structures. This entailed asking follow-up questions, paying attention to inconsistencies in the interviewee's answer as well as to non-verbal cues – factors which can be argued to be even more important when studying a social area such as identity work, where the ongoing identity struggle might show through hesitation or silence (Wengraf, 2001). In other words, we deployed what Rubin and Rubin (2005) denotes “responsive interviewing” – entailing a willingness to understand the point of view of the person by leading a collaborative conversation. In doing so, the conversation was led by one of us researchers, whilst the other was responsible for taking notes. However, to minimize the influence and risk of going native (i.e., bias to the subject's views), we took turns in performing these tasks, allowing us both to intervene in the conversation if necessary (Mills et al., 2010).

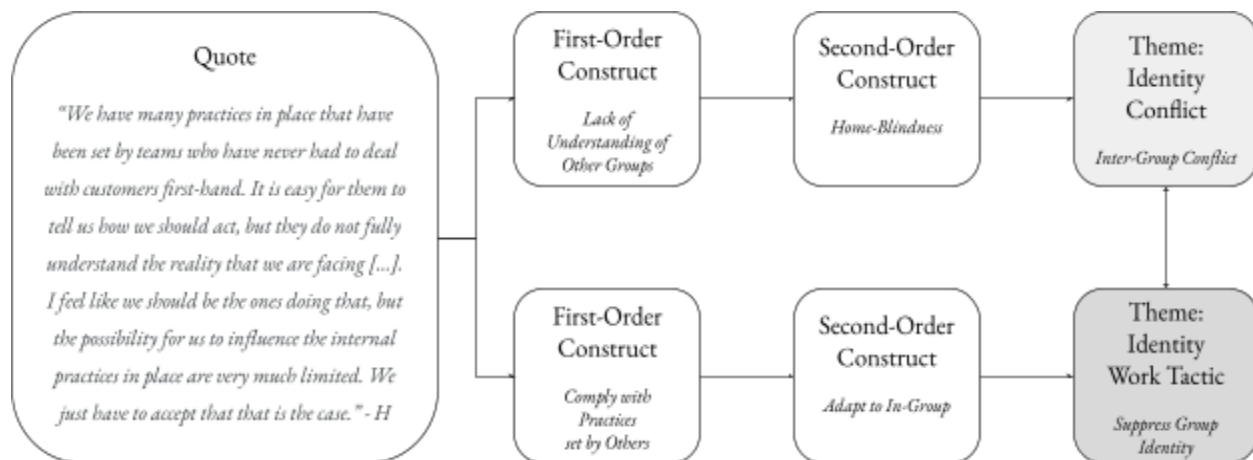
Due to the Covid-19 Pandemic, the majority of interviews (19) were conducted via Google Meets, while the remaining (2) interviews were conducted in-person at the office (Bell et al., 2019). Although conducting video interviews might make it difficult to interpret facial expressions, body language, and to some extent other non-verbal cues, it has been suggested that face-to-face interviews are only marginally superior to video interviews (Irani, 2019), making us confident that we fulfilled our purpose. Moreover, given the sensitive nature of the topic, and to fully capture all perspectives, interviewees were informed in advance that the organization, as well as their names, would be anonymized. Interviewees were also asked whether they agreed to have the interview recorded, while being assured that transcripts were treated with confidentiality to ensure ethical collection of data (Bell et al., 2019). Furthermore, taking into account that the meaning structures of the interviewees are central to the study, all interviewees were asked if they preferred the interview to be conducted in English or Swedish. This resulted in 14 interviews being conducted in English, and the remaining 7 in Swedish. Although taking such an approach might lead to translation problems being materialized in direct quotations, it was deemed necessary since difficulties inherent in language would otherwise have resulted in an exacerbating risk of miscommunication (Felderman & Hielb, 2020).

3.2.2.1.3 Data Processing

Although transcribing is a time-consuming process, it was essential to allow for a more thorough analysis of *what* people said, and to revisit insights we might have missed while conducting the interviews. Inspired by the grounded theory approach by Giola et al. (2012), initial data coding was performed. The coding process, which involved the construction of first- and second-order constructs, was conducted by both researchers separately – each coding the transcripts independently. After transcription, we met up to compare, discuss and resolve any

inconsistencies present to facilitate a mutual understanding of the emerging constructs. In arriving at first-order constructs, we sought to maintain the integrity of the interviewees by focusing on their meaning structures (Giola et al., 2012). Thus, emphasis was placed on uncovering what interviewees said in relation to their identification process, and what they meant when certain words were used in order to capture their *Lebenswelt* (Schwandt, 2007). Thereafter second-order-constructs were developed, whereby we treated ourselves as “knowledgeable agents” by relating emerging constructs to one another and asking ourselves whether these insights might help us derive and explain how subjects carry out identity work at, and across, levels of analysis (Giola et al., 2012). Thus, we adopted an abductive logic, where we began cycling back and forth between data collection, data processing, and review of relevant literature to arrive at a focus yielding interest for both practitioners and scholars (Charmaz, 2009). This abductive approach led to the discovery of constructs in the areas of identity work as well as identity conflict. In particular, it became clear that identity conflicts intensify identity work. Thus, we put emphasis on the identity work tactics that subjects deployed in response to experienced identity conflicts. An example of the relationship at the group level is visually illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Example of data processing.



3.2.2.2 Phase II: Quasi-Experiment

Following the in-depth interviews, a quasi-experiment was conducted using a context similar to that of the personal data breach that occurred at Organization X, to support the findings of Phase I (see Appendix E). Below follows a discussion of the experimental sample (3.2.2.2.1), the experimental design (3.2.2.2.2) as well as the data processing (3.2.2.2.3) conducted.

3.2.2.2.1 Experimental Sample

The experiment was conducted with the same participants as in the main study, in a separate setting from the initial interviews, to control for common method bias (Jordan & Troth, 2020) (see participants in Appendix F).

Although the deployed methodology inhibits the possibility of random assignment and the use of control groups, it was necessary to conduct the experiment with the same people as in the in-depth interviews. This was deemed appropriate in order to fully be able to understand the ongoing evolution of identities within the subject in question – across time – and to see whether they deployed the identity work tactics that had been identified in practice (Bell et al., 2019). Contrary to in Phase I, the majority (13) of the experiments were conducted in-person at the office, due to Covid-19 regulations being released, and the remaining (8) experiments digitally via Google Meets.

3.2.2.2.2 Experimental Design

In designing the experiment, findings from Phase I of the study were used. In particular, employees' perception regarding critical factors to take into account when designing an external response to customers was considered. Notably, subjects differed in their views on critical factors – especially with regards to the optimal level of transparency and accountability (see Appendix I). Furthermore, when grouping the interviewees based on area of work, it became evident that there were differences between groups as to what factors they perceived to constitute a good response. Employees responsible for external communications were advocates for transparency (9 out of 9 interviewees), an apologetic tone (7 out of 9 interviewees) and showing accountability (6 out of 9 interviewees). On the contrary, employees working with legal matters were more inclined to prefer responses that only disclose what is legally required (5 out of 5 employees), whilst incident managers largely differed in their answers. Based on these findings, three external responses were constructed (see Appendix E). It should be noted that the responses were constructed with the argument dilution effect in mind, keeping the responses similar in length and using similar phrasing as a way to counter bias (Tetlock et al., 1996). The three responses were outlined as follows:

- Response 1 is identical to the organization's actual response following the personal data breach that took place, used as a control for the responses constructed.
- Response 2 represents the viewpoint that it is important for the organization to acknowledge responsibility for the event and to be apologetic and transparent.
- Response 3 represents the viewpoint that it is important for the organization to de-escalate the event and to not disclose more information than necessary.

Bearing in mind that the organization's actual response was included, the personal data breach that took place was used as the scenario to which the interviewees would evaluate the constructed responses, but obfuscated. Doing so increased the ecological validity of the experiment as it enabled us to stay close to subjects' organizational reality (Bell et al., 2019). Furthermore, it might have sparked the feelings and identity work process that the subjects experienced following the actual event – allowing for a more realistic view of the identity work process.

In conducting the experiment, interviewees were asked to read through the scenario, after which they were prompted to evaluate the three responses constructed. In reality, this was achieved by having them reflect on which response fit better with (1) how they personally would have liked to respond; (2) how they believed their role would guide them to respond; (3) how they believed their group would guide them to respond; and (4) how they believed the organization would guide them to respond. Interviewees were then asked to choose an ultimate response to advise for Organization X, while thinking out loud. Subsequently, they were asked to reflect upon how the process of balancing identities to arrive at one ultimate response made them feel, in order to capture their sensemaking process.

3.2.2.2.3 Data Processing

The data processing followed the same procedures as outlined in Phase I (section 3.2.2.1.3). Contrary to the in-depth interviews, however, in processing the experiments, attention was paid to how subjects actually negotiated between identities across levels, to ultimately arrive at a response, in practice. Since interviewees had been asked which response that best fit with each level, we were able to see how, and to what extent, each level guided them in their actions. In particular, we compared their ultimate response advocated for to their perception of the best response at each level, to see which level they drew upon in arriving at an action. By doing so, a within-subject-analysis approach was taken, followed by a cross-subject-analysis, whereby we compared the responses between the subjects interviewed to see whether what we were finding proposed more general behavioral patterns among groups of similar subjects, i.e. within the same work area (Ridder, 2017). As such, the findings nuance the identity work tactics identified from Phase I, by giving the participants not only the chance to make sense of their identity work process in words, but also in practicality by presenting them with a scenario. Thereby, we gain a greater confidence in our understanding of the identity work process, as well as its implications on actions.

3.3 Quality of the Study

3.3.1 Quality Considerations

Although the quality criteria for quantitative research are well established, there is a lack of agreement within the scientific community as to how qualitative research should be evaluated (Bell et al., 2019). That said, most researchers agree with the fact that the criteria should reflect the philosophical assumptions of the study (Flick, 2018). Consequently, we draw upon the interpretivist paradigm to critically reflect on the study. The paradigm posits that the researchers' values are inherent in all phases of the research process and that the audience should judge for themselves the rigor of the research by evaluating its *trustworthiness* (Given, 2008).

3.3.2 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is made up of four criteria – credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability – each of which has been carefully considered throughout the study (Bell et al., 2019). The first two criteria, credibility and transferability, parallel validity in quantitative research (Ibid.). In particular, credibility is concerned with

internal validity – that is, the extent to which there is congruence between the researchers’ observations and the theoretical ideas developed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This study achieves, in accordance with Eisenhardt & Graebner (2007), increased internal validity due to the fact that multiple reference points were used; in-depth interviews were complemented with a quasi-experiment. As such, we deployed triangulation as a technique to cross-check the findings and to establish a thorough understanding of how subjects engage in identity work (Bell et al., 2019). Whilst credibility is concerned with internal validity, transferability is concerned with external validity – that is, the extent to which the findings are transferable to other contexts beyond the examined setting (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Although single-case studies have been criticized with regards to transferability, we have included rich descriptions of Organization X throughout the study, enabling others to make judgments for themselves concerning the findings generated (Yin, 2009; Bell et al., 2019).

Moving beyond validity, dependability, which parallels reliability in quantitative studies, is concerned with the extent to which complete records are kept of all phases of the research process in an accessible manner (Bell et al., 2019; Flick, 2018). The detailed description of the research process adopted, as well as the appendices included, contribute to this. Lastly, confirmability is concerned with the extent to which the findings are derived from data and not figments of personal values and theoretical inclinations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). By rooting the study in a real-life event, the personal data breach that took place in the organization, we sought to remain faithful to the realities experienced among subjects when faced with ambiguous situations (Bell et al., 2019). The risk of biased interpretations are further reduced by the fact that both of us produced accounts of the interviewees’ meaning structures individually prior to weighing them together, thereby avoiding deformations (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). In addition, findings were critically discussed internally with our supervisor at the selected case company, as well as externally with our supervisor from Stockholm School of Economics, thereby reducing subjectivity (Bell et al., 2019).

3.3.3 Ethical Considerations

Throughout the study, a main ethical consideration was to ensure anonymity of Organization X and the interview participants. Therefore, names were masked and work areas, roles and competences given new labels. Moreover, all participants were asked to give their consent before partaking in the study, and before we recorded their interviews. In doing so, they were given information about the study and its purpose in foresight, to ensure their informed consent (Bell et al., 2019). Moreover, data in the form of voice recordings was stored safely on Organization X’s internal computers, to make sure that important information was not disclosed outside the company.

4. Empirical Results

The following chapter presents the empirical findings of the main study. The section starts with a brief introduction of the selected case company (4.1). Thereafter, a review of the findings from Phase I are presented, related to the multiple identities that subjects draw upon at and across levels in the event of a personal data breach (4.2). Finally, the findings from Phase II are highlighted, showing the actual trade-offs between identities and the subsequent actions it results in (4.3).

4.1 The Case Company: Organization X

Organization X is a global B2C tech company, whose operating model is centered on challenging the status quo among large organizations that are often focused on hierarchy and bureaucracy. As such, Organization X's mode of working is characterized by speed and agility – to be adaptive to the competitive landscape and ever-changing customer demands. To facilitate fast changes, the organizational structure is composed of multiple teams, each working as a separate start-up on a detailed problem space. Teams consist of employees with different, or the same, skill-sets depending on their scope. In other words, each employee is connected to a competence (i.e., skill-set), team and role. Given the fast changing structure of the organization, however, groups are created, changed and broken up quickly as new opportunities arise – constantly putting the organization in motion.

About a year ago, Organization X faced a personal data breach. This resulted in customers being able to see a subset of their personal information exposed to other customers in one of the organization's channels. Several groups and employees were involved in the incident management process internally, to mitigate the effects of the incident and to safeguard customers' data. However, the situation caused discomfort and the media were quick to pick up on the news. This put pressure on the organization and its employees to resolve it quickly, and to communicate a response to its customers. In constructing an external response, employees working within communications, legal, and incident management paid a particular salient role. Whilst communication employees were responsible for ensuring a consistent and compelling response to customers, legal employees were providing input in order to ensure compliance with laws and regulations. Incident managers, in turn, assisted by ensuring that the response reflected the events that took place in the organization. These employees' perspectives surrounding the personal data breach, and the identity work process, from trigger to action, are covered next.

4.2 Phase I: In-Depth Interviews

The following sections highlight the findings from the 21 in-depth interviews conducted, using quotes of selected interviewees to substantiate the findings.

4.2.1 The Nested Organizational Context

4.2.1.1 Individual Level

Starting at the individual level, the perception of identification was diverse among the interview subjects. 11 interviewees stated that they identify to a high degree with their role(s). These subjects further perceived themselves to be steered by them in their actions following the personal data breach that occurred. Of them, some mentioned that they have shaped their role(s) based on their personal selves (Appendix G). Interviewee J highlighted:

“I would say that I shape my role to a large extent. I have learnt to shape the role based on who I am as a person, individual and how I talk to people.” – J

With the opportunity to shape their roles, some interview subjects further mentioned that they, to a large degree, have fully aligned their role(s) with their personal selves and define themselves accordingly. Others similarly view their roles and personal selves as being one and the same, but rather mentioned that they have shaped their personal selves based on their roles. Interviewee subject G and M stated:

“One’s profession is almost always the second thing people ask you about, after your name, when you meet someone new. So I feel like my professional role is a big part of my personal identity. My role is part of how others define me and vice versa.” – G

“My role, and working within communication, has been part of my everyday life. There is never the possibility to turn off such a role, and especially not in the event of an incident. I don’t really know how to describe it, but the work role is part of who I am.” – M

That said, 10 interviewees did not explicitly state that they identify with their work role and/or that it guided them in their actions following the personal data breach. Instead, they argued that they relied upon their personal selves in making sense of what was required of them in the situation. Interview subject N emphasized:

“In the personal data breach that occurred, it was impossible for me to rely upon my work role. Rather, I did what I had to by relying on my skills, and myself.” – N

4.2.1.2 Group Level

Extending to the group level (i.e. team and competence), 17 interviewees stated that they embody their group’s values as their own (Appendix G). Out of these, some mentioned that they identify more closely with their group than the organization at large. This was also noticed in how they tended to use a more positive tone when talking about, and describing, their group (i.e., *“we are passionate”* – D, *“we are close”* – K), compared to the organization (see section 4.2.1.3). To some, this had to do with the organization’s size, in which the group is

considered to be more accessible, whereas others mentioned that their group's goals feel disconnected from the organization's, making it easier to identify with the former. Interview subjects U and H stated:

"I take great pride in my team. We are very close to one another, almost like a family [...] It feels as if we are our own little organization." – U

"I feel like my team is at times a bit undervalued compared to the entirety of the company, even if we all feel like we do a good job, we might not receive praise for it. I think that really pushes us closer to each other internally, but also further away from the organization." – H

Building upon this, there was a shared perception that members are rather similar to one another within their groups, and with regards to how they made sense of the personal data breach. There was also a tendency amongst interviewees to search for a group that reflects themselves, and whose narratives are appealing to them. The similarities among group members were expressed to be mainly with regards to work interests, goals and values, as illustrated through the below quotes:

"A lot of the people applying to this team are searching for a bigger challenge and a faster tempo. That is where we all link up – it can be super chill for one hour, and then the next hell breaks loose. We are very similar in that sense, we all like this way of working in a controlled chaos, which proved very beneficial when it came to handling the personal data breach that occurred." – J

"Because we, as a team, want to collectively achieve certain objectives, we think in the same way; we support each other, have a professional empathy towards one another, and a shared perception of who we are and want to be." – A

Although the majority referred to their team as the group, there were also those perceiving the competence as their group. In particular, subjects with a legal focus, who are part of cross-functional teams, mentioned that they relate more to other members of the legal competence. This was highlighted to be mainly due to this group's task responsibilities and the explicit requirements concerning compliance that they have to abide by – also in the event of a personal data breach.

"We have a very strong legal competence, which I feel close to. Even if we are based in different places in the organization, us legal employees have a platform where we can help each other. I think that makes us act unitarily, regardless of the situation – but even more so following an incident where we are advisors." – R

"There are many rules and routines that we have to follow, so we cannot really follow our own instincts. It is important that we provide the same legal advice, regardless of who one talks to." – T

4.2.1.3 Organizational Level

7 out of 21 interviewees explicitly stated that they, to a high degree, identify with the organization and have internalized (parts of) its values and beliefs into who they are (Appendix G). Whereas some interviewees mentioned that they applied to Organization X because of its values, others said that they have adapted their personal selves to them since starting at the company.

“I really liked Organization X’s values, even before coming here. It is always very important for me to work at a company whose values are in line with mine.” – N

“Organization X is a disruptor and because of that we, and especially me as an employee, become disruptors. I think that daring attitude shows in every part of my life, not just in my work tasks.” – A

On the contrary, 3 interviewees (D, E, O) explicitly mentioned that they do not identify with the organization, but rather question certain beliefs, thereby viewing the organization as solely a place to work. Instead of talking about Organization X as a “we”, these employees tended to separate themselves from the organization and instead emphasized matters as “them” versus “me” – especially with regards to the personal data breach that occurred. Interviewee O stated it as:

“I think it is important to show full transparency following a personal data breach... but the organization, I think they want transparency, but I don’t really see them actually walking the talk. That makes it a bit difficult to stand by them.” – O

The remaining 11 interviewees mentioned in more loose terms that they identify with some, but not all parts of the organization. However, following the personal data breach, 6 out of these highlighted that they felt pressure to identify with the organization and said that they adapted their behavior to its values and beliefs by suppressing their individual and/or group identities (see Appendix H). Looking further into these subjects, it became evident that the majority of them have customer contact (e.g., H, K, L, S). Interview subject K stated:

“We are the face of the company. We have a lot of people telling us what we can do, especially following personal data breaches, and we have to identify and act in line with the organization – no matter if we believe it to be right or not.” – K

4.2.2 Managing Identities in Conflict

The following section presents the expressed tensions between values, beliefs, norms and demands inherent in identities, as well as how subjects manage these intra-unit (4.2.2.1), inter-unit (4.2.2.2) and inter-level (4.2.2.3).

4.2.2.1 Intra-Unit

Intra-unit, it became clear that there exist struggles within individuals, within groups, and within the larger organization (see Appendix H). Starting at the individual level, 13 interviewees mentioned that it is difficult to balance competing interests between what they personally believe is the right way to act, versus how their role guides them to act – especially following the personal data breach that occurred. Thus, employees, at times, have to suppress their personal values in favor of their role, which can feel frustrating and as if their opinion is neglected. Interviewees L and S said:

“At times, it feels as if I have to set my personal values aside when enacting my role. Working in communications, I have to keep in mind that everything I say reflects back on the company. This makes it a bit hard sometimes, especially when I feel like the fault is on us, and yet I cannot be too apologetic because that might make it seem as if we have not been careful in handling the customer data. It’s a tricky trade-off.” – L

“Sometimes I feel like I really have to suppress my personal opinions, like in the personal data breach that you were talking about. Although that is probably part of every job, it makes me question myself.” – S

Moreover, 7 interviewees mentioned that they do not really know what is expected of their roles, especially in the case of a personal data breach. This was expressed as particularly challenging when subjects occupy several roles, or when they are influenced by previous roles. As such, interviewees mentioned that it can be difficult to leverage the role as a marker for identification, and some said that they are rather forced to rely upon themselves.

“It’s a little hard to identify “that is my role”. I always tell my new colleagues who join my team that our role is fixing things on a running train. The train is going to come and it’s going to go, so you need to fix things while the train is running. At times, the train is running so fast that it is a little bit hard to do things in the most desirable manner – especially in the event of a personal data breach, when things are not as straightforward. Then, you have to go to yourself.” – A

“I have held several roles within the organization, and people still come to me with questions from my previous roles, which can make it a bit hard to know what my current role actually is – like in the incident we were talking about.” – F

At the group level, as previously presented, interviewees tended to have the perception that members are rather similar to one another. Despite this, 9 interviewees, mainly working in cross-functional teams, perceived it, at times, to be difficult to come to an agreement regarding how to act. Although this may not be an issue in the every-day work, interviewees highlighted that it can make it challenging in the event of an incident, where cooperation is seen as crucial to make sense of, and overcome, the ambiguous situation. Interviewee T, working within the legal area, elaborated on this:

“Many teams are similar, in that they employ people with the same skill sets, but within my team, we are lawyers, engineers, and so on... That makes it hard to understand one another, which is crucial following an incident. We speak different languages, but must work together.” – T

Lastly, 12 interviewees highlighted that there also exist conflicts at the intra-organizational level. This proved to be challenging following the personal data breach that occurred, where many mentioned that they did not know how to act at this level. In this event, and in general, the conflicts are mainly based on employees forming different perceptions of the organizational identity in seeking to understand what is in the best interest of the organization. For example, while some interviewees mentioned that they perceive Organization X to have one clear identity, others perceive it to have several competing identities, or that the organization is still searching for an identity. The latter was emphasized by interviewees L and R:

“Organization X is like a chameleon, changing identity in line with what suits the moment. This can actually be a hurdle, since you never know what to expect [...] You just have to adapt yourself to the organizational reality each day.” – L

“I think Organization X is like a teenager who is still searching for its identity, and like a teenager, it can be a bit hard to fully understand it – especially when challenged.” – R

As a result, following the personal data breach, some mentioned that they clung onto aspects that they found it easier to relate to. Interviewee G, for instance, stated:

“I try to focus on, and cling onto, compliance in everything I do – but even more so in the personal data breach that occurred.” – G

4.2.2.2 Inter-Unit

There were not only signs of dissonance within units, but also between units at different levels (Appendix H). In particular, 15 interviewees mentioned that there are silos between groups, making them somewhat isolated and distanced from each other. 12 interviewees further noted that these differences are based in groups' narrow focus areas combined with “home blindness”, meaning that they are protective of their scope, and tend to view things only from their perspective – thus neglecting the views of others. With that in mind, subjects mentioned that they often form different perceptions of the same event. For example, when asked about the personal data breach that occurred, employees that handled customer inquiries perceived that customers were exaggerating the scope of the breach, whereas those with no direct customer contact experienced the customer reactions to be less severe than expected. Interviewees further highlighted the inter-group conflicts as:

“I feel like some teams have blindfolds on, and may not fully understand how consumers think, how merchants act – how everything relates. They may think they understand the bigger picture, but it is evident that they do not. There is... I don’t know what to call it, but some sort of blindness.” – O

“The fact that teams are home blind is evident in how they prioritize their own scope in designing practices. For example, routines related to incident reporting, which are designed by incident management, are often very extensive. They demand a lot from the independent incident reporter in terms of time and the information knowledge needed, making it a pain to actually report in the first place. And in my experience this goes for other practices, designed by other teams, as well.” – R

Building upon groups’ home blindness, it became evident that they further based their perceptions of the best way to act following the personal data breach on their own norms and demands, and constructed narratives that catered to these. Interviewees, however, stated that this resulted in a “battle” between groups with and without direct customer contact. Whereas the former favored an outside-in perspective, focusing on the customer’s interests, the latter took an inside-out perspective, focusing more on the internal processes of Organization X and operations of decisions. Thus, there was a dissonance in how much information to disclose and how quickly to disclose it, where interviewees with customer contact (e.g., D, E, H, I, K, L, S) stated that they were in favor of full disclosure and quick communication, whereas interviewees without customer contact (e.g., C, F, G, P, R, U) preferred to not disclose more than what was legally required, and to have the full picture of event before communicating – to safeguard and protect the brand (Appendix I).

“There is a constant battle between communications and legal. We always want to say more, while they want to say less. I feel like legal has no understanding of the customer, or how a [personal] data breach occurs first-hand.” – I

That said, the majority of the employees with customer contact, mentioned that they often are forced to adapt their narratives as they are steered in how to act based on guidelines set by colleagues with an internal, rather than an external, focus. Although they understand the importance of having a unitary way of acting, they perceive themselves to have the best idea of what the customers want, and hence desire to act in line with it – also in the event of a personal data breach. Therefore, they, at times, mentioned that they feel like their views are neglected.

“We have many practices in place that have been set by teams who have never had to deal with customers first-hand. It is easy for them to tell us how we should act, but they do not fully understand the reality that we are facing. They are not the ones dealing with upset customers, so it is a bit annoying for them to come and say what we should do. I feel like we should be the ones doing that, but the possibility for us to influence the internal practices in place are very much limited. We just have to accept that that is the case.” – H

4.2.2.3 Inter-Level

Finally, 18 interviewees stated that conflicts prevail across levels, especially in events of new and ambiguous situations such as in deciding how to respond following the personal data breach that occurred (Appendix H).

“It’s always tricky when facing something we have not dealt with before. Following the [personal data] breach that you brought up, no entity really knew what the best way to act was, because it was all new for us. Although it turned out okay, I remember that it was a really stressful situation to be in, where everyone had different perceptions of the best way to act.” – C

Furthermore, all interviewees except the three that identified to a high degree with every level (B, M, U) perceived that they, at times, have to make trade-offs between how they want to act, versus how their group and/or organization guide them to act. Although interviewees expressed that trade-offs are necessary to be able to arrive at a decision of how to act, some mentioned that suppressing one or more opinions may result in a feeling of dissonance and disconnectedness to other levels – that may pertain even after an action has been enacted.

“Even though I have acted in line with how my role prescribes me to act, and how my team says that we should handle a particular situation, it can make me doubt whether or not I handled it correctly, because I am not always satisfied with the actions taken.” – D

4.3 Phase II: Quasi-Experiment

The following sections present the findings from the 21 quasi-experiments conducted.

4.3.1 Action: Response to a Personal Data Breach

During the experiment, participants were given a hypothetical scenario of a personal data breach along with three external responses directed to customers. The interviewees were then asked which response best fit with how they believe their personal selves, role-, group- and organizational identities would guide them to respond. Whereas 2 interviewees (B & M) stated that the response would not differ depending on the level, the remaining (19) interviewees were a bit hesitant and, to some extent, chose different responses depending on which level to attribute it to (see Appendix J). Additionally, some asked if they could go back and revise their answers, highlighting an uncertainty experienced when juggling identities across levels. These contrasting experiences were highlighted as:

“I do not think I would answer differently depending on which hat I put on. For me, they are all very similar.” – B

“It makes me a bit stressed having to figure out what is the right way to act. It is a guessing game, you just have to decide at one point – but that does not make it any easier.” – P

After having chosen the response that interviewees best believed fits with the respective level, they were asked to ultimately choose one final response to advise Organization X to communicate. This resulted in 8 subjects advocating for the response that was in line with how they perceived their personal selves would guide them to act, 13 in line with their role(s), 13 in line with the group, and 12 in line with the organization (Appendix J).¹ Looking at the results per work area, subjects arrived at contrasting responses and drew upon different levels in ultimately choosing a response. In particular, subjects working with communications tended to advocate for response 2, which is in line with how they believed that the organization would respond. However, those with no direct customer contact, i.e. working in incident management or legal areas, differed in their answers. Incident management employees tended to advocate for response 1, in line with how they perceived their group, role(s) and personal selves would guide them to act. Contrary, legal employees tended to advocate for response 3, in line with the response they believed best fits their role. One perception from each of the three perspectives (legal, communications, incident management) is given below:

“If you are more of a fact oriented person, the “fluffy” response 2 feels wrong. Even though I might understand the need for such a kind of communication, it makes me feel disconnected from the organization, because it is not what I would want if I were to be on the receiving end. But I have to try and see the bigger picture I guess, however difficult that might be.” – T

“I would not want to communicate response 3 to customers, because I feel like we don’t acknowledge responsibility for the personal data breach – something that would make customers upset.” – L

“For me, response 1 incorporates the main take-aways from both response 2 and 3. It seems like it would make most people satisfied, because we’re not too apologetic about the breach, but we’re also not too defensive.” – U

Although all subjects ultimately arrived at a final response to advocate for, the process was interpreted to be a struggle to the interviewees as many had a difficult time deciding which identities to rely upon in choosing an ultimate response. As a consequence, some mentioned that they took a decision that did not comply with all of their values and beliefs. This, in turn, gave rise to a feeling of discomfort within them.

“This was tough.... I feel like I might actually have to oppose how I believe my team would act, and how I personally would like to act, in favor of the organization. I guess that is the way it is for us, but it feels bad.” – D

¹ In the case that the subject chose an ultimate response that was in line with how they believed several levels would guide them to respond, they were counted to the sum of each.

4.4 Summary of Empirics

To summarize the findings from both Phase I and II, it became prevalent that there are differences in how subjects identify and which levels of identities they draw upon in making sense of a personal data breach to subsequently decide how to act. While some subjects mentioned that they do identify with the organization, there was a tendency to identify more closely with the group. Furthermore, following the personal data breach, some interviewees mentioned that they felt a need to suppress their personal selves, in favor of pleasing the organization – while others said that their personal selves were what guided and formed how they acted. The trade-off between identities was further complicated by the fact that there were specific requirements surrounding the context, imposing contrasting demands that interfered with the identification process. This gave rise to tensions and discomfort, observed at the intra-unit, inter-unit and inter-level. The experiment conducted illustrates how subjects juggled between demands in arriving at an action. Furthermore, it showcases that the majority of the interviewees chose different responses depending on which identities they attributed their answer to.

5. Analysis

Following the empirical results, this chapter presents the analysis of the findings. The chapter is outlined according to the theoretical framework presented in section 2.3 (Figure 1), to provide a full view of the sequence of events. Thus, to fully be able to understand the identity work tactics deployed, we acknowledge the need to first look at the identity conflicts triggered by the ambiguous situation at each level. Doing so allows us to subsequently tie the knots of how identity work occurs across levels, as well as how it influences actions. An overview of the identified identity work tactics are provided in Table 3.

5.1 Levels of Analysis

5.1.1 Individual Level

5.1.1.1 Identity Conflict at the Individual Level

The vast majority of the interviewees perceived there to be intra-individual conflicts. Looking at why that is, two main themes have been identified; role ambiguity and contrasting personal selves and role(s).

Role Ambiguity. Even though the role ambiguity experienced within subjects may just have been a result of role(s) being challenged following the personal data breach, a further igniter was the disruptive nature of Organization X – where roles change and are formed quickly. Interviewee subject A's parable of Organization X being a high-speed train illustrates how quickly changes are made within the organization, irrespective of the occurrence of an incident or not, thus putting pressure on the employees to reassess themselves constantly. Furthermore, the ambiguity was mentioned by most subjects, except those working with legal matters, which can be connected to this group's roles largely being shaped based on legal requirements – providing guidance even in ambiguous situations. That said, while the majority of the interviewees stated that they possess only one role on paper, it became evident that they oftentimes perceive themselves to have multiple and overlapping roles. These perceived multiple roles were all challenged following the personal data breach – and thereby imposed additional contrasting demands and expectations on the subject. The result could, on the one hand, have provided opportunities, in line with what Ibarra (1999) argued, as there were more provisional selves, i.e. role identities, to choose among – implying a higher possibility of a fit between the subject and the context. On the other hand, it was also observed to provide obstacles, as it was particularly challenging for the individual to know which role to draw upon, which interviewee F highlighted (section 4.2.2.1).

Contrasting Personal Selves and Role(s). Furthermore, interviewees mentioned that oftentimes their personal, i.e. possible selves, and occupational selves, i.e. provisional selves, are impossible to align. This supports Leung et al. (2014), who discussed differences between individuals' personal identities and the expectations set by their work roles. Whereas this type of conflict seems to be strengthened by organizational discourses concerning how one is allowed to act, especially highlighted by employees working with communication, it may

also be a trigger of conflict in cases where the discourses are not as prevalent. Conflicts between provisional and possible selves may, furthermore, be challenging in case the subject has strong personal values that contradict the role requirements. Following the personal data breach, for instance, where the personal values and beliefs were strong, but could not be enacted, the identity conflict was perceived as intensified as illustrated by several interviewees, (such as L, section 4.2.2.1) – thereby strengthening the findings of Horton et al. (2014).

5.1.1.2 Identity Work at the Individual Level

To deal with the conflicts experienced following the personal data breach, the analysis concludes that individuals deployed three identity work tactics that were not mutually exclusive; distancing oneself from the role, suppressing personal selves, and balancing personal selves and role(s).

Distancing Oneself From the Role. Although interviewees experienced a feeling of ambiguity regarding what constituted their role(s) following the personal data breach, few to none mentioned that they disidentified with their role(s) altogether, due to the organizational nature requiring them to comply with certain discourses of how to act. This strengthens Brown's & Toyoki's (2013), Costas' & Kärreman's (2018) and Marlow's & McAdam's (2015) arguments concerning the influence of the larger organizational context. However, the ambiguity that interviewees experienced made them unable to rely solely on cues from their role identities in making sense of the situation. In turn, some were observed to distance themselves from their role(s), because they did not provide a clear-cut answer of how to act. This became evident through N's statement, saying that she had to rely on herself (section 4.2.1.1). The identity work tactic of distancing oneself from the role(s) was further supported in the experiment, with 8 interviewees ultimately advocating for a response that was contradictory to what they believed best fit their role(s) (Appendix J).

Suppressing Personal Selves. Rather than distancing oneself from the role, to deal with the contrasting personal- and occupational selves, some subjects engaged in identity work to suppress the personal values that contrasted how their occupational roles prescribed them to act. Connecting back to interviewee L, who stated that her view of what constituted a good response following the personal data breach contrasted from that of her role, she mentioned that she had to suppress her personal self in favor of letting the role decide how to act. While it was a challenge doing so, she mentioned that it helped her to justify the actions taken (section 4.2.2.1). Thus, we see how subjects are particularly likely to forgo the identity that is perceived to be conflicting with the situation at hand, in line with Bataille's & Vough's (2022) arguments. The tactic identified was further supported in the experiment as the majority of the interviewees (13) – especially those working with communications – suppressed their personal selves by choosing an ultimate response that was contradictory to how they personally would have liked to respond (Appendix J). In doing so, however, subjects risked embodying the idea of their “feared possible selves” presented by Markus & Nurius (1986) and Oyserman & Markus (1990). This was seconded by interviewee S, who said that as she suppressed her personal values following the personal data breach that occurred, she was left in a state of self doubt (section 4.2.2.1). Thus, whilst the identified tactic

helped subjects to reach a temporary state of self, facilitating action, new conflicts arose as a feeling of dissonance still pertained after enacting a particular identity (Hinojosa et al., 2017; Zanna & Cooper, 1974).

Balancing Personal Selves and Role(s). Instead of putting the personal or role(s) prior to the other, some engaged in identity work to balance them. This substantiates the tactic brought forward by Kreiner et al. (2016), showing how personal elements can be infused into the role, and vice versa, in order to find an optimal state between them. As a result, subjects to a high degree, mentioned that their roles and personal selves are more or less the same. Interviewee M, for instance, stated that (s)he had become her role, and vice versa, and that the two could not be separated from one another – especially not in the event of an ambiguous situation (section 4.2.1.1). Thus, subjects use personal narratives to revise the meanings associated with their identities and to reduce the distance between the self and the role, thereby also supporting the identity work tactics identified by Boucher et al. (2016), Proulx (2012), Mausz et al. (2022). The tactic of balancing personal selves and role(s) was, like the previous, supported in the experiment as 6 interviewees perceived their personal selves and role(s) to yield the same response (Appendix J).

5.1.2 Group level

5.1.2.1 Identity Conflict at the Group Level

Despite the fact that the majority of the interviewees (17) stated that they identify with their group to a high degree, identity conflicts were observed – both between- and within groups.

Social Hierarchies Between Groups. Ashforth & Mael (1989) argued that as subjects position themselves relative to social groups, distinctions between in- and out-groups become salient. This became evident as many interviewees perceived their ability to influence practices to differ depending on group affiliation. For example, while employees with an internal focus were described as having the mandate to design practices for personal data breach handling based on the best outcome for their group, external communication employees perceived themselves to have limited ability to do so. Although the latter group expressed that they know best given their recurring interaction with customers, they were nonetheless expected to act in line with practices set by the former. This not only showcases that they were stigmatized as the “out-group”, which interviewee H highlighted (section 4.2.1.2), but also that they were subject to identity control, where discourses inhibited free action and gave rise to feelings of dissonance (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Horton et al., 2014).

Contrasts Between Groups. Building upon the arguments of social groups, subjects who are members of opposing groups form different views on matters (Löwstedt & Räisänen, 2014). For example, while both the legal and incident management employees took on a more internal focus when considering critical factors in an external response to customers, to protect the organization in line with their focus of work, employees with direct customer contact, on the other hand, took on a more external focus. Hence, this group seems to be more influenced by the customers than Organization X’s identity, which can explain their desire to act in line with the

customers' interests. This goes hand in hand with Alvesson's (2000) findings on consultants embodying their client companies' values prior to their home organization's as a result of them spending more time at the former. The organizational structure could furthermore be an explanation as to why groups are pushed apart. On the one hand, the large size makes it easier to identify with the more coherent group. On the other hand, groups are encouraged to work autonomously as start-ups, facilitating identification to this organizational entity. In turn, groups are pushed apart since they have different goals, visions and ways of working – evident here and seconded by Hekman et al.'s (2009) study on hospital employees having different goals depending on their area of work.

Contrasts Within Groups. At the intra-group level, conflicts were less prominent, building upon the argument that group members are generally alike (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tyler & Blader, 2001). However, there were conflicts, which could partly be attributed to the composition of groups. Legal employees, in particular, who are part of cross-functional teams, struggled to identify with their teams, as highlighted by interviewee T (section 4.2.2.1). In these teams, legal employees perceived it to be difficult to reach an agreement and co-operate because members “speak different languages”. On the contrary, communication representatives, in general, belong to teams consisting of members of the same competence, allowing for more homogeneity of perceptions and easier group identification, in line with what Ashforth & Mael (1989) and Horton et al. (2014) proposed. In this group, less subjects experienced intra-group conflicts, and instead highlighted that members were rather similar – both in terms of actions following a personal data breach, and partly with regards to who they are and would like to become, supporting Ashforth & Mael (1989) and Tyler & Blader (2001).

5.1.2.2 Identity Work at the Group Level

To deal with the conflicts experienced, subjects deployed either one of two identity work tactics; maintaining and strengthening the group, or suppressing the group identity.

Maintaining and Strengthening the Group. Connecting back to the conflict concerning social hierarchies between groups, as a result, there were tendencies of subjects engaging in identity work to maintain and strengthen their groups' social status through the creation of in- and out-groups, as proposed by Ashforth & Mael (1989) and Horton et al. (2014). Thus, groups constructed narratives for their members to hold onto in order to facilitate internal alignment and to deal with the personal data breach (Bruner, 1991). On the one hand, this reduced the intra-group conflicts experienced as members perceived it to be easier to identify with the group given that they became more alike internally. This aligns with arguments by Ashforth et al. (2008), Elsbach (2004) and Tajfel & Turner (1979), and was evident by R's statement in section 4.2.1.2. On the other hand, it spurred the contrasting inter-group conflict as differences became salient. This was evident as subjects talked about their own group's responsibilities following the personal data breach first-hand, and about other groups as having blindfolds on – without them realizing that they may be just as “home-blind” themselves. In other words, every group put themselves and their interests first, irrespective of what others thought. This was further showcased in the experiment, where 13 interviewees acted in line with how they perceived their group would act.

Suppressing the Group Identity. Although all groups sought to maintain and strengthen their group identities, communication representatives expressed that they ultimately had to engage in identity work to suppress their group identity, similarly to the tactic they used at the individual level. Thus, although they perceived themselves to have a clear view of the best way to act following the personal data breach, they were not allowed to fully enact it in favor of guidelines set by “outsiders”, such as incident management employees who were expressed as having more mandate to influence and act the way they wanted (interviewee H, section 4.2.2.2). This shows how the communications group, as an out-group, set themselves in relation to the in-group, while they simultaneously were subject to organizational discourses steering them in how to act (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Brown & Toyoki, 2013; Costas & Kärreman, 2018; Marlow & McAdam, 2015; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Consequently, groups, as in this example, underwent identity work to manage the conflict concerning social hierarchies between groups, by suppressing their group identity. This was also partly supported in the experiment as 4, out of 9, communication representatives chose an ultimate response that they believed to be contradictory to how their group would act. That, in spite of the fact that the majority of them expressed that they identify with the group to a high degree and had a desire to act in line with them.

5.1.3 Organizational Level

5.1.3.1 Identity Conflict at the Organizational Level

Looking at the organizational level, few interviewees (7) perceived themselves to identify with the organization. This yields important implications given that previous researchers have shown that identity steers behavior (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Caza et al, 2018), meaning that if few identify with the organization, one can assume that few would subsequently act in accordance with it (Löwstedt & Räisänen, 2014; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Looking into plausible explanations for this, it is noticeable that subjects find it difficult to make sense of the organizational identity.

Fragmented Organization. Subjects to a large degree have different views of Organization X’s identity, something that Ashforth & Mael (1989) also showed can be a trigger for conflicts. This was especially true in this situation, which destabilized subjects’ stable sense of self, and where they as a result searched for cues on how to make sense of the situation to facilitate action. Without a congruent picture of what to identify with at the organizational level, subjects were forced to subjectively interpret the organization, naturally leading to contrasting expectations and behavior – highlighted by interviewees L and R (section 4.2.2.1). The large number of employees at Organization X further makes it difficult for organizational members to form an aligned view, as the possible answers to what constitutes Organization X’s identity are numerous. Consequently, it is easier for subjects to identify with the more tangible group, in which the perspectives can be argued to be more coherent (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) – which can explain why interviewees stated that they identify more with their group than the organization at large.

5.1.3.2 Identity Work at the Organizational Level

Given the hybridity of Organization X's identity, subjects engaged in intensified identity work to understand what was in the best interest of the organization that had been challenged following the personal data breach. They did so in order to generate cues on whether it was possible to align with it, by clinging onto it, or in cases when no cues were found, to separate oneself from it, to reduce the feelings of dissonance.

Clinging Onto the Organization. Some interviewees highlighted that they felt pressure to adapt themselves to the organization. This was especially prevalent amongst communications employees who are the “face of the company”, as interviewee K highlighted (section 4.2.1.3). Thus, while they were hesitant to cling onto values and beliefs that are contradictory to their own, in line with Löfstedt and Räisänen (2014) findings, they nonetheless acknowledged that organizational identification is of importance to facilitate unitary action and to support the organization in ambiguous situations (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tyler & Blader, 2001). Contrastingly, others did not express a pressure to adapt to Organization X. Instead, they clung onto certain values as a tactic to satisfy their desire to be part of something larger than themselves – thereby overlooking values that contrasted them. This goes hand in hand with arguments by Ashforth & Mael (1989) and Elsbach (1999), who stated that one can identify with an entity, while simultaneously opposing parts of it. An example of this was seen amongst legal employees, who emphasized and chose to cling onto Organization X's focus on compliance first-hand, as evident through interviewee G (section 4.2.1.3). Notably, the tactic was also supported in the experiment, where 12 interviewees ultimately chose a response that was identical with the response they perceived best fit with how the organization would act following a personal data breach (Appendix J).

Separating Oneself from the Organization. Clinging onto the organization was perceived to be rather challenging, however, due to the fragmented nature of it. As a result, some interviewees instead engaged in identity work to separate themselves from the organization. Although we cannot make explicit the organizational disidentification that Bataille & Vough (2022) identified, and Alvesson (2000) predicted, in this study, there were tendencies of subjects speaking of other levels more highly than the organizational. For example, it was noted that some subjects tended to perceive their group as their “organization”, such as interviewee U (section 4.2.1.2). As a result, these subjects catered more to their group's goals and needs, than those of the organization in the event of a personal data breach – thereby implying a separation from the organizational entity. Moreover, a sign of separation became evident in the experiment as 9 interviewees chose a different ultimate response than the one resembling their view of how the organization would have acted (Appendix J).

5.2 Crossing Levels of Analysis

5.2.1 Identity Conflict Across Levels

Contrasting Identities. The aforementioned identity conflicts at each level did not occur in isolation, but rather happened simultaneously as they spilled over and initiated identity conflicts at other levels, given the nestedness of the organizational context (Horton et al., 2014; Kozlowski & Klein, 2000). For instance, it was seen that contrasts between groups (section 5.1.2.1) spurred the fragmented nature of the organization (section 5.1.3.1), as interviewees tended to perceive the organization in line with how their group perceived it. Thus, as all levels are intertwined and impose somewhat contrasting norms and demands, an additional conflict was sparked; inter-level, as highlighted by interviewees C and D (section 4.2.2.3). This not only became evident in the in-depth interviews, but also in the experiment as all subjects, except B & M, chose contrasting responses at different levels. Nonetheless, they had to advocate for one response which gave rise to feelings of discomfort as they had to oppose identities they would have liked to act in line with (section 4.3.1).

5.2.2 Identity Work Across Levels

Revising the Identity Hierarchy. To deal with the contrasting identities across levels, subjects engaged in identity work to reduce tensions by weighing and making trade-offs to arrive at a temporary state of self that facilitated action. Subjects did so by revising their identity hierarchies, indicating that they changed the salience of their identities at different levels, thereby strengthening arguments by Styrke & Serpe (1994), and the tactic presented by Pratt & Kraatz (2009). As with the fragmentation surrounding Organization X's identity, however, a similar conclusion can be made regarding subjects' identity hierarchies following the personal data breach. Subjects drew upon different identities in making sense of the situation, which resulted in an array of contrasting, but possible, ways to interpret it and arrive at a state that guided action. That said, in line with Ashforth & Mael (1989) and Tyler & Blader (2001), along with previous arguments at the group level (section 5.1.2.2), subjects of similar characteristics, such as those belonging to the same work area, tended to draw upon similar identities. To exemplify, communications employees, to a large extent, underwent identity work by *clinging onto the organization* (thereby increasing the salience of this level), while simultaneously *suppressing their group identity and personal selves* (thereby decreasing the salience of these levels). This is particularly interesting since only 1 communications employee mentioned that she identifies with the organizational level to a high degree in Phase 1, while 8 out of 9 stated that they identify highly with the group prior to facing the hypothetical scenario of a personal data breach (Appendix G). Thus, one would have expected them to act in line with their group, as opposed to the organization. The fact that they do not shows that subjects carried out identity work across levels by combining the identity work tactics identified at each level, to increase and/or decrease the salience of one identity relative to others. Thereby, they revised their identity hierarchies to fit the situation at hand. For an overview of all tactics identified at and across levels, see Table 3.

Table 3. Identity Work Tactics Identified.

Tactic (Identity Work)	Prompted By (Identity Conflict)	Exemplary Quotes (from Phase I)	Deployed By (In Phase II, Appendix J)
<i>Individual Level</i>			
Distancing Oneself from the Role	<i>Role Ambiguity</i>	<i>“In the personal data breach that occurred, it was impossible for me to rely upon my work role. Rather, I did what I had to by relying on my skills, and myself.”</i> – N	<i>D, E, H, K, N, O, Q, S</i>
Suppressing Personal Selves	<i>Contrasting Personal Selves and Roles</i>	<i>“At times, it feels as if I have to set my personal values aside when enacting my role [...].”</i> – L	<i>A, C, D, E, F, H, I, K, L, P, R, S, T,</i>
Balancing Personal Selves and Roles	<i>Role Ambiguity / Contrasting Personal Selves and Roles</i>	<i>“I would say that I shape my role to a large extent. I have learnt to shape the role based on who I am as a person, individual and how I talk to people.”</i> – J	<i>B, G, H*, J, K*, M, U</i> <i>*Note, H & K Suppress both</i>
<i>Group Level</i>			
Maintaining & Strengthening the Group	<i>Social Hierarchies Between Groups / Contrasts Between Groups / Contrasts Within Groups</i>	<i>“Because we, as a team, want to collectively achieve certain objectives, we think in the same way; we support each other, have a professional empathy towards one another, and a shared perception of who we are and want to be.”</i> – A	<i>A, B, C, F, I, L, M, O, Q, R, S, T, U</i>
Suppressing the Group Identity	<i>Social Hierarchies Between Groups</i>	<i>“[...] They are not the ones dealing with upset customers, so it is a bit annoying for them to come and say what we should do. [...] We just have to accept that that is the case.”</i> – H	<i>D, E, G, H, J, K, N, P,</i>
<i>Organizational Level</i>			
Clinging Onto the Organization	<i>Fragmented Organization</i>	<i>“We are the face of the company [...] we have to identify with the organization – no matter if we believe it to be right or not.”</i> – K	<i>B, D, E, G, H, I, K, L, M, N, R, S</i>
Separating Oneself from the Organization	<i>Fragmented Organization</i>	<i>“I take great pride in my team. We are very close to one another, almost like a family [...] It feels as if we are our own little organization.”</i> – U	<i>A, C, F, J, O, P, Q, T, U</i>
<i>Across Levels</i>			
Revising the Identity Hierarchy	<i>Contrasting Identities</i>	<i>“This was tough.... I feel like I might actually have to oppose how I believe my team would act, and how I personally would like to act, in favor of the organization [...]”</i> – D	<i>All but B & M*</i> <i>*For these subjects all levels were equally salient</i>

5.3 Implications of Identity Work on Actions

Unitary Action is Inhibited. Although we have acknowledged that subjects underwent identity work across levels by creating an identity hierarchy, the analysis indicates that they created different hierarchies, meaning that they were steered by different values, beliefs, norms, and demands. While there were dissimilarities between subjects on an aggregate level, similarities were apparent when comparing subjects belonging to the same work areas. Employees working with external communications, in general, had the organizational level as their highest-salient identity. Thus, they arrived at response 2 as their ultimate response advocated for. Interesting to note, however, is that response 1 was used by Organization X following the personal data breach that occurred. This showcases the subjectivity of interpretations, and the fact that subjects have differing views of what constitutes the organization, as previously discussed (section 5.1.3.1). Contrary, the legal subjects arrived at response 3, guided by their role(s) first and foremost. Whilst incident management was also guided by their role(s) first-hand, in tandem with their group and personal selves, they instead arrived at response 1. Consequently, although the salience of identities yield important insights in understanding what organizational members believe themselves to be steered by, it is undermined by the meaning structures of the subjects, since they possess different perceptions of how to interpret and draw upon a particular identity, based on their own standpoints. Thus, in engaging in identity work, subjects unintentionally reinforce fragmentations within the organization. While previous theory suggests that successful identity work would facilitate unitary action, we, in line with Beech (2011), see that, despite efforts at identity work, lack of congruence persists across subjects, *inhibiting unitary action*.

6. Conclusion

This study sought to take a multi-theoretical perspective to identity work at and across levels, as well as its implications on actions, thus closing the identified research gaps. In doing so, a case was studied in which the ambiguous situation was exemplified by a personal data breach, and the action by an external response to customers following it. In answering the research question (presented in section 1.3, and below), we, based on our findings, address how identity work occurs at and across levels of analysis (6.1), and its implications on actions (6.2). We also discuss the theoretical contributions of the study (6.4) as well as its practical implications (6.5). Subsequently, we finally present the limitations of the study (6.6), followed by suggestions for future research (6.7).

How do subjects engage in identity work at and across levels of analysis in response to an ambiguous situation, and what are the implications on actions?

6.1 How Actors Engage in Identity Work at and Across Levels of Analysis

Subjects engage in identity work both at and across levels due to their identities being destabilized following an ambiguous situation. However, the *how* of the process differs. Drawing upon Organization X, we were able to identify several tactics described below.

Starting at the individual level, subjects engage in identity work in three main ways. Firstly, in case the role is ambiguous as a result of the threat, and does not provide the individual with a clear-cut answer of how to act, she engages in identity work by *distancing herself from her role(s)*. Secondly, in case the role(s) and the personal selves clash, and there are prominent role discourses, she engages in identity work by *suppressing her personal selves*, thereby increasing the salience of the role. Thirdly, she can engage in identity work by *balancing the personal selves and role(s)*, through shaping one based on the other – thereby reducing the distance between them.

Moving to the group level, subjects engage in identity work by *maintaining and strengthening the group*, and with that its position in the social context that has been threatened. They do so by constructing narratives for their members to hold onto, thereby pushing the group closer internally, while distancing itself from other groups whose values and beliefs differ. That said, not all groups are able to maintain and/or strengthen their group identities in ambiguous situations, leading them to instead engage in identity work by *suppressing their group identity* to comply with discourses.

At the organizational level, subjects attribute and derive meanings differently following an ambiguous situation – creating a fragmented organization that challenges organizational identification at large. As a result, two identity work tactics have been identified. Firstly, subjects engage in identity work by *clinging onto the organization* and the values that fit oneself – thereby decreasing dissonance between the organization and other identities. Alternatively, in case there is too much dissonance between what is in the best interest of the

organization and other levels that are more salient for the subject, the latter can engage in identity work by *separating oneself from the organization*.

From the study we conclude that identity work does not just happen within each level, but also across levels. Thus, the subject is a combination of identities across levels that they seek to balance by engaging in identity work to *revise the identity hierarchy*. By doing so, subjects increase the salience of identities that are not perceived to be conflicting with the situation at hand, through engaging in identity work at these levels. Simultaneously, they decrease the salience of identities that are conflicting – thereby establishing a temporary state of self that facilitates action. Thus, the tactic of creating an identity hierarchy should be interpreted as an overarching tactic that encapsulates the identity work tactics at each level.

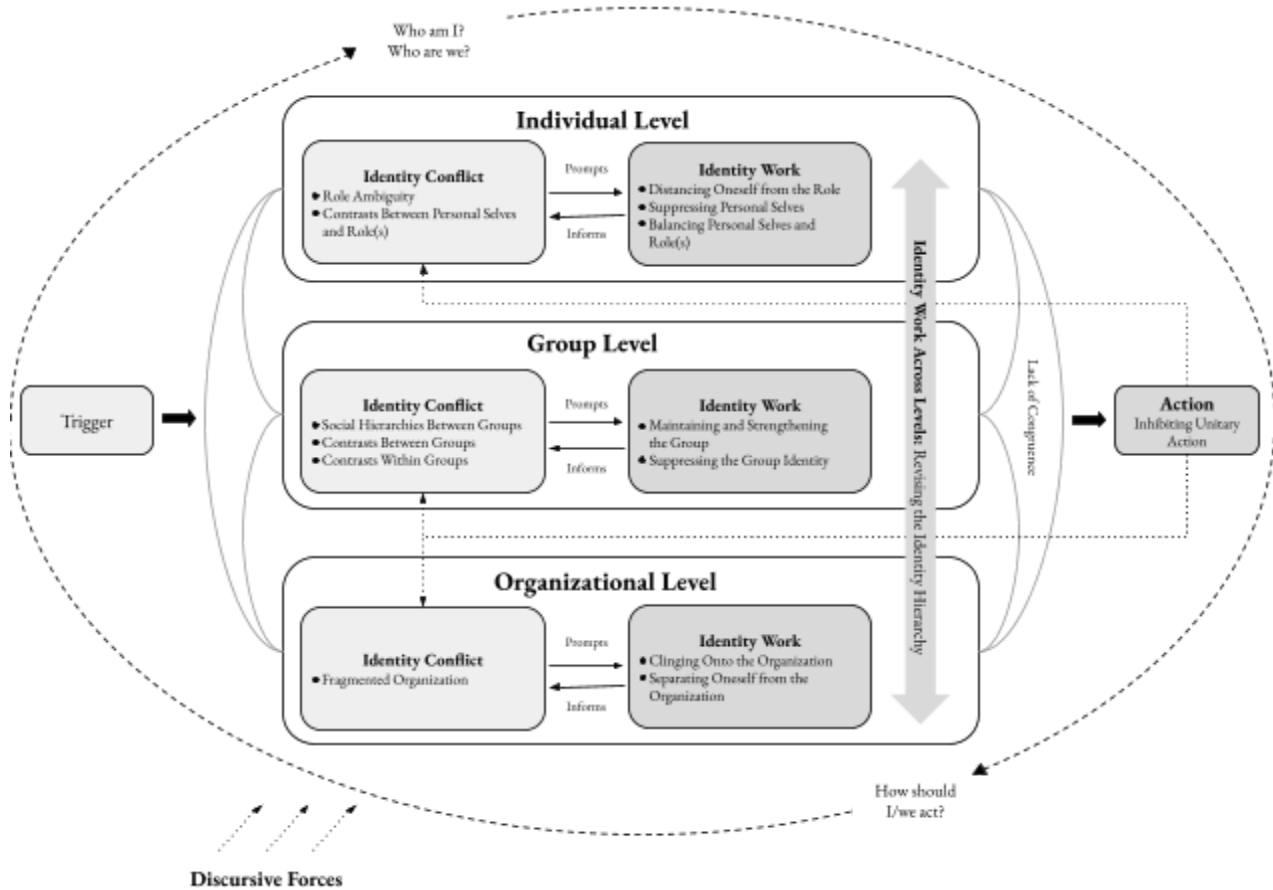
6.2 Implications on Actions

The identity work process that subjects engage in at and across levels has implications on actions. However, given that subjects make sense of and draw upon identities differently, following ambiguous situations, the subsequent actions likewise differ. That said, the study concludes that groups within which subjects are similar to a larger extent draw upon, and interpret identities in a similar manner, leading them to generally act unitarily. That said, across the entire organization, dissonance still prevails with regards to how to act. Consequently, *unitary action is inhibited*, meaning that other measures of arriving at a final decision need to be taken.

6.3 Adapted Theoretical Framework

Having presented an answer to the research question, an adapted version of the theoretical framework is presented below, incorporating the main take-aways from the study (Figure 4). The framework illustrates the identity work process described amongst subjects in Organization X – at and across levels, the relationship between identity conflict and -work, the nestedness of identities across levels, as well as the subsequent implications it has on actions. Moreover, as a feeling of dissonance can still exist after enacting a particular identity, the arrow connecting action back to identity conflict pertains. This supports the argument previously presented; that the action does not necessarily denote an end state, but that identity work can be triggered again and again. Noteworthy, discursive forces have been added as a concept that intervenes with the process outlined, although it has not been explored extensively in the study.

Figure 4. The adapted version of the theoretical framework.



6.4 Theoretical Contributions

This study addresses the research gaps identified by adopting a multi-theoretical lens, examining identities at and across levels of analysis, as well as the implications of identity work on actions. By doing so, we tap into areas that previously have been underrepresented in tandem in research, thereby extending the understanding of the identity work process. Applying a multi-theoretical lens to the study has allowed us to capture the contextual and dynamic nature of identity work in an organizational context, where collective-, role-, and personal identities all influence the subject in question. Thus, in contrast to previous research, our study contributes to the challengers of identity work scholars, such as Caza et al. (2018) and Brown (2021), who advocate that lenses should not be separated and that one theoretical standpoint does not disclude others, but rather provides important and novel implications that previously have been neglected.

By studying one particular event in a real-life organization that has priorly handled an ambiguous situation from the inside, we have been able to provide a more nuanced picture of the full sequence of events – from trigger, via identity work, to action – than previous research has covered. As a result, we have been able to develop a framework of the full identity work process; how it occurs within each level as well across levels, by subjects deploying certain identity work tactics. Furthermore, the tactics identified partly coincide with those identified by previous research, allowing us to infer that the framework might be relevant also in other contexts (see section 2.1.4). Thereby, the framework provides structure to what we, like previous researchers, have perceived as a rather ambiguous and fragmented research field.

6.5 Practical Implications

The findings of the study have several implications for practitioners. First of all, the case has shown that identity work occurs everywhere in the organization, and that the outcome of the process influences how the subject acts or would like to act in a given situation. Hence, there is a need for practitioners to understand how subjects undergo the process – what factors that facilitate and constrain the identities they draw upon, in order to be able to target these and facilitate unitary actions, thus decreasing feelings of dissonance. Secondly, our findings indicate that subjects attribute and derive meanings of what is in the best interest of the organization differently, reinforcing fragmentations. However, groups of similar subjects tend to identify alike and thus have the same perception of the best way to act. Contrastingly, they distance themselves from groups of contradictory perspectives, with other perceptions of the best way to act – illustrating one reason for why there might be silos internally. By providing practitioners with the understanding of the impact of identities in an organizational context, and the importance of making sense of how subjects derive meanings in times of ambiguity, our findings furthermore facilitate a more smooth and aligned management of future ambiguous situations.

Despite the fact that we only studied identity work and the subsequent actions following a certain event and in a particular organization, the findings may still provide valuable insights of the process in other organizational scenarios. Especially related to understanding how groups of similar identities distance themselves from those of contrasting identities. The ambition should be to minimize the feeling of dissonance within the organization, implying a need to understand what identities each employee draws upon and how they interpret these to make sense of a particular situation. That is not to conclude that managers should strive for an organization where everyone is identical to one another, since that would be detrimental to innovation and creativity (Dukerich et al., 1998; Glynn, 1998), but rather for creating an environment where employees can arrive at dissonance-free agreements. This will be necessary in order for organizations to be able to act unitarily going forward – especially as the potential threats to their identities will likely not decrease in number.

6.6 Limitations of the Study

The findings generated are subject to limitations. First of all, in line with our methodology to choose interview subjects based on involvement in the personal data breach that occurred at Organization X, we arrived at a quite

narrow final sample. This might have led us to miss out on valuable perspectives – especially since the interviewees were all part of three distinct work areas, i.e. fewer than the total number of work areas that exist within Organization X, although all groups to some extent can be argued to be part of the management of incidents. Secondly, identity work is, to a large extent, a cognitive and subjective process that occurs within subjects and that cannot be fully captured by outside observers. Although we have sought to remain faithful to the meaning structures of the interviewees and taken measures in the methodological design to eliminate interviewer bias, subjective interpretations of the findings and the interviewees' narratives are inevitable. This makes it possible that we have emphasized or deemphasized certain aspects of the identity work process, such as the extent to which a subject perceives themselves to identify with a certain entity.

6.7 Future Research

We hope that the study will facilitate future research within the field, with more researchers adopting a multi-theoretical lens going forth in studying identity work. Starting off, to strengthen the findings of this study, and to cover its limitations, it would be relevant for future researchers to test the theoretical framework developed in other organizational contexts, with a broader sample of interview subjects, and by using other ambiguous situations as triggers – both incident-related and non-incident-related. Secondly, we, in line with Caza et al. (2018), see a shortage in research emphasizing additional implications of identity work, such as the cognitions and feelings it evokes, given its close connection to dissonance, which has been seen to spark identity work in this study. Thirdly, our study indicates that subjects are not entirely free to draw upon and enact identities as they would like in any given situation due to discursive forces in place. However, we have not looked into what those discourses might be in detail and how each influences identity work, thus leaving room for future studies. Lastly, it would be interesting to look into how organizations ultimately arrive at one identity hierarchy to guide action, what factors are taken into account in making that trade-off, as well as if and how there is subsequent identity work sparked following it.

7. References

- Allen, L. (2005). Managing masculinity: young men's identity work in focus groups. *Qualitative Research*, 5(1), pp. 35–57. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794105048650>.
- Alvesson, M. (2000). Social identity and the problem of loyalty in knowledge-intensive companies. *Journal of Management Studies*, 37(8), pp. 1101–1124. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-6486.00218>.
- Alvesson, M. & Ashcraft, K. & Thomas, R. (2008). Identity Matters: Reflections on the Construction of Identity Scholarship in Organization Studies. *Organization*, 15. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508407084426>.
- Alvesson, M., & Willmott, H. (1992). Critical theory and management studies: An introduction. In M. Alvesson, & H. Willmott (Eds.), *Critical Management Studies*. SAGE Publications.
- Ashforth, B. & Harrison, S. & Corley, K. (2008). Identification in Organizations: An Examination of Four Fundamental Questions. *Journal of Management*. (34), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206308316059>.
- Ashforth, B., Kreiner, G. E., Clark, M. A., & Fugate, M. (2007). Normalizing dirty work: Managerial tactics for countering occupational taint. *Academy of Management Journal*, 50(1), pp. 149–174. <https://doi.org/10.5465/AMJ.2007.24162092>.
- Ashforth, B., & Mael, F. (1989). Social identity theory and the organization. *The Academy of Management Review*, 14(1), pp. 20–39. <https://doi.org/10.2307/258189>.
- Ashforth, B., & Mael, F. (1998). The power of resistance: sustaining valued identities. In R. M. Kramer, & M. A. Neale (Eds.), *Power and influence in organizations*, pp. 89–120. SAGE Publications, Inc., <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483345291>.
- Ashforth, B., Rogers, K. M., & Corley, K. G. (2011). Identity in organizations: Exploring cross-level dynamics. *Organization Science*, 22(5), pp. 1144–1156. <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1100.0591>.
- Ashforth, B., & Schinoff, B. (2016). Identity under construction: How individuals come to define themselves in organizations. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 3, pp. 111–137. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-041015-062322>.

- Barnard, A., Mccosker, H., & Gerber, R. (1999). Phenomenography: A Qualitative Research Approach for Exploring Understanding in Health Care. *Qualitative Health Research*, 9(2), pp. 212–226. <https://doi.org/10.1177/104973299129121794>.
- Bataille, C. D., & Vough, H. C. (2022). More than the Sum of My Parts: An Intrapersonal Network Approach to Identity Work in Response to Identity Opportunities and Threats. *Academy of Management Review*. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2018.0026>.
- Beech, N. (2011). Liminality and the practices of identity reconstruction. *Human Relations*, 64(2), pp. 285–302. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726710371235>.
- Bell, E., Bryman, A., & Harley, B. (2019). *Business research methods*. Oxford university press.
- Boucher, H. C., Bloch, T., & Pelletier, A. (2016). Fluid compensation following threats to self-concept clarity. *Self and Identity*, 15(2), pp. 152–172. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15298868.2015.1094405>.
- Brewer, M. B. (2001). The Many Faces of Social Identity: Implications for Political Psychology. *Political Psychology*, 22(1), pp. 115–125. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3791908>.
- Brewer, M. B., & Gardner, W. (1996). Who is this "We"? Levels of collective identity and self representations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 71(1), pp. 83–93. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.71.1.83>.
- Brown, A.D. (2015). Identities and Identity Work. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 17, pp. 20-40. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijmr.12035>.
- Brown, A. D. (2017). Identity Work and Organizational Identification. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 19, pp. 296-317. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijmr.12152>.
- Brown, A. D. (2021). Identities in and around organizations: Towards an identity work perspective. *Human Relations*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726721993910>.
- Brown, A. D., & Toyoki, S. (2013). Identity Work and Legitimacy. *Organization Studies*, 34(7), pp. 875–896. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840612467158>.
- Bruner, J. (1991). The Narrative Construction of Reality. *Critical Inquiry*, 18, pp. 1-21. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/448619>.

- Carollo, Luca & Guerri, Marco. (2018). Activists in a Suit: Paradoxes and Metaphors in Sustainability Managers' Identity Work. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 148, pp. 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-017-3582-7>.
- Carrim, N. & Nkomo, S. (2016). Wedding intersectionality theory and identity work: South African Indian women negotiating managerial identity. *Gender work and organization*, 23. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12121>.
- Caza, B. B & Moss, S. & Vough, H. (2017). From Synchronizing to Harmonizing: The Process of Authenticating Multiple Work Identities. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 63. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0001839217733972>.
- Caza, B. B, Vough, H., Puranik, H. (2018). Identity work in organizations and occupations: Definitions, theories, and pathways forward. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 39, pp. 889– 910. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.2318>.
- Charmaz, K. (2009). *Shifting the Grounds: Constructivist Grounded Theory Methods. Developing Grounded Theory: The Second Generation*. Left Coast Press.
- Clarke, C., Brown, A. and Hailey, V. (2009) Working identities? Antagonistic discursive resources and managerial identity. *Human Relations*, 62, pp. 323–52. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726708101040>.
- Costas, J., & Kärreman, D. (2016). The Bored Self in Knowledge Work. *Human Relations*, 69(1), pp. 61-83. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726715579736>.
- Courpasson, D. & Monties, V. (2017). I Am My Body. Physical Selves of Police Officers in a Changing Institution. *Journal of Management Studies*, 54, pp. 32-57. <https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.12221>.
- Creary, S. J., Caza, B. B., & Roberts, L. M. (2015). Out of the Box? How Managing a subordinate's Multiple Identities Affects the Quality of a Manager-Subordinate Relationship. *Academy of Management Review*, 40(4), pp. 538-562. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5465/amr.2013.0101>.
- Crouch, M., & McKenzie, H. (2006). The logic of small samples in interview-based qualitative research. *Social Science Information*, 45(4), pp. 483–499. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0539018406069584>.
- Cuganesan, S. (2017). Identity Paradoxes: How Senior Managers and Employees Negotiate Similarity and Distinctiveness Tensions over Time. *Organization Studies*, 38(3–4), pp. 489–511. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840616655482>.

- Dukerich, J. M., Kramer, R., & McLean Parks, J. (1998). The dark side of organizational identification. In D. A. Whetten & P. C. Godfrey (Eds.). *Identity in organizations: Building theory through conversations*: pp. 245–256. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Dutton, J., Dukerich, J., & Harquail, C. V. (1994). Organizational images and member identification. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 39(2), pp. 239–263. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2393235>.
- Edwards, M. (2005). Organizational identification: a conceptual and operational review. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 7, pp. 207–230. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2370.2005.00114>.
- Eisenhardt, K. (1989). Building theories from case research. *Academy of Management Review*, 14, pp. 532– 550. <https://doi.org/10.2307/258557>.
- Eisenhardt, K., and Graebner, M. (2007). Theory building from cases: Opportunities and challenges. *Academy of Management Journal*, 50(1), pp. 25-32. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2007.24160888>.
- Elsbach, K. (1999). An Expanded Model of Organizational Identification. *Research in Organizational Behaviour*, 21, pp. 163-200.
- Elsbach, K. (2004). Interpreting workplace identities: The role of office décor. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 25(1), pp. 99–128. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.233>.
- Epitropaki, O., Kark, R., Mainemelis, C., & Lord, R. (2017). Leadership and followership identity processes: A multilevel review. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 28(1), pp. 104–129. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2016.10.003>.
- Feldermann, S., & Hiebl, M (2020). Using quotations from non-English interviews in accounting research. *Qualitative Research in Accounting & Management*, 17(2), pp. 229-262. <https://doi.org/10.1108/QRAM-08-2018-0059>.
- Flick, U. (2018). *Managing quality in qualitative research* (Second ed.). SAGE Publications Ltd <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781529716641>.
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2006). Five Misunderstandings About Case-Study Research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12(2), pp. 219–245. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800405284363>.

- Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings 1972-1977*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Gioia D., Corley K., & Hamilton, A. (2013). Seeking Qualitative Rigor in Inductive Research: Notes on the Gioia Methodology. *Organizational Research Methods*, 16(1), pp. 15-31.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1094428112452151>
- Given, L. (2008). *The SAGE encyclopedia of qualitative research methods* (Vols. 1-0). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications. <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412963909>
- Glynn, M. A. (1998). Individuals' need for organizational identification (nOID): Speculations on individual differences in the propensity to identify. In D. A. Whetten & P. C. Godfrey (Eds.). *Identity in organizations: Building theory through conversations*, pp. 238 –244. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- He, H., & Brown, A. D. (2013). Organizational Identity and Organizational Identification: A Review of the Literature and Suggestions for Future Research. *Group & Organization Management*, 38(1), pp. 3–35.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1059601112473815>.
- Hekman, D. R., Steensma, H. K., Bigley, G. A., & Hereford, J. F. (2009). Effects of organizational and professional identification on the relationship between administrators' social influence and professional employees' adoption of new work behavior. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 94(5), pp. 1325–1335.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/a0015315>.
- Hinojosa, A., Gardner, W., Walker, H., Coglisier, C., & Gullifor, D. (2017). A Review of Cognitive Dissonance Theory in Management Research: Opportunities for Further Development. *Journal of Management*, 43(1), pp. 170–199. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206316668236>.
- Horton, K., Bayerl, P. and Jacobs, G. (2014). Identity conflicts at work: An integrative framework. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 35, pp. 6-22. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.1893>.
- Hoyer, P. (2020). Career identity: An ongoing narrative accomplishment. In Brown A.D. (ed), *The Oxford Handbook on Identities in Organizations*, pp. 101-116. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ibarra, H. (1999). Provisional Selves: Experimenting with Image and Identity in Professional Adaptation. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44(4), pp. 764–791. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2667055>.

- Ibarra, H., & Barbulescu, R. (2010). Identity as narrative: Prevalence, effectiveness, and consequences of narrative identity work in macro work role transitions. *The Academy of Management Review*, 35(1), pp. 135–154. <https://doi.org/10.5465/AMR.2010.45577925>.
- Irani, E. (2019). The Use of Videoconferencing for Qualitative Interviewing: Opportunities, Challenges, and Considerations. *Clinical Nursing Research*, 28(1), pp. 3–8. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1054773818803170>.
- Jain, S., George, G., & Maltarich, M. (2009). Academics or entrepreneurs? Investigating role identity modification of university scientists involved in commercialization activity. *Research Policy*, 38(6), pp. 922–935. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2009.02.007>
- Jordan, P., & Troth, A. (2020). Common method bias in applied settings: The dilemma of researching in organizations. *Australian Journal of Management*, 45(1), pp. 3–14. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0312896219871976>.
- Kozlowski, S., & Klein, K. (2000). A multilevel approach to theory and research in organizations: Contextual, temporal, and emergent processes. In K. J. Klein & S. W. J. Kozlowski (Eds.), *Multilevel theory, research, and methods in organizations: Foundations, extensions, and new directions*, pp. 3–90. Jossey-Bass.
- Kreiner, G., Hollensbe, E., & Sheep, M. (2006). Where Is the “Me” among the “We”? Identity Work and the Search for Optimal Balance. *The Academy of Management Journal*, 49(5), pp. 1031–1057. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20159815>.
- Kuhn, T. (2006). A ‘Demented Work Ethic’ and a ‘Lifestyle Firm’: Discourse, Identity, and Workplace Time Commitments. *Organization Studies*, 27(9), pp. 1339–1358. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840606067249>.
- Leroy, H., Anisman-Razin, M., Avolio, B. J., Bresman, H., Stuart Bunderson, J., Burris, E., Claeys, J., Detert, J., Dragoni, L., Giessner, S., Kniffin, K., Kolditz, T., Petriglieri, G., Pettit, N., Sitkin, S., Van Quaquebeke, N., & Vongswasdi, P. (2022). Walking Our Evidence-Based Talk: The Case of Leadership Development in Business Schools. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, 29(1), pp. 5–32. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15480518211062563>.
- Leung, A., Zietsma, C., Peredo, A. (2014). Emergent identity work and institutional change: The ‘quiet’ revolution of Japanese middle-class housewives. *Organization Studies*, 35, pp. 423–450. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840613498529>.

- Lincoln, Y. and Guba, E. (1985) *Naturalistic Inquiry*. SAGE, Thousand Oaks, pp. 289-331.
- Lucas, K. (2011). Blue-Collar Discourses of Workplace Dignity: Using Outgroup Comparisons to Construct Positive Identities. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 25(2), pp. 353–374.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0893318910386445>.
- Löwstedt, M. & Räisänen, C. (2014). Social identity in construction: enactments and outcomes. *Construction Management and Economics*, 32, pp. 1093-11. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01446193.2014.956132>.
- Makri, C., & Neely, A. (2021). Grounded Theory: A Guide for Exploratory Studies in Management Research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211013654>.
- Markus, H. R., & Nurius, P. (1986). Possible selves. *American Psychologist*, 41(9), pp. 954–969.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.41.9.954>.
- Marlow, S., & McAdam, M. (2015). Incubation or Induction? Gendered Identity Work in the Context of Technology Business Incubation. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, 39(4), pp. 791–816.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/etap.12062>.
- Mausz, J., Donnelly, E., Moll, S., Harms, S., & McConnell, M. (2022). Role Identity, Dissonance, and Distress Among Paramedics. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 19(4).
<https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19042115>.
- Mills, A., Durepos, G., and Wiebe, E. (2010). *Encyclopedia of Case Study Research, Volumes I and II*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Owens, T. , Robinson, D., & Smith-Lovin, L. (2010). Three faces of identity. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 36, pp. 477–499. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.34.040507.134725>.
- Oyserman, D., & Markus, H. R. (1990). Possible selves and delinquency. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 59(1), pp. 112–125. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.59.1.112>.
- Pettigrew, A. (1990). Longitudinal field research on change: Theory and practice. *Organizational Science*, 1, pp. 267–292. <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1.3.267>
- Pratt, M., & Kraatz, M. (2009). E pluribus unum: Multiple identities and the organizational self. In L. M. Roberts & J. E. Dutton (Eds.), *Exploring positive identities and organizations: Building a theoretical and research foundation*, pp.385–410. New York, NY: Routledge.

- Proulx, T. (2012). Threat-compensation in social psychology: Is there a core motivation? *Social Cognition*, 30, pp. 643–651. <https://doi.org/10.1521/soco.2012.30.6.643>.
- Ramarajan, L. (2014). Past, present and future research on multiple identities: Toward an intrapersonal network approach. *The Academy of Management Annals*, 8(1), pp. 589–659. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19416520.2014.912379>.
- Ramarajan, L., & Reid, E. (2013). Shattering the myth of separate worlds: Negotiating nonwork identities at work. *The Academy of Management Review*, 38(4), pp. 621–644. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2011.0314>.
- Ridder, H. (2017). The theory contribution of case study research designs. *Business Research*, 10(2), pp. 281–305.
- Rubin, H. & Rubin, I. (2005). The responsive interview as an extended conversation. In Qualitative interviewing (2nd ed.): *The art of hearing data*. SAGE Publications, Inc., <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781452226651>.
- Schwandt, T. (2007). *The SAGE dictionary of qualitative inquiry* (Vols. 1-0). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc. <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412986281>
- Schwartz-Shea, P., & Yanow, D. (2020). Interpretivism. In P. Atkinson, S. Delamont, A. Cernat, J.W. Sakshaug, & R.A. Williams (Eds.), *SAGE Research Methods Foundations*. <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781526421036915455>.
- Sims, D. (2008). Managerial identity formation in a public sector professional: An autobiographical account. *International Journal of Public Administration*, 31(9), pp. 988–1002. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01900690801920825>.
- Sluss, D., & Ashforth, B. (2008). How relational and organizational identification converge: Processes and conditions. *Organization Science*, 19(6), pp. 807–823. <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1070.0349>.
- Snow, D., & Anderson, L. (1987). Identity work among the homeless: The verbal construction and avowal of personal identities. *American Journal of Sociology*, 92(6), pp. 1336–1371. <https://doi.org/10.1086/228668>.
- Stets, J., & Burke, P. (2000). Identity theory and social identity theory. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 63(3), pp. 224–237. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2695870>.

- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*, 2nd ed. Sage Publications, Inc.
- Stryker, S. (1987). Identity theory: Developments and extensions. In K. Yardley, & T. Hones (Eds.), *Self and identity: Psychosocial perspectives*, pp. 83–103. New York: Wiley.
- Stryker, S., & Serpe, R. (1982). Commitment, identity salience, and role behavior: A theory and research example. In W. Ickes & E.S. Knowles (Eds.), *Personality, roles, and social behavior*, pp. 199- 218. New York: Springer-Verlag.
- Stryker, S., & Serpe, R. (1994). Identity salience and psychological centrality: Equivalent, overlapping, or complementary concepts? *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 57, pp. 16–35.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/2786972>.
- Sveningsson, S., & Alvesson, M. (2003). Managing Managerial Identities: Organizational Fragmentation, Discourse and Identity Struggle. *Human Relations*, 56(10), pp. 1163–1193.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/00187267035610001>.
- Tajfel, H. (1978). *Differentiation between social groups: Studies in the social psychology of intergroup relations*. London: Academic Press.
- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G. Austin, & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The social psychology of intergroup relations*. Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Tetlock, P., Lerner, J. , & Boettger, R. (1996). The dilution effect: Judgmental bias, conversational convention, or a bit of both? *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 26, pp. 915-934.
[https://doi.org/10.1002/\(SICI\)1099-0992\(199611\)26:6<915::AID-EJSP797>3.0.CO;2-W](https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1099-0992(199611)26:6<915::AID-EJSP797>3.0.CO;2-W).
- Thoits, P., & Virshup, L. (1997). Me's and we's: Forms and functions of social identities. In R. D. Ashmore, & L. Jussim (Eds.), *Self and identity: Fundamental issues*, pp. 106–133. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Timmermans, S., & Tavory, I. (2012). Theory construction in qualitative research: From grounded theory to abductive analysis. *Sociological Theory*, 30(3), pp. 167-186.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0735275112457914>.
- Trice, H.M. (1993). *Occupational subcultures in the workplace*. Ithaca, NY: ILR Press.

- Tyler, T., & Blader, S. (2001). Identity and Cooperative Behavior in Groups. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 4(3), pp. 207–226. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430201004003003>.
- Van Maanen, J., & Barley, S. (1984). Occupational communities: Culture and control in organizations. In B. Staw and L. Cummings (Eds), *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 6, pp. 287–365. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Watson, T. (2009). Narrative, life story and manager identity: A case study in autobiographical identity work. *Human Relations*, 62(3), pp. 425–452. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726708101044>.
- Wengraf, T. (2001). *Qualitative research interviewing*. SAGE Publications, Ltd
<https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781849209717>.
- Winkler, I. (2018). Identity work and emotions: A review. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 20(1), pp. 120–133. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijmr.12119>
- Wright, C., Nyberg, D., & Grant, D. (2012). “Hippies on the third floor”: Climate change, narrative identity and the micro-politics of corporate environmentalism. *Organization Studies*, 33(11), pp. 1451–1475. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840612463316>
- Yin, R. (2003). *Case study research: Design and methods*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publications.
- Zanna, M., & Cooper, J. (1974). Dissonance and the pill: An attribution approach to studying the arousal properties of dissonance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 29(5), pp. 703–709. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0036651>.

8. Appendices

8.1 Appendix A. Interview Subjects (Preparatory Work)

Subject	Employment Time	Work Area	Responsibilities	Direct Customer Contact	Interview Format	Duration	Date
A	11 months	Incident Management	Coordinating incidents	No	Google Meets	42 minutes	2022-01-27
B	1 year	Incident Management	Coordinating incidents	No	Google Meets	45 minutes	2022-01-27
C	1 year	Legal	Compliance to laws	No	Google Meets	45 minutes	2022-01-31
D	10 months	External Communication	External communication	Yes	Google Meets	44 minutes	2022-02-01
E	11 months	External Communication	External communication	Yes	Google Meets	51 minutes	2022-02-01
F	5,5 years	Incident Management	Coordinating incidents	No	Google Meets	47 minutes	2022-02-03

8.2 Appendix B. Interview Guide (Preparatory Work)

Background

- What is your main responsibility and focus area?
- How long have you been working at Organization X, and within your role/team/competence?
- How do you perceive yourself to identify with different entities of the organization (e.g. organization, group, role)?

Personal Data Breach: General Questions

- When encountering a personal data breach, how do you go about it?
 - Who decides what actions to take and who carries the actions out?
- How do you work with and **respond** to personal data breaches?
 - What's YOUR specific role in the process?
 - Could you elaborate on the OVERALL process? (responsibility in terms of individual/group/Organization X)
- How do you perceive the overall mindset at Organization X when it comes to handling breaches?
 - Your perception
 - Your group's perception
 - The organization's perception
- What would you say is the most challenging aspect with regards to personal data breaches?

Personal Data Breach: Drawing Upon the Event That Took Place

- How did you work with others (i.e., individuals, groups) following the event?
- What did you find to be challenging/difficult following the breach that took place?

External Response

- What do you think are crucial factors to consider from the customer's perspective (i.e., in the response)?
 - What is your perception of the external response following the breach that took place?
-

8.3 Appendix C. Interview Guide (Main Study)

Background

- What is your main responsibility and focus area?
- How long have you been working at Organization X, and within your group and role?

Identification

Individual Level

- Do you perceive that you have a clear role?
 - Is it clear what is expected of you in your role(s)? Situations when it's not as clear?
- How do you identify with your work role?
- How does your work role guide you to act following a personal data breach?

Group Level

- Do you perceive that you have a group affiliation?
 - Is it clear what is expected of you by your group? Situations when it's not as clear?
- How would you describe your group and its identity?
- How do you identify with your group?
- How does your group guide you to act following a personal data breach?

Organizational Level

- How do you fit into Organization X?
 - Is it clear what is expected of you and your group by the organization? Situations when it's not as clear?
- How would you describe Organization X and its identity?
- How do you identify with Organization X?
- How does the organization guide you to act following a personal data breach?

Inter-level

- Do you at times perceive that you have to make trade-offs between identities across levels?
 - How do you cope with balancing different perspectives?
 - If it were up to you, what would you/they take into consideration when designing an external response following a personal data incident?
-

8.4 Appendix D. Interview Subjects (Main Study)

Subject	Employment Time	Work Area	Responsibilities	Direct Customer Contact	Interview Format	Duration	Date
A	11 months	Incident Management	Coordinating incidents	No	In person	54 minutes	2022-02-14
B	1 year	Incident Management	Coordinating incidents	No	Google Meets	46 minutes	2022-02-14
C	1 year	Legal	Compliance to laws	No	Google Meets	47 minutes	2022-02-15
D	10 months	External Communication	External communication	Yes	In person	45 minutes	2022-02-15
E	11 months	External Communication	External communication	Yes	Google Meets	47 minutes	2022-02-16
F	5,5 years	Incident Management	Coordinating incidents	No	Google Meets	59 minutes	2022-02-16
G	1 year	Legal	Compliance to laws	No	Google Meets	48 minutes	2022-02-16
H	1,5 years	External Communication	External communication	Yes	Google Meets	62 minutes	2022-02-16
I	2 years	External Communication	External communication	Yes	Google Meets	51 minutes	2022-02-16
J	3,5 years	Incident Management	Coordinating incidents	No	Google Meets	57 minutes	2022-02-17
K	11 months	External Communication	External communication	Yes	Google Meets	55 minutes	2022-02-17
L	10 months	External Communication	External communication	Yes	Google Meets	46 minutes	2022-02-18
M	8 years	External Communication	External communication	Yes	Google Meets	54 minutes	2022-02-18
N	3 years	Incident Management	Coordinating incidents	No	Google Meets	59 minutes	2022-02-18
O	6 years	External Communication	External communication	Yes	Google Meets	57 minutes	2022-02-20
P	1 year	Legal	Compliance to laws	No	Google Meets	51 minutes	2022-02-20
Q	2 years	Incident Management	Coordinating incidents	No	Google Meets	61 minutes	2022-02-20
R	1,5 years	Legal	Compliance to laws	No	Google Meets	63 minutes	2022-02-25
S	2 years	External Communication	External communication	Yes	Google Meets	44 minutes	2022-02-25
T	12 months	Legal	Compliance to laws	No	Google Meets	41 minutes	2022-03-01
U	1,5 years	Incident Management	Coordinating incidents	No	Google Meets	54 minutes	2022-03-01

8.5 Appendix E. Quasi-Experiment

Experiment

We will now present you with a hypothetical scenario, followed by three constructed responses. Take your time and read through the text presented carefully.

Hypothetical Scenario

Organization X was just informed about an incident caused by a faulty configuration change in one of its channels. This enabled some users to see a subset of their information exposed to other users, during a time period of 31 minutes between when the change was introduced and the access to the channel was disabled. The incident only affected the information displayed (see pictures below). No changes, updates or payments could be made by a user on another user's account. No card details or account details were exposed.

[PICTURES HAVE BEEN REMOVED DUE TO CONFIDENTIALITY]

Following the incident, Organization X has constructed three possible blog-post responses targeting the affected customers:

Response 1: OBFUSCATED DUE TO CONFIDENTIALITY.

Response 2: We are sorry. Customers are always our top priority and we take the protection of our users' personal information very seriously. However, we are extremely sad and frustrated to inform you of a self-inflicted incident that for 31 min affected X app users. The incident led to user data being exposed (name, email, address and purchase history) to the wrong user when accessing our user interfaces. Although access to data has been entirely random and not showing any data containing card or bank details, we acknowledge responsibility for the incident, and would like to emphasize that it should never have occurred to begin with. Consequently, we are taking this very seriously and will work tirelessly to regain all our customers' trust and to prevent it from happening again.

Response 3: We are informing you of a faulty configuration, caused by a human error, that affected some of our users. The bug led to random user data being exposed to the wrong user when accessing our user interfaces. The access to data has been entirely random and not showing any data containing card or bank details. Only the [channel], and only some users actively using the [channel] at the time of the incident, were affected. It is important to note that GDPR would classify the information visible as "non-sensitive". Nonetheless, we are taking it seriously and are working on a number of improvements to prevent recurrence and mitigate the impact of similar events.

We would now like your input on...

- Which response **fits better** with how **you** would **personally** like Organization X to respond externally to customers following the scenario?
- Which response **fits better** with how **you** believe your **role(s)** guide you to respond externally to customers following the scenario?
- Which response **fits better** with how you believe your **group** guides you to respond externally to customers following the scenario?
- Which response **fits better** with how you believe **Organization X** guides you to respond externally to customers following the scenario?

Having answered the following four questions, we would now like you to choose one response as the official response that is to be communicated externally following the event.

- How does it make you feel to balance the different perspectives?
-

8.6 Appendix F. Participants (Quasi-Experiment)

Subject	Employment Time	Work Area	Responsibilities	Direct Customer Contact	Interview Format	Duration	Date
A	11 months	Incident Management	Coordinating incidents	No	In person	23 minutes	2022-03-14
B	1 year	Incident Management	Coordinating incidents	No	Google Meets	32 minutes	2022-03-14
C	1 year	Legal	Compliance to laws	No	In person	26 minutes	2022-03-14
D	10 months	External Communication	External communication	Yes	In person	25 minutes	2022-03-15
E	11 months	External Communication	External communication	Yes	In person	27 minutes	2022-03-15
F	5,5 years	Incident Management	Coordinating incidents	No	Google Meets	29 minutes	2022-03-15
G	1 year	Legal	Compliance to laws	No	In person	28 minutes	2022-03-15
H	1,5 years	External Communication	External communication	Yes	Google Meets	22 minutes	2022-03-17
I	2 years	External Communication	External communication	Yes	In person	31 minutes	2022-03-17
J	3,5 years	Incident Management	Coordinating incidents	No	In person	27 minutes	2022-03-17
K	11 months	External Communication	External communication	Yes	Google Meets	25 minutes	2022-03-19
L	10 months	External Communication	External communication	Yes	In person	26 minutes	2022-03-19
M	8 years	External Communication	External communication	Yes	In person	24 minutes	2022-03-19
N	3 years	Incident Management	Coordinating incidents	No	Google Meets	29 minutes	2022-03-19
O	6 years	External Communication	External communication	Yes	In person	27 minutes	2022-03-19
P	1 year	Legal	Compliance to laws	No	Google Meets	31 minutes	2022-03-19
Q	2 years	Incident Management	Coordinating incidents	No	Google Meets	31 minutes	2022-03-20
R	1,5 years	Legal	Compliance to laws	No	Google Meets	33 minutes	2022-03-20
S	2 years	External Communication	External communication	Yes	In person	24 minutes	2022-03-20
T	12 months	Legal	Compliance to laws	No	In person	21 minutes	2022-03-20
U	1,5 years	Incident Management	Coordinating incidents	No	In person	24 minutes	2022-03-20

8.7 Appendix G. Subjects' Identification With Different Levels of Identities

	Subject working with Incident Management
	Subject working with Legal
	Subject working with External Communication

	Identifies with the nature of Organization X (e.g. being a disruptor)	Organization X's values show in the work (e.g. high quality and industry disruption)	Talks about Organization X as "we"	Has internalized values from Organization X into the self outside of work	Organization X is a way of living, rather than just a job	Adjusts to Organization X's values in actions taken	Talks about the group as "we"	Adjust to the group's values and beliefs in actions taken	Being part of a particular group is a big part of the identity	Perceives the current and/or previous role as part of the personal self	Little dissonance between the self and the role	Adjusts personal self to fit the role, or vice versa	Is the same person at work and at home
	Identifies with the Organization X level identities to a high degree						Identifies with the group level identities to a high degree			Identifies with the role level identities to a high degree			
A		x						x					
B		x						x				x	
C								x				x	
D								x					
E								x				x	
F													
G		x										x	
H								x				x	
I								x					
J								x				x	
K								x					
L													
M		x						x				x	
N		x											
O								x				x	
P								x				x	
Q		x						x					
R								x					
S								x					
T								x				x	
U		x						x				x	

*The remaining subjects, without crosses, do not identify with the respective level to a HIGH degree.

8.8 Appendix H. Identity Conflicts at Several Levels

	Subject working with Incident Management
	Subject working with Legal
	Subject working with External Communication

Intra-Individual Conflict										
Difficult to balance personal beliefs and the work beliefs	Difficult to balance differing demands and expectations internally at Organization X	Difficult to balance internal Organization X beliefs and external customer beliefs	Difficult to balance expectations of several roles, previous roles and the self	Difficult to balance different discourses	Dissonance in my view of the best way to act versus what the role/group/org anization tells me to do	Suppression of personal values in favor of those of the organization	Sometimes acts in a way that contradicts the personal values, or vice versa	There are not always clear guidelines, especially in the event of an ambiguous situation. It requires the individual to use other cues	Uncertainty about what constitutes the respective roles	Overlap between roles
Trade-offs between values/ beliefs and norms					Suppression of personal values			Ambiguity regarding responsibilities		
Contrasts between personal selves and roles								Role ambiguity		
A	x							x		
B										
C										
D	x							x		
E	x									
F	x							x		
G	x				x					
H	x				x					
I								x		
J	x									
K	x				x			x		
L					x			x		
M										
N	x							x		
O										
P	x									
Q										
R					x					
S	x				x					
T	x									
U										

Intra-Group Conflict										
Uncertainty of the scope of other group members' responsibilities	Different perspectives depending on role and perspectives (e.g. between people of different work areas)	Differences in personalities and interests	Differences in the perception of role expectations within the group	Sometimes miscommunication about who does what	Dissonance in how to act (e.g. how quickly to respond)	Different reactions to incidents	Differences with regards to roles and perspectives	Differences in the perception of role expectations within the group	Different ways of reaching the same goal	Tensions and conflicts as a result of differing perceptions
<i>Differences in perspectives</i>					<i>Differences with regards to how to act/behave</i>					

Contrasts within group	
A	
B	
C	x
D	
E	
F	x
G	
H	
I	
J	x
K	x
L	
M	
N	x
O	x
P	x
Q	
R	x
S	
T	x
U	

Intra-Organizational Conflict				
View of the organization: Several identities	View of the organization: Still searching for an identity / "Teenager"	View of the organization: One clear identity	Dissonance between the image and reality of Organization X	Dissonance between what Organization X promises that employees can do, versus the perception of mandate they actually have
<i>Hybrid Organizational Identity</i>			<i>Preach versus teach</i>	

Fragmented organization		
A	x	
B		
C		
D	x	x
E	x	x
F	x	
G		
H		x
I		
J		
K		x
L	x	x
M	x	
N		
O	x	x
P		
Q		
R	x	
S	x	x
T		
U	x	

Inter-Group Conflict										
Different attitudes to reporting incidents between groups	Groups have different perspectives and perceptions of the severity and priority of situations	Groups have different guidelines and/or goals	Differences in how groups work and communicate	Every group is busy and thinks their problem space is the most important	Lack of understanding of other groups	Patriotic to their own group's area of expertise, making them justify it and neglect other perspectives	Sometimes groups' responsibilities overlap, which can yield several answers to the same question	Ambiguity regarding group scope	Dissonance between routines/guidelines (written by someone else) and operations (carrying out)	Lack of mandate to influence depending on group affiliation
Silos between groups				Group home blindness			Perception of ownership		Ability to influence	
Contrasts between groups									Social hierarchies between groups	
x				x						
x										
x				x					x	
x				x						
x							x			
x				x					x	
x				x					x	
x				x						
x				x			x			
							x		x	
x				x					x	
				x						
x										
x				x						
				x			x		x	
x				x			x			

Inter-Level Conflict			
Contrasting demands between levels (i.e., individual, group, organization)	Different perception of how to act between levels	Suppression of one or more perspectives	Feelings of dissonance

Contrasting Identities	
A	x
B	
C	x
D	x
E	x
F	x
G	x
H	x
I	x
J	x
K	x
L	x
M	
N	x
O	x
P	x
Q	x
R	x
S	x
T	x
U	

8.9 Appendix I. Critical Factors in an External Response

The table shows the critical factors for the construction of an external response following a personal data breach. Based on findings from Phase I.

	Subject working with Incident Management
	Subject working with Legal
	Subject working with External Communication

	Transparency	Accountability	Apologizing	Only disclosing what is legally required / de-escalate
A			x	
B	x			
C		x		x
D	x	x		
E	x	x	x	
F				x
G		x		x
H	x		x	
I	x	x	x	
J	x		x	
K	x	x	x	
L	x		x	
M	x	x	x	
N				x
O	x	x		
P				x
Q	x			
R				x
S	x		x	
T				x
U				x

Aggregated answers per work area (number of interviewees per critical factor)

External Communications (out of total 9)	9	6	7	0
Incident Management (out of total 7)	3	0	2	3
Legal (out of total 5)	0	2	0	5

8.10 Appendix J. Results From the Experiment

The table shows what response interviewees would choose with different levels of analysis in mind. Based on Phase II.

	Subject working with Incident Management
	Subject working with Legal
	Subject working with External Communication

	Which response fits better with how your personal selves guides you to respond externally to customers following the scenario?	Which response fits better with how you believe your role guides you to respond externally to customers following the scenario?	Which response fits better with how you believe your group would like to respond externally to customers following the scenario?	Which response fits better with how you believe Organization X would like to respond externally to customers following the scenario?	So, which response would you ultimately choose?	Ultimate response in line with...
A	2	1	1	2	1	Role / Group
B	1	1	1	1	1	Equal
C	2	3	3	1	3	Role / Group
D	2	1	2	3	3	Org
E	1	3	1	2	2	Org
F	3	1	1	2	1	Role / Group
G	1	1	3	1	1	Personal / Role / Org
H	1	1	1	2	2	Org
I	1	2	2	2	2	Role / Group / Org
J	2	2	1	1	2	Personal / Role
K	3	3	3	1	1	Org
L	1	2	2	2	2	Role / Group / Org
M	1	1	1	1	1	Equal
N	3	1	2	3	3	Personal / Org
O	2	1	2	1	2	Personal / Group
P	2	3	2	2	3	Role
Q	3	1	3	2	3	Personal / Group
R	2	3	3	3	3	Role / Group / Org
S	3	1	2	2	2	Group / Org
T	1	3	3	2	3	Role / Group
U	1	1	1	2	1	Personal / Role / Group