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Abstract

In the last decades, identity has become an increasing target and outcome of organizational control, notably through processes of identity regulation (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Several studies provide strong evidence of the relevance of the organizational practices of identity regulation identified by Alvesson and Willmott. However, we currently miss an understanding of ‘how’ these organizational practices are exercised by organizational members. This paper aims at advancing the identity regulation process understandings by providing evidence of specific practices through which organizational identity regulation practices are exercised. Through a qualitative longitudinal study of a managerial training, we found that identity regulation works through (1) practices of linguistic and conceptual resources providing and (2) practices of enactment of these resources. We have also identified ‘side’ practices which sustain and reassure both the participants’ engagement into the training and the discourse enactment. Despite this appearance of effectiveness, parasitic factors such as autonomous discourses produced by participants as well as individual previous identity and willingness to ‘play the game’ undermine the power of identity regulation which remains an uncertain process. Our contributions to the literature are threefold: we document various micro-practices through which identity regulation discourse is performed and linked to organizational members’ identity; we show that these identity regulation practices are sustained by ‘side’ practices; we argue that identity work understanding as an autonomous and individual process needs to be balanced because it can also be a deliberate target of identity regulation. This opens new paths for studies of identity construction processes inside organizations.

Key words. Identity regulation, micro-practices, identity work, managerial training
Introduction

Several authors have argued that in the last decades, organizations have developed more and more refined modes of control of the ‘inside’ of individuals (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Knights and Willmott, 1989; Kunda, 1992). For example, discourses about corporate culture, performance, creativity, happiness, (Costea, Crump and Amiridis, 2008) or programs designed to promote authenticity at work (Fleming and Sturdy, 2011) are increasingly targeting organizational members’ thoughts, emotions and identities. The growing importance of these modes of control does not affect or replace classic technocratic modes of control (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2004). The purpose of these socio-ideological modes of control is not to prescribe behaviours or to shape desired outputs but mainly to produce ‘appropriate individuals’ (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Thus, identity has become an increasing target and outcome of organizational control.

One key process of such – perhaps not new but more and more pervasive – mode of control is Alvesson and Willmott’s concept of ‘identity regulation’. It ‘encompasses the more or less intentional effects of social practices upon processes of identity construction and reconstruction’ (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002:625). Identity regulation is mainly constituted by discursive practices which orient identity definition. These discourses prompt identity work, a form of more or less conscious self-work aimed at ‘forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a precarious sense of coherence and distinctiveness’ (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002:626), i.e. one’s identity. Thus, identity regulation and identity work jointly form the bases of identity construction, i.e. the process of being and becoming.

To date, only little research has responded Alvesson and Willmott’s call for studies to illuminate processes of identity regulation. So far, such research tackles the identity work of managers (e.g. Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Thomas and Linstead, 2002), or professionals such as consulting elites (Alvesson and Robertson, 2006), paratroopers (Thornborrow and Brown, 2009) or old workers (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2009) through the study of broad identity regulation devices, i.e. various organizational discourses, rites of becoming, storytelling or (self and others) surveillance. These studies provide strong evidence of organizational influence on individuals’ identity work and identity. To sum up, organizational discursive resources of identity regulation constrain and support identity work. However, this influence is only partial because of an inescapable individual agency and conflicting and incomplete discourses (Thomas and Linstead, 2002). Identity work is notably
an individual ‘appropriation’ of these resources by organizational members for their own purpose (Brown and Lewis, 2011). Consequently, in the process of identity work, ‘discourses can be reflectively ignored, rejected, adhered and translated by individuals’ (Gendron and Spira, 2010:298). Nevertheless, despite these valuable insights, we still know little about the specific micro-practices through which organizational members are led to enact the discourses of identity regulation. We have a broad picture of the influence of identity regulation devices but we currently miss an understanding of the basic practices which support and sometimes fail to achieve identity regulation, i.e. the critical operation which is the linking of discourses to identity (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002:628). In order to better comprehend new modes of control, we need to know how identity regulation is performed through what people really do.

This paper aims to advance knowledge in this area of research by providing evidence of specific practices employed in order to lead organizational members to incorporate organizational discourses into their identity. We conduct a qualitative longitudinal study around a managerial training. Our main findings are that identity regulation works through specific practices such as ‘linguistic and conceptual resources providing’ and practices of enactment of these resources. For example, some training exercises are conducted to trigger the enactment of a specific vocabulary of motives through the crafting of a self-narrative. Those exercises are opportunities to exert one’s reflexivity. As such, they trigger and channel identity work in order to question and then confirm a broad managerial identity albeit producing lightly moves. We also found ‘side practices’ which sustains participants’ engagement into discursive enactment. Despite this appearance of effectiveness, parasitic factors undermine the power of identity regulation, which remains an uncertain process. Our contributions to the literature are threefold: we document various micro-practices through which identity regulation discourse, as a form of control, is performed and linked to organizational members’ identity; we show that these identity regulation practices are sustained by ‘side’ practices; we argue that identity work understanding as an autonomous and individual process needs to be balanced because it can also be a deliberate target of identity regulation. This opens new paths for studies of identity construction processes inside organizations.

The paper begins with a theoretical overview of identity regulation and the current lack of knowledge about the linking of discourses and identity work. We also introduce how this gap can be addressed through the study of practices. The paper focuses afterwards on a case study and the findings of this empirical investigation. The final section discusses the implications of this research and paths for future studies.
Identity regulation and practices

Identity regulation

During the past few years, scholars have increasingly been interested in the construction of identity inside organizations (Alvesson, Aschcraft and Thomas, 2008; Thomas, 2009; Ybema, Keenoy, Oswick, Beverungen, Ellis and Sabelis, 2009). Indeed, if it is widely acknowledged that organizations are not the only places of identity construction, they still are one of the central places supporting this process. Thus, managerial attempts to shape individual’s inner self are seen as more and more salient (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Knights and Willmott, 1989; Kunda, 1992; Rose, 1989). Identity – which is often presented interchangeably as subjectivity or self or self-identity (Watson, 2008) – refers to the answer people give to the question: ‘Who am I?’ (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). This notion is surrounded by debates such as the ontological status of identity or the place of organizational members’ agency in the crafting of their own identities (Thomas, 2009). In this paper, we adopt a non-essentialist view on identity as something fluid and fragmented, reflexively understood by an individual, without being necessarily always under uncertainty (Collinson, 2003). In this view, identity is never achieved but has nevertheless some precarious stability over time. To sum up, we all are in constant ‘becoming’ (Andersson, 2010; Clegg, Kornberger and Rhodes, 2005). Moreover, we sustain the idea that identity is not unitary but multiple. More precisely, identity is a ‘crystal’ with different facets (Tracy and Trethewey, 2005), even if these facets can sometimes be in struggle. Each of these facets is expressed in a specific context (Watson, 2007). This process of identity becoming have been referred to identity formation or construction, mainly composed of identity regulation and identity work (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002).

Identity regulation is a mode of control which is ‘accomplished through the self-positioning of employees within managerially inspired discourses about work and organization with which they become more or less identified and committed’ (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002:620). Basically, it is composed of organizational discourses (or discursive practices) which convey various social identities, a kind of top-down identity regulation from managers to employees (Empson, 2004). Further studies have also stressed the importance of considering extra-organizational discourses (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2009; Wasserman and Frenkel, 2011) and combinations of managerial discourses (Musson and Duberley, 2007) in order to grasp the varied competing bases for identification used by organizational members.
The top-down exercise of identity regulation is also difficult to sustain. Numerous organizational members and extra-organizational members (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2009) – including people targeted themselves – can be source of identity regulation. According to Alvesson and Willmott (2002), there is three main sources of this specific mode of control, frequently intertwined in practice: (1) managerial, (2) cultural-communitarian, and (3) quasi-autonomous. The first one encompasses the managerial discourses directed at organizational members’ self-definition, most often sustained by managerial speeches, arrangements or practices. The second implies organizational as well as extra-organizational (e.g. societal) discourses about shared beliefs and understandings. They are diversely related to managerial discourses. Their effect on identity definition is more a by-product than a deliberate intent. The third one better describes a situation of discursive cacophony.

Regardless of these sources, these identity regulation discourses are concerned with identity self-definition of organizational members. In this view, social identities are linguistic resources used in the process of self-definition (Thomas and Linstead, 2002) but also to define others in offering a potential identification. For example a ‘manager’ or a ‘leader’ are more or less appealing. A social identity fuelled by identity regulation discourse can be a source of identification if it represents a valued, ‘desired’ (Beech, 2011) or ‘aspirational’ identity (Thornborrow and Brown, 2009). It can also act as an anti-identity (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003) and trigger a counter-identification. It is important to note here that social identities rely on discourses but also on organizational arrangements. Identity regulation is expressed not only through explicit discourses but also symbolically through specific organizational arrangements. For example, recruitment practices of the best experts, the autonomy given to those employees and the material environment such as prestigious buildings or luxurious hotel rooms are seen to convey an elite identity (Alvesson and Robertson, 2006). Another arrangement such as organizational aesthetics have also been studied as specific means of control and of identity regulation (Wasserman and Frenkel, 2011). Thus, social identities conveyed by discourse and organizational arrangements are basic resources for identification attempts which constitute identity regulation.

It is important to note that managerial attempts to regulate self-identity are counter-balanced by other discourses which enable a multiple and legitimate identification. At a locale level, there are always several competing identity regulation discourses which form a specific ‘array of discursive possibilities available for identity construction’ (Kuhn, 2006:1354). Thus, ‘individuals are always controlled in partially unique ways’ (Zanoni and Janssens, 2007:1393). Furthermore, discourses of identity regulation are not monolithic but fluid and
ongoing, reproduced by a wide range of actors in multiples situations with conflicting interests (Musson and Duberley, 2007). This kind of situation creates uncertainties upon identity stability but also spaces for micro-emancipations (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992). Thus, as a control mechanism, identity regulation is rarely overwhelming, even if it is directly and strategically used to define organizational members or to help organizational members to cope with these identity tensions (Gotsi, Andriopoulos, Lewis and Ingram, 2010). Moreover, individuals exercise an irreductible agency through identity work (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Thomas and Lindstead, 2002). Identity work is one of the two sub-processes of identity construction: ‘Identity work involves the mutually constitutive processes whereby people strive to shape a relatively coherent and distinctive notion of personal self-identity and struggle to come to terms with and, within limits, to influence the various social-identities which pertain to them in the various milieux in which they live their lives’ (Watson, 2008:129, original emphasis) It aims to maintain a quite positive, coherent and distinctive identity (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). Thus, ‘discourses [of identity regulation] can be reflectively ignored, rejected, adhered and translated by individuals’ (Gendron and Spira, 2010:298) or even resisted, openly or not, individually or collectively (Musson and Duberley, 2007; Wasserman and Frenkel, 2011). Identity work is a precious concept to understand how organizational members use (or not) social identities conveyed by discourses in order to define themselves. This said, this process depends on the other component of identity construction: identity regulation. As Alvesson and Willmott (2002) put it, identity regulation prompts identity work which in return informs identity regulation. The two processes are intertwined. But one question remains however: how does identity regulation prompt identity work?

In order to trigger organizational members’ identity work, a discourse of identity regulation must be available, repetitive and somehow intense (O’Doherty and Willmott, 2001) regardless of its intentionality. Indeed, a discourse is stronger when it faces no counter-discourses. But according to Alvesson and Willmott (2002), what is critical beyond these conditions is the way those discourses can link themselves to organizational members’ identity work. Indeed: ‘Regulation through the management of identity is conditional upon the strengthening of this link. Yet, to repeat, discourses may be produced and circulated without ‘sticking’ to their targets.’ (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002:628) Another characteristic seems necessary for discourses to be used by organizational members: the positive feature of the social identity conveyed by the discourse. Indeed, it has some chance to be used as a valid source of identification if it conveys a positive image of oneself – for example for minorities
which have difficulties to achieve a positive sense of self (Zanoni and Janssens, 2007). So, a discourse of identity regulation prompts identity work if it creates a link between the social identities it promotes and the organizational member’s sense of self.

This link can be created through various organizational practices of identity regulation. Those practices refer to ‘the diverse ways in which identity regulation is enacted’, i.e. ‘how identity is influenced, regulated and changed within work organizations’ (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002:628-629). Alvesson and Willmott have offered a theoretical overview of those practices, not exhaustive and more specific than the categories previously set up by the very limited studies interested in ‘the specific means, targets and media of control through which the regulation of identity is accomplished’ (2002:628). Several studies have built on this theoretical framework and attested of its empirical relevance (e.g. Empson, 2004; Musson and Duberley, 2007). These practices are organized by types of target (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Targets of identity regulation</th>
<th>Organizational practices of identity regulation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The employee</td>
<td>Defining the person directly</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Defining a person by defining others</td>
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<tr>
<td>Action orientation</td>
<td>Providing a specific vocabulary of motives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Explicating morals and values</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Providing knowledge and skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social relations</td>
<td>Group categorization and affiliation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hierarchical location</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The scene</td>
<td>Establishing and clarifying a distinct set of rules of the game</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Defining the context</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Targets and practices of identity regulation, adapted from Alvesson & Willmott (2002:632)

The first target is the employee, regulated through two practices: defining the employee either directly (who she or he is) or by defining others (who they are, implying who s/he is or we are); the second target is the ‘action orientation’, i.e. what are the appropriate actions, regulated through three practices: providing a specific vocabulary of motives (giving sense of the work and of the kind of people one is in doing it), explicating morals and values (the sense of who one is when s/he espoused specific moral values such as fairness) or providing knowledge and skills (mastering a discourse or a knowledge gives the opportunity to define oneself such as an expert, a consultant, etc.); the third one are social relations or group belongingness and differentiation, regulated through: group categorization (the ‘us’ versus ‘them’ distinction) and hierarchical location (defining oneself through her or his official status, including the one provided by more informal ranking); the fourth and last one
is the ‘scene’, i.e. social identities matching with broader levels than the group, such as the organization or an industry, achieved through two practices: establishing the ‘rules of the game’ (these rules are what is to be found as ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ in a specific area) and defining the context (even a broad context such as globalization which characteristics lead people to embrace specific identities such as ‘enterprising selves’). Those practices of identity regulation are precious insights to understand how identity regulation bounds with organizational members’ identity. However, they are generic categories which do not allow us to understand why identity regulation discourses are enacted or not by organizational members. Indeed, when a discourse is targeting organizational members to define them directly, it can be rejected or enacted. If it is enacted, it prompts an identity work which result can be either identification or dis-identification. We have presented several factors which can explain the success or failure of identity regulation attempts: regarding the discourse itself (availability and strength of the discourse as well as the positive character of the social identities promoted) or the presence or absence of competing discourses in specific situations. We can also mention the factors which influence organizational members sensitivity to the discourse of identity regulation such as previous identifications, self-interest or possession of skills which lead individuals to react positively or not toward identity regulation incentives (Musson and Duberley, 2007) (even if these individual factors do not explain the totality of organizational members’ agency). But since organizational members are exposed to identity regulation incentives in specific contexts (Kuhn, 2006; Zanoni and Janssens, 2007), we also need to take into account the diverse manners through which identity regulation practices are exercised. To date, few studies have explored these more specific and situated practices of identity regulation, i.e. the contextual performance of Alvesson and Willmott’s broad identity regulation practices. For example, Ainsworth and Hardy (2009) found that discourses of identity regulation of older workers are enacted through a major mechanism which is the *participation* of older workers in those discourses. Indeed, this participation lead them to be trapped in their self-definition because of the use of the social identities promoted – even when they tried to resist them, the use of those discourses is their only possibility to be heard by others. This *participation* can also be found in Musson and Duberley (2007) study of managers confronted to a new ‘discourse of participation’. They all are forced to use the discourse during weekly meetings – at least for impression management. The organization of the participation can lead either to embrace or to resist the social identities promoted by discourses of identity regulation. In both cases, the linkage between discourse and self-identity (or the enactment of the discourse) is achieved. However, we lack an understanding
of the specific means by which this participation is triggered and why it produces a partially effective regulation. The only study which focuses on these specific means is about recruitment processes (Bergström and Knights, 2006). We can here talk of micro-practices since the authors are looking at the various moves which lead organizational interviewers to a systematic control of the expressions of candidates. Those micro-practices are: response control of the candidates; specific and oriented enunciation of organizational discourses; and ‘various housekeeping moves’ to control and secure the acceptance of candidates in front of the organizational discourse (i.e. through oriented questions aimed at producing specific answers). However, despite its obvious value, this study is far from draining the topic. Indeed, as the authors acknowledge (2006:373), ‘As a means of realizing more fully how and when organizational discourses constitute subjectivity, there is a need to complement this study with studies of other kinds of interaction [than recruitment practices] and in other contexts [than consulting firms]. More specifically, since recruitment is an occasion where subjectification takes place, there is clearly a need to study how subjectivities are reproduced when subjects have entered the organization.’

This paper aims to refine and extend those prior studies in studying micro-practices of identity regulation. As such, we address the demand for greater attention to identity regulation as a still scarce explored dimension of organizational and managerial control (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Therefore, we intend to contribute to answer the call for studies about identity regulation which focuses on ‘when, where and how discourses have their effects on individuals’ (Bergström and Knights, 2006:373). Since we deal here with several kind or level of practices, it seems relevant to mobilize practice theory in order to light up what we mean by micro-practices.

Practices
Practice theory is increasingly used in management science fields such as strategy (e.g. Chia, 2004; Whittington, 1996; 2006), information technology (e.g. Orlikowski, 2000; 2007), accounting (e.g. Ahrens and Chapman, 2007; Quattrone, 2009) or to advance research about key organizational issues such as routines (e.g. Feldman, 2000; Feldman and Pentland, 2003) or knowing and learning (e.g. Gherardhi, 2000). Practice theory is focused on the dynamics of everyday activities of organizational members, in both its routine and improvised forms (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011). Practice theory is focused on what people really do. Initially based on the recognition of the centrality of human agency and actions on organizational outcomes and its ongoing operations (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011), this approach aims to
produce new insights which lead us to a better understanding of major organizational phenomena. Practice theory shares some key conceptual points with the identity construction theory introduced above. Indeed, practice theorists reject dualism between structure and agency (Whittington, 2011) and reflect their articulation as mutually constitutive (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011) as well as identity researchers reject dualism and unidirectional influence between identity regulation discourses and agentic identity work (see Bergström and Knights, 2006). Following this trend, one can say that individuals enact social identities conveyed by organizational discourses of identity regulation through identity work; at the same time, this enactment (re)produce organizational discourses of identity regulation (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Moreover, practice theorists acknowledge the role of power: ‘[i]t is important to note that relations of mutual constitution do not imply equal relations. Rather, these are relations of power’ (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011:1242). In the same way? identity regulation is also a mode of control of the ‘inside’ of organizational members. Based on these similarities, we argue that practice theory is a useful lens to progress in the understanding of the very (micro) process of identity regulation. A practice can be defined (or at least conceived) as ‘embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding’ (Schatzki, 2001:11). Moreover, following Bazin’s theoretical review (2011): practices are generally viewed (1) ‘as patterns of repetitive actions that require a constant bricolage in order to be enacted’ (p. 8); and (2) ‘as institutionalized patterns of actions emerging from a constant ongoing bricolage required to invent relevant local solutions in similar, yet always different, situations’ (p. 14). Following this, organizational practices of identity regulation set up by Alvesson and Willmott (2002) can be seen as ‘institutional models of action’ (Bazin, 2011:11) or general templates for identity regulation. What we call micro-practices here refers to ‘an ongoing and intelligent coping that produces local solution in similar, yet always different, situations’ (Bazin, 2011:12). These levels are closely related. Indeed, their articulation is mutually constitutive: Alvesson and Willmott’s set of practices is performed by organizational actors through micro-practices which, in return, (re)produce the bigger set of practices.

**Research Design**

As recommended by Bergström and Knights (2006), we have decided to study a kind of interaction which concerns organizational members already belonging to an organization. Following Alvesson and Willmott’s call for in-depth and longitudinal studies for investigating
processes of identity regulation (2002:638), we have conducted a 12 months case study of a single identity regulation device: a managerial training. The rationale for this choice was twofold: firstly, it is one of the identity regulation social practices identified by Alvesson and Willmott which ‘are developed in ways that have implications for the shaping and direction of identity’ (2002:625). Indeed, several studies have underlined that managerial trainings such as MBA have implications for manager’s identity (Andersson, 2010; Sturdy, Brocklehurst, Winstanley and Littlejohns, 2006); secondly, a training is a set of micro-practices which are tailor-made in order to reach some goals, mainly giving specific knowledge and skills – and also unintended outcomes such as identity formation (Warhurst, 2011). Through the study of these practices and their sequence, we could isolate and study specific opportunities for identity regulation.

Case context
DP is a worldwide entertainment company. The french division of the company employs approximately 14 000 workers. Organizational members are employed to various activities, mainly operating the resort tourist attractions or daily and periodic shows, belonging to the various hotels, shops and restaurants of the resort or working in one of the numerous support services such as human resources, planning, the reservation call center, maintenance or guest security. In 2009, the local health and safety department has identify seven major targets, including occupational risks for mental health such as stress and harassment. One of the measures promoted to progress on this issue was to mobilize the management population and to promote health and safety as a daily concern. The first action decided in this trend was to set up a training for the 450 managers of the site. These managers, positioned as N+2 of basic collaborators, were selected because of their strategic link between top managers and fieldwork managers, i.e. their team leaders.

The training has been elaborated during one year, between December 2009 and December 2010. The conception of the training was iterative and involved multiple interviews with managers and the participation of three main workers of the health and safety department: a experimented health and safety team leader, a psychologist and the future main trainer who was especially recruited to set up the training because of her pedagogical background. Several sequences of the training were independently tested with managers before a bigger test of two pilot sessions on November and December 2010. The training was finally launched on January, 2011. This is a two-day training which formal aims are to teach managers to identify stress factors among their team and to implement preventive actions. A
third goal is to establish how to take care of a subordinate which suffers from a stressful situation. Attendance to the training is not compulsory and managers can participate on voluntary bases. The trainer welcomes groups of eight to ten managers. Indeed, the pedagogy offered is highly participative and relies on managers’ personal implication during the training session, which was perceived as difficult to achieve with a larger group of participants. The design of the training includes eight different sequences as presented in table 2. Managers are often led to work in a sub-group with three or four other managers (who are always the same during the training). These sub-groups allow more informal conversation and deeper engagement of managers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Sequence content</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Day 1 – morning</td>
<td>S1. Introduction; trainer and participants’ presentation; video analysis which debriefing consists in an iterative building of a conceptual tool aiming at analyzing working situations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S2. In sub-groups, case study of individual stressful situations in the context of other firms; back and forth with the conceptual model; in sub-groups, exercise of writing questions and answers (question: portraying a managerial situation implicating stress; answer: writing three potential answers – only one is more accurate)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day 1 – afternoon</td>
<td>S3. ‘snakes and ladders’ game (competition between sub-groups on the bases of previously written questions and answers)</td>
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<td>S4. Exercise in sub-group and then with everybody: each manager shares with others a personal successful managerial situation implicating his subordinates and stress; day conclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day 2 – morning</td>
<td>S5. Exercise with all the participants: identifying stress indicators among teammates, identifying organizational supportive actors who can help managers</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>S6. Exercise in sub-groups and then with everybody: each manager shares with others a personal unsuccessful or unsatisfactory managerial situation implicating his subordinates and stress; exercise of rephrasing (labelled ‘speed dating’)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day 2 – afternoon</td>
<td>S7. Training summary; personal improvement guidelines</td>
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<td>S8. Training appraisal; conclusion</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Description of the training session

Lastly, the training is followed by short sessions (named ‘managers’ coffee’). There is one short session per month, with a duration of one and a half an hour, dedicated to a group composed of eight to ten managers (still on voluntary basis) and the trainer. Its aim is to allow managers to expose one or two personal difficult situations and to study them with peers in the same spirit than during the training.
Data collection

Access to the firm was allowed by one of the trainers who was interested in knowing what the training was ‘doing’ to managers. The data for this study were collected over a 12 months period. In order to understand the history and context of the training, we made three interviews with the trainers which have been completed with informal conversations with the main trainer. To study the identity regulation practices and their related effects, we made two participant observation of trainings and interviews of trainees (the participant managers).

Observations. In order to identify micro-practices of identity regulation, we attended two training sessions as well as three ‘managers’ coffee’. During those observations, we took extensive notes about the organization of the session by sequences: timing, content, nature and organization of exercises, participants’ reactions, etc.), the speech of the trainer (what was said, to whom, etc.) as well as discussions between participants during exercises or during breaks. All documents used during the session were gathered, e.g. exercises’ sheet. Before the beginning of the training, the trainer asked participants to what extent the presence of the researcher was problematic. None of them had an objection. The researcher was also part of the lunch and helped the trainer to install and store the pedagogic material before and after each days of training, triggering informal conversations about the training and the participants’ reactions.

Interviews. In order to comprehend the nature of identity work undertaken by participants – and finally the effects of identity regulation practices on organizational members’ identities – we realized 45 interviews with 24 managers who attended the training. The first set of 24 interviews was conducted a short period after their participation to the training (an average of approximatively one month). The second set of 21 interviews took place four to six months after the prior interview (undertaken in order to take into account managers’ perception of the training among time). Despite their will, three managers were not available to welcome this second interview during the period of study. All managers had the same grade. They come from five different countries (18 are from France). They work for the company from six months to 22 years with an average of 11 years. Their managerial experience varied from six months to eleven years with an average of four years. Ten managers are in charge of operational teams, 14 are managing support staff (e.g. various HR functions). Their team varied from four to 120 organizational members, with an average of 30. All managers were contacted through the trainers. Trainers have informed managers about the study and asked them if they were willing to participate. Conducted in manager’s offices, interviews varied in length from 40 to 100 minutes (with an average duration of one hour).
All interviews were recorded and the total transcribed dataset was 700 pages. We asked a broad range of questions focused on their perception of the training, their self-perception as manager in charge of stress management for their teams and the changes they have undertaken following their training. For example: ‘What do you think about the training?’ ‘Did you question yourself or your practices during the training?’ ‘Now, are you doing things differently?’ Questions were followed by others more specific in order to deepen relevant themes.

Data analysis

We followed a process of analysis which involved several related steps. First of all, following Musson and Duberley’s method (2007), we have read our observation notes in search for data which match the nine organizational practices of identity regulation identified by Alvesson and Willmott (2002). We took a special care to link each practice with (1) the moment of its exercise during the training and (2) relevant quotes of both the trainer and participants. This coding process is an ‘analytical’ one. Indeed, this kind of coding is relevant when one want to consider the meanings in context and create ‘categories that express new ideas about the data’ (Richards, 2009:102-103). We have proceeded as follow: after having put the data into the organizational practices category, we have carefully analysed the content of each category in order to identify the micro-practices through with identity regulation was exercised. Through this reading, we have separate all micro-practices and then looked for common patterns. We have then identified several kinds of recurrent micro-practices. All of these were further grouped into two main categories. We have basically found two types of micro-practices: a first type of practices which are performed by the trainer only; and another type of practices identified in the literature: participation (see Ainsworth and Hardy, 2009; Bergström and Knights, 2006), which involves both the trainer and trainees. In order to deepen the analysis of these participation practices, we have mobilized Watson’s two kind of identity work (2008): the inward identity work (i.e. the production of a self-narrative) and the outward identity work (i.e. the feed-back of others upon one’s identity claims, notably those of one self-narrative, a sort of ‘self verification’). This first step gives us a broad picture of the discourse of identity regulation and of the multiple micro-practices through which it is practically exercised. Secondly, in order to identify the reactions of participants to the discourse of identity regulation and of the various micro-practices of identity regulation exercised during the training, we have read our interview transcripts in search of emerging common themes – what Richards calls ‘topic coding’ (2009). These themes are the basic
codes we used to further extract the data and class them into coded categories. Those categories were numerous and included ‘things learned’, ‘training pedagogy’, ‘changes in managing’, ‘managers’ coffee perception’, etc. After this coding step, we read all data inside each category in order to identify the key points which gives us insights on the effect produced on managers’ identity and some factors which favor or temper the effects of identity regulation practices.

**Practices of identity regulation**

In this section, we analyse the various training practices of identity regulation and their effects on managers’ identity work and identity. These are closely related. What was surprising during the analysis is the presence of micro-practices of identity regulation which belong to specific actors. Indeed, the trainer is the only provider of ‘the scene’ practices (i.e. ‘defining the context’ and ‘establishing and clarifying a distinct set of rules of the game’). On the other hand, participants were the main providers of practices which ‘explicate morals and values’ and establish ‘social relations’ (i.e. ‘group categorization and affiliation’ and ‘hierarchichal location’). This second set of practices was seldom if ever exercised by the trainer. The source of these practices is more *cultural-communitarian* than a managerial one. All of the other kind of organizational practices were exercised by both actors. For ease of presentation, we present our findings in four sections. First, we analyse the practices which aim is to expose managers to identity regulation discourses. Second, we illustrate the practices, mainly embedded in various training exercises, which lead to enact identity regulation linguistic and conceptual resources provided by the first set of practices. This second set of practices – mainly *participation* practices – is strikingly prompting managers’ identity work. Third, we report the practices which allow managers to engage quite freely and authentically in the training and in the various training exercises. Indeed, we found that those practices act as a support for identity regulation practices. Finally, we discuss the effect produced on managers’ identity and some factors which favor or temper the efficacy of the abovementioned practices. Before everything, we will present the identity regulation discourse promoted during the training and the social identities it conveys.

*A promoted identity embedded in the discourse*

The training aims are to ‘identify psychological health risk and protection factors; undertake actions which improve subordinates’ psychological health with the help of peers; identify and
orient distressed subordinates’ (training presentation slides). Through these aims, we have identified a central figure: the ‘caring manager’, i.e. the manager who listens to his subordinates about their occupational and personal troubles, who looks for change in their mood to detect people’s suffering and who offers some support and directs them to a specialist (occupational physician, social worker, psychological helpline, HR etc.). This ‘caring manager’ is also a social identity built between two anti-identities (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003) which are ‘managers who deny their subordinates’ troubles’ and ‘those who ask for passing a psychology degree’ (OHSD Executive, MC3). These anti-identities can be seen as the ‘cold hearted manager’ who doesn’t care at all and the ‘psychologist’ or ‘social worker’ who cares too much. These are the social identities fuelled by the discourse of identity regulation given during the training. We will now turn onto the specific practices which concretely realize these promoted figures.

Providing linguistic and conceptual resources

We will focus here on the practices of the trainer – practices of a managerial source – which aim is to give the discourse of identity regulation to the training participants (the cultural-communitarian practices will be analysed in the next section). The official and managerial discourse of identity regulation was given to participants through micro-practices of direct speech. For example, the trainer begins the training by defining the context and setting rules of the game through a short talk introducing the training, the context of its organization and its objectives. Some slides are projected with a summary of the speech. She presents the history of the training and explains that the Occupational Health and Safety Department (OHSD) has launched a second campaign in order to improve employees’ psychological health. Then, to improve previous actions, OHSD has defined four main priorities, including ‘to get psychological health improvement into managerial practices’ (Trainer, T2). The sentences used by the trainer seem neutral. However, through this presentation, she places managers within the range of the organizational actors in charge of employees’ psychological health.

During the training, to promote the ‘caring manager’ identity, the trainer had also recourse to these ‘direct speech’ micro-practices to exert two other organization practices of identity regulation: (1) ‘defining the person directly’ and (2) ‘providing a vocabulary of motives’. For example, she said:

‘You managers who are not doctors, occupational psychologists, or even psychologists’ (Trainer, T1)
This direct sentence reminds them to stay attentive but not too much by using some anti-identities (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003) with a negative value. If a ‘psychologist’ is not bad in itself, it is an inappropriate position for the manager. An excess of ‘care’ transforms the ‘caring manager’ into what he or she is not. To conclude the training at the end of the second day, she also explained:

‘If you do need to remember one thing about the training, remember that when there is a conflict of persons, it is the tip of the iceberg, there is always something else behind.’ (Trainer, T1).

This sentence gives participants a vocabulary of motives since it tells them what to do when they face a conflict between two persons of their team. Indeed, they have to go deeper than the persons’ temper and look for other causes of the conflict (e.g. inside the work organization) through questions and active listening (i.e. be a ‘caring manager’). What seems surprising here is the relative absence of the construction of ‘knowledge and skills’. Indeed, during a training, a major animator is giving knowledge to participants in order to train them to do something new. This absence is the consequence of the choice of a specific pedagogy. Instead of giving knowledge through lectures, the trainer draws on participants’ insights to produce the appropriate knowledge and the vocabulary of motives which exemplifies the ‘caring manager’. Thus, she is frequently reframing sentences or answers of participants in order to translate them into the identity regulation vocabulary. For example, when a participant said that ‘it comes back frequently. Preserve, to preserve an equilibrium which is not simple... To preserve oneself because we are real blotting papers sometimes’, the trainer just rephrased the idea in saying ‘you are sponges [...] you must move back and give to the other some space to breathe around the work he have to perform’ (Trainer, T1). This sentence draws on the participant insight (being difficult to maintain an equilibrium) in order to qualify what the manager should do and to reinforce the discourse of the ‘caring manager’ which should stand back and give a sense of responsibility to his subordinates (i.e. not to take them in charge). Moreover and more importantly, the first sequence (S1) is dedicated to a video analysis which debriefing consists on an iterative building of a conceptual tool to make sense of the situations which causes troubles to participants’ subordinates. As we said, the trainer does not give this analytical tool directly because she builds it on participants’ insights. During this operation, she is also ‘rephrasing’ because she has the pen in her hand and she decides what to write and how to write it on Post-it which are finally assembled on a big board. In the end, all the participants have a same conceptual model named the daisy because
it is based on five major categories (task content, work relationships, socio-economic environment, physical environment and work organization – see annex). If there are small differences between the training sessions, they come from the iterative process of building from interactions between the trainer and participants. The conceptual model construction starts during the first sequence and is pursued in all other sequences. It is a way to provide skills and knowledge as well as vocabulary of motives. Indeed, this model aims to help participants to reflect on their own managerial experience and to find appropriate ways to deal with their subordinates’ troubles. It supports both a deeper analysis of their subordinates’ painful situations and the search for consistent solutions which are managerial ones, i.e. the daisy’s categories are manager’s action boundaries. In doing so, it conveys two key messages: listen to your subordinates (and listen really in asking questions to dig into their situations) and support them (act after listening, and follow the limits defined by the daisy’s dimensions – not beyond which is the specialists’ territory).

Finally, since the board and the daisy are always apparent for the participants, we can add a third micro-practice which supports the supply of linguistic and conceptual resources: ‘billsticking’, i.e. the display of key messages ‘on the wall’, always in sight of both trainer and participants. During the training, two big boards are used to organize participants’ insights rephrased by the trainer. Apart from the above-mentioned daisy, the trainer also builds another conceptual tool (during the fifth sequence) which is the list of symptoms indicating subordinates’ distress and of the relevant specialists who are to be contacted in specific situations. Other material supports are also put up on walls, such as exercises instructions and questions (with a space to write participants’ answers). Finally, the trainer takes pictures of all these devices and sends them to participants after the session. These ‘billsticking’ practices contribute to display and to embody concretely the managerial identity regulation discourse.

Through a mix of top-down (‘direct speech’) and bottom-up (‘rephrasing participants’ accounts’ and ‘billsticking’) micro-practices, the trainer is providing specific vocabulary and conceptual ideas which are consistent with the identity regulation discourse of the ‘caring manager’. So far, it is impossible to know what participants think of the discourse promoted and if they link it with their own identity. They only have been exposed to it. As we shall see, the discourse presentation is sustained and reinforced by other specific micro-practices: participative ones.
**Triggering the enactment of identity regulation: putting on identity work**

The trainer is not passive in front of participants’ reactions to the linguistic and conceptual resources displayed. She is actively looking for these reactions. Indeed, she undertakes identity regulation micro-practices through the management of exercises. Sequences one to seven include various exercises which follow similar patterns: exercise launch, exercise monitoring and exercise conclusion. Each of these steps is characterized by micro-practices of identity regulation which has the effect of ‘putting participants on identity work’. There are three different kinds of exercises: (1) case studies, (2) a ‘snakes and ladders’ game and (3) reflexion on (personal) managerial situations. Each of these exercises is part of the identity regulation process. However, in order to highlight this process, we will focus on the third type which exemplifies and intensifies the participation of managers. We will first describe the exercise and then discuss the underlying identity construction process.

This exercise takes place two times (in S4 and S6) and lasts between one and half an hour to two and half an hour. It is launched by the trainer who asks participants to write down a personal managerial situation typically centered on their subordinates’ psychological health troubles. This situation must be already solved (in S4) and currently problematic (in S6). Participants are invited to write this situation onto a sheet of paper distributed by the trainer which contains two ‘text blocks’: the first one lists the descriptive facts that the manager has to provide in order to characterize the situation (e.g. team description, seniority in team management, context etc.) and then to describe the situation; the second one demands to ‘read again the situation with the five factors’ of the daisy. After having written the situation, participants share it within their sub-group. During this individual presentation, managers engage in a discussion with other managers characterized by three types of interactions: (1) general comments such as ‘it is so surprising, they are opposed to you when you try to help them!’ (Marc, T1) or ‘I’ve had got the same problem with one of my subordinates’ (comment made by several managers, T1 and T2); (2) questions about the situation which aims are to have more specific details or to ask if the manager tried ‘to do this or that’. The manager who presents often has to justify himself (or herself); (3) advices to help the manager to deal with his (or her) situation. In order to monitor the exercise, the trainer goes from one sub-group to another and also asks questions to challenge the participants’ situation. For example:

‘About the work-life balance, what is this equilibrium made of? What are your levers, pillars, and how is it maintained? What are the vigilance key points?’ (Trainer, T1)
Then, the trainer asks each sub-group to select one situation and to present it in front of all the participants. The interaction process between participants – comments, questions, advice – starts again but here the trainer often rephrases participants’ insights and writes some of them on post-it to complete the ‘daisy board’. Finally, the trainer concludes the exercise by synthesising key messages consistent with the identity regulation discourse displayed.

How is identity at stake during these exercises? First of all, during the first step of exercise (launching), the trainer asks managers to produce a self-narrative about a personal situation. The production of those self-narratives has been well documented as an opportunity for inward identity work (e.g. Brown, 2006; Down and Reveley, 2009; Humphreys and Brown, 2002; Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010; Watson, 2008), i.e. an internal self-reflection about who one is. As we see, this identity work is not freely undertaken by participants. Indeed, they are asked to follow the ‘sheet categories’ which orient them into the building of their narrative. In doing so, the trainer is exercising identity regulation upon the identity work of participants, i.e. she forces participants to enact linguistic and conceptual elements of the ‘caring manager’ social identity (mainly through vocabulary of motives) into the presentation of a personal situation. Thus, participants are asked to present themselves in relation to the ‘caring manager’ figure, even if they can adopt or reject it. What is at stake here is the strong incentive to link identity regulation discourse with participants’ identity. Then, during the monitoring of the exercise, the trainer asks participants to present their narrative to their peers of the sub-group. The presentation of a narrative in front of other people can be analysed as another form of identity work, i.e. an outward identity work, the external engagement of oneself toward others (Down and Reveley, 2009; Watson, 2008). During this outward identity work, participants can reflect on the image of themselves that others will send back to them, granting or challenging their identity claims, leading to a refinement of their self-narrative (Beech, 2008; DeRue and Ashford, 2010). At this step, we can also differentiate two sources of identity regulation exercised through micro-practices of comments, questions and advices: the autonomous identity regulation of other managers which can be more or less aligned to the other source, the managerial one, mainly carried by the trainer and her ‘caring manager’ figure. Thus, comments, questions and advice are micro-practices of identity regulation aimed at orienting the outward identity work of participants. For example, during an exercise of the second training, Wendy (a manager participant) said about one of her subordinates who were in distress: ‘She doesn’t know to say no’. The trainer asked her: ‘But, is it easy to say no?’ and Wendy responded ‘It is not what I’m saying. It is because I do not know to say no… It’s hard to say no to one’s superior.’ Here, we see the attempt of the trainer to avoid a victim-
blaming mechanism and to underline that managers should be more empathetic – alike a ‘caring manager’. The next step is the presentation in front of all the participants. It follows the same principles. Finally, the debriefing and conclusion of the trainer lead participants to ‘close’ the identity work triggered by the exercise. This is an opportunity for her to repeat previous key messages such as ‘a conflict between two persons is not a problem of personality but of underlying problems of work organization’ or ‘he can have personal problems, whatever, if he is focused on his problems, it interferes with his work’ (Trainer, T2) which conveys the idea that a ‘caring manager’ should go past of his first impression to search for other causes for their employees’ distress in order to listen to them and to support them further. The identity regulation discourse is not only displayed because he refers to the presentation of managers regarding their own cases. A link between the identity regulation discourse and participants’ managerial identity is created and (re)worked through these exercises. The participants’ engagement towards these exercises lead them to enact linguistic and conceptual resources provided by the trainer. In doing so, they are ‘put to identity work’. However, as we shall see later, it does not mean that identity regulation is perfectly effective: a discourse enactment is not a discourse embodiment. This link is also reworked during the monthly ‘Managers’ coffee’. Voluntary managers who participate to the training can attend to this one and half an hour event. Its organization is rather simple. One manager tells to his peers and the trainer a problematic situation he is facing. It basically reproduces the structure of the above training exercise described. The only difference that we noted is that advice is more frequently given to managers than during the training. For example:

‘You should force your subordinate to position himself. He can’t continue to work like this [doing 10% of his work because of a depression]. You offer a deal to him: either he leaves your department, either he works more’ (Trainer, CM1)

This advice is clearly oriented to help the manager to solve his problem in being a ‘caring manager’ who knows when to stop to be empathetic. In this case, the manager was doing all the work that his subordinate refuses to do and was tired of this situation without knowing what to do. To sum up, this second set of micro-practices around the conduct of exercises aims to trigger the enactment of the identity regulation discourse by participants. As we will see in the next section, these micro-practices are linked to another kind or practices which sustain them in various ways, influencing the identity regulation effectiveness.
‘Side practices’: supporting identity regulation practices

Why are managers willing to engage in these exercises? We have identified other micro-practices which aim is not to regulate participants’ identity but to secure their engagement in the training and their attitude in front of the discourse displayed. These ‘side practices’ are (1) practices of discourse legitimation and (2) of reinsurance.

**Practices of discourse legitimation.** These practices are intentionally designed to favour managers’ receptivity to the identity regulation discourse and its enactment. An important practice is the appropriation of managerial critics. The training has been prepared during one year with a sample of volunteer managers who told to the trainer through interviews and tests of several sequences what they were expecting of the training. They expressed notably the fact that they did not want to be stigmatised as responsible for their employees’ psychological health problems nor as their only support. The result is quite positive:

‘We had what we wanted and not what we didn’t want to!’ (Queenie, E1)

This year of training conception was also the opportunity for the trainer to identify managers’ ‘needs’. Indeed, she found that a majority of managers were questioning themselves about what to do when they face subordinates’ troubles. The discourse of the ‘caring manager’ provides a vocabulary of motives designed to answer this question and to fulfill managers’ needs. In doing so, the identity regulation discourse gains a legitimacy and the ability to be handled positively by the training participants.

**Practices of reinsurance.** We have identified several kinds of reinsurance practices. First, the trainer is setting a specific material environment which gives the opportunity for reflexivity. The training lasts two days and gives room to peers interactions and discussions. This temporal and spatial environment favours a deep thinking about managers’ situations. Many of them expressed that they stood back from their day-to-day intense schedule. They had the time and the space to reflect on their experiences. Through this operation, managers can take the time to re-construct (and not to discover) their past practices with the linguistic and conceptual categories. Moreover, they discover that all managers are facing the same kind of problems:

‘The sequence of exchange with colleagues who we do not necessarily come to see and who face completely different problems in terms of business, we realize that in terms of human management, we were roughly the same.’ (Hugo, E1)
This sense of community belonging is a by-product of the training. However, it contributes to the engagement of managers into the prescribed exercises. Moreover, it leads managers to share their experience in an authentic way. Somehow, they put themselves in danger because they are exposed to others’ judgment. These avowals are further supported by a second kind of practices: rule setting and maintenance. Indeed, the trainer gives the rules of the training so that it constitutes and maintains a safe climate to allow managers to reflect on their past and present experiences. These rules are acknowledged by participants and systematically reminded. One of the cornerstones is the absence of top managers or subordinates in the room and a general benevolence from their peers. The trainer, in an informal conversation, explains that she had to ask to senior managers to leave the training because of a mistake in the registration process. The other pillar of the maintaining of this safe climate is the careful monitoring of the trainer who is constantly navigating from one sub-group to the other in order to ask questions and reframe the sub-group conversations around the aims of the exercises and according to acknowledged rules. Even in the ‘managers’ coffee’, she opens the session by telling these rules again, including ‘protect yourself, don’t put yourself in danger, we can’t guarantee that what you tell in this room will not be repeated’. This warning acts as a reality principle and contributes to enhance the specific pedagogy of the device, which is appreciated by managers:

‘We spent two days... Two days which went quickly. We have not been subjected to the training. It was a learning method... different. We didn’t know about it. As [the trainer] said, it is an adult method.’ (Noé, E1)

**Effects on identity**

The official aims of the training are to teach managers to identify stress factors and to implement preventing actions, and to take care of a suffering subordinate. To some point, these goals are reached. These aims are not to work on managers’ identity. However, since the training defines and promotes behaviours of a ‘caring manager’ (i.e. being sensitive about their subordinates’ health, taking time to listen to their difficulties, taking into account a large range of potential stressful factors, etc.), identity work appears to be a rather important outcomes of such a training (Sturdy, et al., 2006; Warhurst, 2011). The first effect on identity is to provide social identities that participant can use during the training (and reuse after it) to (re)define themselves as managers. However, participants are not ‘becoming manager’ or changing their organizational identity from a ‘professionnal’ one to a ‘manager’ or ‘leader’ one. Social identities discussed during the training are more facets of a broad managerial
identity. The ‘social worker’, the ‘caring manager’ or the ‘cold hearted manager’ are specific facets linked to specific situations. Moreover, the practices which lead managers to secure their ontological anxiety about specific managerial dilemmas (i.e. in bringing self-confidence) also help them to position themselves in front of present and future ambiguous managerial situations. This opportunity to secure their managerial identity is further continued through ‘managers’ coffee’. Thus managerial identity is not threatened during the training. However, if managers confirm their managerial identity, they go back to work with adjusted facets to define themselves in front of specific situations, mainly dealing with the individual problem of a subordinate. Then, the practices of the training produce an identity work which outcome is a broad managerial identity confirmation but slightly enriched and adjusted with new or renovated identity facets. Indeed, managers’ perception of the training is not a discovery but a confirmation of previous practices which were ‘not so bad’:

‘And we try in the course of time with the feedback of others... We try to work with that and with the elements we've seen during the training. And we see that there is not... There is a gap which is not so high. And we try as far as possible to adjust our way to deal with the situations.’ (Auguste, E1)

‘Well, the training has comforted me. It has comforted me in my way of doing things. It gives advice, it gives tips, for sure. Then it readjusts also some things.’ (Ugo, E1)

‘We get out of there and we say: yes, it’s obvious. This is something we already know... Learning anything, this is wrong. Because I learned a lot. In fact, I learned to become aware. That’s it. To say: yes, it's true, we don't pay enough attention to that... And yet, we should.’ (Bastien, E1)

However, if managerial identity is mainly confirmed but slightly moved through the training practices, it is not possible to master the way this move or adjustment operates. Lastly, it works to the extent that managers are willing to ‘play the game’ and engage in training exercises. Identity regulation, even if well designed, remains an open process which results are always partial thwarted by other discourses and individual agency. Indeed, in accordance with previous research (e.g. Bergström and Knights, 2006), this process is not producing strong disciplined outcomes like ‘clones’, nor it is only organizationally oriented. Discourses provided to managers to frame their experiences do not come solely from the trainer and the training supports. Other participants, as peers, also bring their own vocabulary and challenge managers’ self-narratives in asking questions and suggesting other ways to behave. Moreover, identity work (and identity outcome) is not triggered with the same intensity depending on
managers’ appraisal of their past and present behaviour in front of social identities requirements brought by the training.

Discussion

This study makes several contributions to existing literature. Firstly, we confirm and extent the idea that identity regulation is not (only) a top-down process. We confirm Ainsworth and Hardy (2009) claim that discourses of identity regulation are expressed by numerous actors in society. We extend their claim when we point-out that these numerous actors can belong to a single organization: the trainer, trainees, the occupational physician, human resources experts, senior managers etc. Managers are defined by numerous others, including their peers. Our findings also support the idea that identity regulation discourses are local constructs (Kuhn, 2006). Indeed, because of the presence of numerous actors with their own interests and experiences, each training session produces a different version of identity regulation discourse. We confirm that identity regulation discourses are not monolithic and evolve even slightly over time (Musson and Duberley, 2007). However, we offer an explanation of this evolution which is partially controlled by micro-practices of identity regulation. Indeed, the training studied here evolves over time in order to include what works best. The micro-practices are improved and embedded into the trainer's experience. The more she practices, the better she becomes. Learning and knowledge of successful experiences come from the repetition of practices. One part of the discourse evolution is controlled and comes from its continuous ‘improvement’. However, the variability of the identity regulation discourse also relies on participants’ engagement in the training. Even if the trainer continuously improves the training content and exercises, a part of the construction of the discourse escapes from her control. The micro-practice aimed to set up rules of the games and to sustain them during the training are also part of the attempt to control the identity regulation discursive course. Nevertheless, there are too many actors and factors to be controlled by a single person. Our findings show that if discourses of identity regulation evolve over time or depending on situations, this evolution is partially – but only partially – controlled by some actors.

Secondly, our study brings empirical support to Alvesson & Willmott’s conceptual framework (2002), confirming prior studies about identity regulation (e.g. Empson, 2004; Musson and Duberley, 2007). We add an original contribution to this framework in documenting specific practices of identity regulation and their effects on identity work and
identity. In doing this, we show that identity regulation should not only be studied as organizational discourses that prompt organizational members’ identity work but as a result of micro-practices, including, but not limited to, discursive practices. Indeed, we show that identity regulation occur through micro-practices which effect is to trigger and to frame an intensive identity work. The training studied is build of interrelated practices which act together in order to lead managers to produce self-narratives in front of their peers, such as asking direct questions about ‘who they are’ and running exercises which invite them to exert their reflexivity, for example in telling a story of a difficult past or present managerial situation. These micro-practices of identity regulation, close to the avowal technique identified by Foucault (1976), act as ‘identity work trigger mechanisms’. Moreover, they are drawing on other practices which provide resources such as a vocabulary of motives and a conceptual tool, i.e. putting managers in touch with identity regulation discourses. The presentation of the self required in exercises is directed by the use of theses specific words and categories in the sense making of managers own experiences. Thus, training exercises are micro-practices through which managers enact these discursive and conceptual materials, i.e. the managerial social identity embedded in the identity regulation discourse. We further show that the engagement of managers in this process is facilitated by another kind of micro-practices: ‘side’ practices such as ‘discourse legitimation practices’ (providing a solution to an actual problem or area of managers’ concerns) and ‘reinsurance practices’ (such as the establishment of a safe climate of confidence and community membership) that managers experience during the two days training and during ‘managers’ coffee’. In providing ontological security and a sense of continuity with previous self-conception, the exercises allow managers to open and then to close an identity work. The result of these micro-practices is a confirmation of their overall managerial identity, albeit lightly moved regarding their managerial identity. Moreover, we show that identity work is not an autonomous process that individuals undertake as an expression of their free agency. Identity work can be a deliberate target of identity regulation incentives in order to create a link between the discursively promoted social identity and organizational members’ identities. This strategy seems to be quite powerful since the identity regulation discursive enactment is controlled or at least channeled. One of the managerial tactics to control organizational members’ identity definition is to trigger and to orient their identity work in a favourable way to managerial interests.

Finally, we provide a confirmation and extension of Warhurst (2011) and Sturdy et al. (2006) account about the effects of managerial trainings. Indeed, we also found that
unintended outcomes of the training were identity work and self-confidence. However, we extend their findings outside the specific range of MBA programs studied so far. According to our analysis, every kind of (managerial) trainings are identity regulation devices and can be studied as such. Further research could thus enrich our repertoire of specific practices of identity regulation.

Our findings are limited to a single case study and to a training which is a single identity regulation device. The managers interviewed were recruited on voluntary basis, so that we did not met managers really dis-identified with the identity regulation discourse provided during the training. They were all quite positive about this discourse which is not odd or really new for them. Nevertheless, without claiming a general validity of our findings, we hope to provide elements for a theoretical generalization. As Feldman and Orlikowsky note about the use of practice theory: ‘Although each context of study is different, the dynamics and relations that have been identified and theorized can be useful in understanding other contexts. In this way, theoretical generalizations are powerful because they travel’ (2011:1349). For example, further research could refine and extend the range of micro-practices identified in this paper through the analysis of other identity regulation opportunity such as interviews and meetings between a manager and his subordinates or other kinds of trainings based on different topics and pedagogy. Such research can produce further valuable insights to better comprehend how new modes of control of the inside of individuals are performed and resisted.

References


Annex

Annex 1 – the daisy (picture taken by the trainer, T2)

1 In the paper, data from observations are labelled T1 and 2 for the two trainings studied and MC1 to 3 for the ‘managers’ coffee’. Interviews are signaled by E1 or E2. E1 refers to a first interview realized with a manager, E2 to the second realized with the same manager (usually four to six months after the first).