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Fast Tracks and Inner Journeys: Crafting Portable Selves for Contemporary Careers

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Abstract

Through a longitudinal, qualitative study of 55 managers engaged in mobile careers across organizations, industries, and countries, and pursuing a one-year international master's of business administration (MBA), we build a process model of the crafting of portable selves in temporary identity workspaces. Our findings reveal that contemporary careers in general, and temporary membership in an institution, fuel people's efforts to craft portable selves: selves endowed with definitions, motives, and abilities that can be deployed across roles and organizations over time. Two pathways for crafting a portable self—one adaptive, the other exploratory—emerged from the interaction of individuals' aims and concerns with institutional resources and demands. Each pathway involved developing a coherent understanding of the self in relation to others and to the institution that anchored participants to their current organization while preparing them for future ones. The study shows how institutions that host members temporarily can help them craft selves that afford a sense of agentic direction and enduring connection, tempering anxieties and bolstering hopes associated with mobile working lives. It also suggests that institutions serving as identity workspaces for portable selves may remain attractive and extend their cultural influence in an age of workforce mobility.

Keywords: identity work, portable selves, identity workspaces, systems psychodynamics, business schools, contemporary careers

What does it take to keep moving around without losing one's roots? The fluidity of contemporary workplaces, in which working lives frequently unfold across organizational and national boundaries, has made this question ever more compelling for scholars of organizations. Over the past few decades, as work has become a primary source of self-definition (Gini, 2001), changing

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workplaces and careers have loosened the traditional moorings of those definitions (Kalleberg, 2000), rendering efforts to craft, maintain, revise, and let go of one's identity more necessary (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003) and problematic than in the past (Sennett, 1998; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002).

A burgeoning stream of research has embedded identity as a ''root construct'' in organization studies (Albert, Ashforth, and Dutton, 2000: 13). It has mostly examined the vicissitudes of identity in the context of traditional careers, which follow institutionally prescribed trajectories in the same organization or between organizations in a similar domain (Super, 1957). Scholars have shown how people craft identities to enter a new organization (Beyer and Hannah, 2002), adapt to new professional roles (Ibarra, 1999; Pratt, Rockmann, and Kaufmann, 2006), and transition between or exit roles (Ebaugh, 1988; Ashforth, 2001).

We know less about identity construction in contemporary careers (Arthur, 2008), which do not follow institutionalized trajectories in a single organization or industry that can serve as a permanent identity workspace and orient members' identity work (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010). Contemporary careers are characterized by discontinuities, such as noncodified transitions between organizations and sectors (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010), and they require more personal definitions of success (Heslin, 2005). They feature looser attachments to organizations (Ashford, George, and Blatt, 2007) and often involve periods of questioning, reorientation, and liminality (Hall and Mirvis, 1996; Ibarra, 2003; Ibarra and Obodaru, 2016). As a result, they increase the appeal of temporary identity workspaces—institutions that host members temporarily yet promise to transform them permanently.

Introducing the concept of identity workspaces—institutions that people entrust as holding environments for their identity work—Petriglieri and Petriglieri (2010) argued that how people conduct identity work is closely tied to where they do it. That organizations shape their members' identities through socialization efforts is well established (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979; Pratt, 2000). The conceptualization of identity workspaces suggests that people entrust some organizations more than others in this regard, and as social contracts erode, they trust employers less (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010). Popular management authors have reflected this idea, exhorting people to view careers as a series of tours of duty (Hoffman, Casnocha, and Yeh, 2013), less like ladders and more like jungle gyms (Sandberg, 2013), and issuing dire warnings such as, ''Don't bet on institutions taking care of you, ever. You're expendable to them. They should be expendable to you'' (Haque, 2013).

Where, then, do people find trusted venues in which to consolidate or change their professional and personal selves? Scott (2010) suggested that people rendered insecure by unreliable workplaces are more likely to surrender to ''reinventive institutions.'' In return for members' dedication and discipline, these institutions promise to help them craft desired and desirable selves. Within them, Scott (2010) argued, authorship of the self emerges from the interaction between the subject and the experts to whom he or she turns. As long as membership is a choice, people remain unaware of the institution's power (Ramarajan and Reid, 2013) and experience it as conducive to personal growth (Sonenshein et al., 2013).

To position themselves as identity workspaces in general, and reinventive institutions in particular, organizations need to balance two aims: delivering

products or services to the market and developing members toward their personal goals. This duality is defining for educational institutions (Albert and Whetten, 1985), has recently been examined in service associations (Anteby and Wrzesniewski, 2014), and is growing in popularity among corporations whose executives list developing talent among their top priorities (Deloitte, 2013). Such institutions embrace the idea that ''attention to the bottom line and the personal growth of all employees . . . are interdependent'' (Kegan et al., 2014: 46). As more workers embrace mobile careers, it becomes important to discern what kind of selves people craft, and how, in these institutions, which offer them temporary membership but promise lasting transformation.

We chose to address this question in the context of a school of business administration, following conceptualizations of these institutions as identity workspaces (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010) in which managers engage in intense identity work during career transitions (Ibarra, 2003; Sturdy et al., 2006; Kelan and Dunkley Jones, 2009). Our aim is to better understand how people craft stable and hopeful selves, and how institutions sustain connections and foster identification, in the context of mobile careers in a fluid world of work.

IDENTITY WORK AND CONTEMPORARY CAREERS

Individuals' identities—the meanings associated with a person by the self and others (Gecas, 1982)—derive from three broad sources: (1) social identities, which describe the meanings associated with individuals by virtue of their membership in social groups, such as gender, nationality, or profession (Tajfel and Turner, 1986; Ashforth and Mael, 1989); (2) relational identities, which describe the meanings associated with individuals by virtue of their role relationships with others, such as spouses or cofounders (Sluss and Ashforth, 2007); and (3) personal identities, which describe the meanings associated with individuals by virtue of their personal characteristics, preferences, and aspirations (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). These three sets of meanings inform the self-concept, a person's overarching view of the self resulting from a compromise among social, relational, and personal identities (Gecas, 1982).

The identities within a person's self are neither necessarily stable nor always coherent (Markus and Nurius, 1986; Ramarajan, 2014), nor are they simply labels loosely or firmly attached to the self. They are living narratives that give the self a history and aspirations; help it appraise its experiences; bind it to groups and discourses; and give motives, meaning, and value to its pursuits (Ricoeur, 1988; Josselson, 1993; McAdams, 1993, 1996; Watson, 2008; Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010). These narratives take shape as people claim identities with words and deeds in relation to others who grant or deny their claims (Mead, 1934; Goffman, 1958; Bartel and Dutton, 2001). Seen from this perspective, identities define the self ''both in the present and prospectively in the future'' (Ashforth and Schinoff, 2016: 112). They are ''incessantly crafted or even kaleidoscopic processes of becoming'' (Brown, 2015: 27) that rest on one's ''ability to keep a particular narrative going'' (Giddens, 1991: 54).

In this paper, we are concerned with selves as dynamic constellations of identities encoded in more or less stable and consistent narratives and with the work required to keep those narratives going, or to change the plot. The

concept of identity work refers to the activities people engage in to form, strengthen, repair, or revise the identities that define the self (Snow and Anderson, 1987; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Brown, 2015) and fulfill its needs for agency, communion, and coherence (Swann and Bosson, 2010). Scholars of identity work have mostly focused on verbal accounts and behavioral performances in social contexts, although they have also acknowledged its emotional aspects. They have described identity work as an effort to escape existential and social insecurities (Knights and Willmott, 1999; Collinson, 2003); repair ''negative self-perceptions and emotional states'' (Bartel and Dutton, 2001: 119); and achieve a degree of ''comfort, meaning and integration and some correspondence between a self-definition and work situation'' (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003: 1188). Scholars have paid less attention to how emotions affect the process of identity work and the relational systems in which it unfolds (Kahn, 1998; Voronov and Vince, 2012). Although they have suggested that identity work may be aimed at adaptation or development (Dutton, Morgan Roberts, and Bednar, 2010), empirical research has focused on the former, likely due to the settings in which identity work has been studied.

Researchers have typically studied identity work in settings in which people work on identities to enter, adapt to, manage, or leave roles with strong display rules (Sutton, 1991). Examples include professional role transitions (Ibarra, 1999; Pratt, Rockmann, and Kaufmann, 2006), micro role transitions (Ashforth, Kreiner, and Fugate, 2000), demanding occupations (Kreiner, Hollensbe, and Sheep, 2006), stigmatized occupations (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Wrzesniewski, Dutton, and Debebe, 2003), transitions into new organizations (Pratt, 2000; Beyer and Hannah, 2002), and role exits (Ebaugh, 1988). In many contemporary contexts, however, institutional demands are less clear, people have more discretion in self-definition (Cote and Levine, 2002), and selves and career projects are tightly intertwined (Grey, 1994).

A shift in the psychological contract between organizations and employees over the last three decades has resulted in the disbanding of the former's obligation to provide security in exchange for employees' loyalty (Rousseau, 1990). A growing segment of the workforce no longer follows an institutionalized career blueprint ''defined by movement up a pay scale, promotion, increasing authority, apparent security and an eventual pension'' (Gold and Fraser, 2002: 580). This shift has made a life on the move not just normal but desirable (Spicer and Fleming, 2016) and has fueled a growing body of scholarship on boundaryless (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996), protean (Hall, 2002), kaleidoscopic (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2006), and postcorporate (Peiperl and Baruch, 1997) careers. Arthur (2008) suggested using the term ''contemporary careers'' to encompass these conceptualizations, all of which feature the expectation of mobility, the experience of uncertainty, and the necessity for individual agency.

The demise of institutionalized career templates changes the circumstances as well as the meaning of people's careers (Sullivan and Baruch, 2010), bringing the subjective facet of pursuing and evaluating one's career to the fore (Heslin, 2005). Having to reinvent oneself several times in the course of one's work life (Alvesson, 2001; Thomas and Linstead, 2002; Sennett, 2006) creates opportunities to exercise more agency in crafting one's work (Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001) and identity (Ibarra, 2003), but it also makes identity more salient and problematic (Gergen, 1991; Sennett, 1998; Alvesson and Willmott,

2002). The advent of ''liquid'' (Bauman, 2000) or ''late'' (Giddens, 1991) modernity has brought ''far fewer identity givens, more identity options, more tolerance of identity diversity, and more frequent identity changes'' to the workplace (Albert, Ashforth, and Dutton, 2000: 14). Such circumstances present people ''with a remarkable opportunity to become autonomous, unique, and fulfilled, but the pressure to be all those things can be daunting'' (Baumeister, 1997: 208; see also Schwartz, 2000; Collinson, 2003). How people experience and deal with those opportunities and pressures remains relatively unexplored.

Scholars have investigated whether people selling their services in external labor markets experience more flexibility (Barley and Kunda, 2004) and how they acquire skills to navigate career progression (O'Mahony and Bechky, 2006). They have explored how opportunities to develop, deploy, and signal skills orient choices of employers (Bidwell et al., 2014) and moves across organizations (Bidwell and Briscoe, 2010), as well as how such moves affect performance (Groysberg, Lee, and Nanda, 2008). Little empirical work, however, has focused on how people craft identities within discontinuous careers in a fluid world of work (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010). Conducting such research requires relaxing the assumption that strong, lasting attachments to an organization are the mark of successful careers and the aim of identity work. Only then might we address what Barley and Kunda (2001: 78) regarded as ''a crucial empirical question: When people are no longer able to use a single organization as the backdrop for their career, how do they lend meaning to and set boundaries around their trajectories?'' In a study of young adults, for example, Silva (2012: 508) found that ''the loosening of traditional forms of identity has emancipatory potential for those who can muster the ability to reflexively write one's own biography and to find witnesses to provide the validation and authenticity to it.'' The question is how and where people muster those reflexive and social resources if they cannot rely on one organization to provide them for the long run.

We begin to answer that question here with an inductive study of how people in contemporary careers use temporary identity workspaces to craft selves suited to their mobile working lives. We build theory on the processes involved through a longitudinal, inductive study of managers engaged in such careers. We followed them as they left their employers to begin a master's in business administration (MBA) program—with no certainty about what role they would hold afterward and where—and ended as they were about to enter new work roles. Our choice of setting was informed by observations that business schools provide a space in which managers often refine and revise their identities in addition to acquiring knowledge, skills, and job opportunities (Ibarra, 2003; Dubouloy, 2004; Sturdy et al., 2006; Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010; Khurana and Snook, 2011). As such, our research setting represented an extreme example of a temporary identity workspace.

METHODS

Sample and Setting

Our study followed 55 participants through the MBA program of a top-tier business school, which we refer to here as Blue. The year-long, full-time

program recruited a single cohort per year with no overlap between classes. At the time of our research, Blue had appeared at the top of a global MBA ranking based on corporate recruiters' opinions for three years in a row. The average age of participants in the class studied was 31, the average work experience was seven and a half years, and the majority had held management roles. Twenty percent of the participants were women, 45 nationalities were represented, and no participants were local residents. All arrived in town before the course began, lived close to campus, and spent the first six months working in the same classroom and underground meeting rooms. Participants changed groups once during the first six months and after a break were assigned to a third group working on a consulting project for three months. Job search and recruitment activities also took place in these months alongside elective courses.

Our choice of sample and setting followed a theoretical logic (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). All participants in our sample were engaged in contemporary careers. Each had worked in at least two organizations, and two-thirds had lived outside of their native country. More than half had worked in more than one industry. All had left their previous employer—most with no expectation of returning—and had little certainty about what their future held. Participants' professional and personal identities were made salient throughout their time at Blue. Prior to joining, they were required to write two essays: one for admission purposes that invited them to reflect on their career to date as well as future ambitions and the other an autobiography that encouraged them to articulate a life narrative. The focus on identity continued throughout the year with a number of assignments and activities that stimulated participants to consciously question, reflect on, and revise the way they understood and presented themselves.

Unlike previously studied identity-transforming organizations (Greil and Rudi, 1985; Pratt, 2000), however, Blue was not geared toward changing members' identities in a set direction. Instead, it emphasized the need to be self-directed and to pursue one's personal goals while there. Participants entered a new environment, one in which they had only a virtual acquaintance with each other at first and little shared cultural understanding. Their membership in Blue was limited to one year. These features made Blue an extreme setting (Eisenhardt, 1989) that was favorable for examining how and why people engaged in contemporary careers conduct identity work in a temporary identity workspace.

Data Collection and Management

We recruited participants for the study via an e-mail sent to all prospective Blue MBAs at the time of registration. The purpose of the study was phrased broadly as "to research both the personal and professional development process of individuals during their MBA year." The sample of 55 represents 61 percent of the population. When compared with the demographics of the full cohort, it was representative along the lines of age, work experience, nationality, and gender. We collected the primary data for this study through in-depth, semi-structured interviews at three points in time: during the month prior to the MBA program (wave 1), at the midpoint of the program (wave 2), and in the two weeks prior to graduation (wave 3).

To maximize consistency, the second author conducted all three interviews, the first via telephone and the second and third in person, on campus. The first interview included two sections: the first took the form of a life-history interview (Atkinson, 1998), and the second focused on the individual's rationale and motivations for embarking on the MBA, his or her expectations for the year, anticipated transitions (both personal and professional), and expectations for the future. The wave 2 and wave 3 interviews included questions regarding participants' personal and professional changes, the Blue environment and its impact on them, and their future life path. For interview protocols, see the Online Appendix (http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/suppl/10.1177/0001839217720930).

Although the second and third interviews shared many elements, they also became progressively more focused to capitalize on emerging themes (Spradley, 1979). For example, in the second wave of interviews, several participants mentioned fellow students whose motives and demeanor they described in stark opposition to their own. They also spoke about rifts in the community based on interests and attitudes toward the MBA. Many contrasted the friction experienced in the work groups assigned by the administration with the support and relief offered by the informal subgroups with which they chose to affiliate. In light of these observations, we included questions in the third interview about the evolution of participants' relationships with each other. Interviews lasted between 40 and 90 minutes (50 minutes was the average) and were tape recorded and professionally transcribed.

Secondary data sources included notes from conversations with faculty, coaches, and psychotherapists working at Blue; notes from observations during our time on campus; and written documentation (i.e., brochures, syllabi, web pages, and blogs). We used our secondary data as background on the Blue context. In the case of the coaches and psychotherapists, whom we interviewed toward the end of our data collection, we also asked them to comment on our emerging insights as a form of member check (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). We used ATLAS 5 qualitative data management software to organize our primary data (over 1,500 pages of text) and field notes, coding summary sheets, and documents used as secondary data sources.

Data Analysis

We complemented a traditional inductive data analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1998) with a clinical inquiry into the systems psychodynamics in our setting (Berg and Smith, 1985). The process involved analyzing data as we collected it, moving back and forth among transcripts, literature, and our emerging conceptualizations. Our analysis comprised four stages. We repeated the first two after each wave of data collection, whereas the final two took place after all interviews were completed.

Stage 1. Following each wave of data collection, we conducted line-by-line analysis of small batches of interview transcripts. We typically worked through 20 transcripts, identifying common statements and grouping them into first-order codes and tentative categories. Descriptions of Blue as a ''stepping

stone'' or a ''retreat,'' for example, coalesced within the umbrella code of ''institutional image.'' We used in vivo codes (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) whenever possible (e.g., ''flexible'') and descriptive codes when no suitable in vivo codes could be identified (e.g., ''resolute''). The process involved many rounds of grouping codes into categories, testing how they fit the data, and regrouping until we agreed on a coding scheme.

Stage 2. In stage 2, the first two authors reviewed all 55 transcripts to document the first-order codes and tentative categories. Although we generally found that those identified in stage 1 fit the remaining transcripts, we kept discussing the codes and categories and made alterations to the structure after each wave of data collection and during the paper's review process. We used a coding summary sheet, a one-page document on which we logged all codes assigned to one participant. These sheets were a valuable reference tool as well as a way to compare participants with similar and different patterns of codes.

Stage 3. During stage 3 we moved to axial coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). We consolidated categories into higher levels of abstraction and began searching for relationships between them. In stage 2 we had noticed, for example, that people who described themselves as ''lacking ability'' usually regarded the institution as a ''training ground,'' whereas those who saw themselves as ''lacking clarity'' portrayed it as a ''magnifying glass.'' Participants seemed to conduct identity work, we noted, not only to match their words and actions to relational and institutional expectations but also to match their concerns and aspirations to challenges and opportunities in the institution. These patterns led us to conceptualize two pathways for crafting selves valued within and beyond Blue, which we labeled ''adaptive'' and ''exploratory.'' Participants were distributed roughly equally across the two. Each pathway encompassed a set of congruent interpretations of the self, the relationship, and the institution that aligned with what emerged as Blue's dual ideologies. After circling back to the literature on ideologies, or ''integrated system[s] of apparently congruent beliefs and values that explain and justify the world, our place within it, our relationship with others, and our own and others' actions'' (Hogg, 2005: 204), we labeled Blue's ''instrumental'' and ''humanistic,'' respectively. To establish coding reliability, we independently coded the entire sample, assigning categories such as adaptive or exploratory, instrumental or humanistic to each participant, with 94 percent intercoder agreement. We resolved disagreements in face-to-face meetings. The culmination of this stage was a preliminary outline of the two pathways for crafting portable selves in a temporary identity workspace. We went back and forth between transcripts and outline to ensure that it represented the data (Locke, 2001). The fit of most participants with one or the other pathway, with little movement between the two and much discomfort reported by those who attempted such a move, was so striking that it led us to employ a systems psychodynamic lens to deepen our theorizing.

Stage 4. Systems psychodynamics refers to a body of scholarly work that emerged from the combination of systems theory and psychoanalysis (Miller and Rice, 1967; French and Vince, 1999; Gould, Stapley, and Stein, 2004) and

to an interpretivist research perspective concerned with the interplay between individual emotion and motivation and the structure and culture of social systems (Neumann and Hirschhorn, 1999). As our analysis unfolded, we employed systems psychodynamics concepts such as splitting, introjection, and projective identification, which we will discuss later, as well as a systems psychodynamic perspective to theorize from our data. This perspective assumes that people join organizations for reasons that have as much to do with the management of emotions and identities as with the pursuit of the organization's task (Gabriel, 1999). It is particularly suited to explaining organizational features that might appear ''irrational'' or ''dysfunctional'' in that they do not advance the organization's task or produce economic gains and yet are impervious to change (Ashforth and Reingen, 2014; Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2015). These features, systems psychodynamic scholars argue, serve a covert function parallel to and often at odds with the organization's stated task: reducing members' discomfort or fulfilling their wishes (Jacques, 1955).

Focusing on the interplay between individual experience and social structure, a systems psychodynamic lens is ''ideal for looking at cross-level dynamics within organizations'' and ''includes both conscious and unconscious processes at individual and at least group levels'' (Pratt and Crosina, 2016: 339). Unlike clinical psychoanalysis, which often interprets people's emotions in relation to identifications with early caregivers, systems psychodynamics interpret emotions in relation to the nature and organization of people's work (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2015). Nevertheless, it shares with its clinical cousin the assumption that ''conflict is unavoidable and constitutive of the subject'' (Gabriel, 2016: 214), and if people are always divided, so are groups and organizations, often in ways that make members less so.

A central tenet of systems psychodynamics is to ''see ambivalence diagnostically,'' whether it is lodged in an individual, a collective, or both, and to recognize that ''it is possible for seemingly contradictory data to coexist and to express a truth'' (Berg and Smith, 1985: 284). From this perspective, to reveal ''a truth'' from a phenomenon (in the territory of lived experience) or a theme (in the map of theoretical representations) is to infer a twofold meaning: on the one hand, the concerns that the phenomenon helps conceal and that would become conscious should it be removed, and on the other, the wishes that it helps express and that would be frustrated should they be denied. Our analysis revealed, for example, that people embedded in one of the two pathways reported manageable angst and flourishing hope. When individuals could not settle on one pathway, anxiety became less tolerable and hope faded. Using a systems psychodynamic lens helped us to theorize that the bifurcation of the two pathways, while on the surface depriving participants of the opportunity to take advantage of a subset of the institutions' opportunities, enabled them to manage anxiety and sustain hopes about their fate—and the institution's value—in a fluid and unpredictable world of work.

In drawing such theoretical inferences from field observations, systems psychodynamic research rests within the ''big tent'' of grounded theory building and the methodological eclecticism it encompasses (Eisenhardt, Graebner, and Sonenshein, 2016). Because its inferences seek to reveal unconscious motives that are inaccessible to direct observation, they can at best be illustrated rather

than documented and require that researchers carefully report how the inferences emerged from the data (Hackman, 1985). We articulated ours through attending to two kinds of associations. The first were verbal associations: themes that occurred in proximity to accounts of participants' emotional experiences, for example, a mention that engaging in a certain activity ''stabilized me'' or that an event ''freaked me out.'' The second were patterns of thematic associations, such as the shift of participants' emotions as their views of the self, others, and the institution unfolded over time. For example, we noticed that participants expressed distress in relation to conflicting aims and later appeared hopeful after having settled on one aim while also denigrating those who were pursuing the aims they had dismissed. We found evidence across participants for the pattern that assurance about one's views and prospects was associated with criticism or dismissal of others portrayed as having views and aspirations opposed to one's own. We took those instances, as a whole, to be illustrations of the transfer of intrapsychic ambivalence to interpersonal relations. We also paid attention to what participants felt when they deviated from the understandings and conducts of their chosen pathway. The data suggested that uncertainty and anxiety erupted into consciousness in those moments. Once we completed this inferential stage, we refined a theoretical process model of the crafting of portable selves in a temporary identity workspace.

FINDINGS

Participants' Personal Context: Contemporary Careers

A month before the MBA program began, participants faced a familiar predicament: waiting for a move with little certainty about what it might bring. Their lives already featured frequent moves, and all expected their future to hold more of the same. Mobility was a central theme in people's accounts of their experiences and aspirations.

Career experiences. Participants described the pursuit of mobility as central to who they were. ''I like a lot to be mobile, to be moving around,'' said one (11i).[1] Another explained,

> I have always been very fluid. Depending on where the market is heading, and the trends we see in business, I am very open to different things. I never feel locked into a specific industry or function. I always think of myself as acquiring skills, not necessarily taking a job. Hopefully, in my skill gathering I will be able to get everything I need to take on whatever job comes my way. (53i)

They reported mixed experiences attendant to mobile working lives. On the one hand, such lives afforded freedom and opportunity. One, for example, recalled that he had been keen to ''take English lessons early in my childhood'' because he already saw speaking English as ''a ticket to freedom to go and do whatever I wanted to do'' (52i). Another, recounting his first move, associated it with freedom in self-definition: ''The problem at boarding school is that you become the person that everyone thinks you are. It is very difficult to break out

[1] When providing quotations from participants, we identify them by number and by *i, ii, or iii*, referring to the first, second, or third wave of interviews we conducted.

of that. When I was 18, I went [abroad] and I could actually be who I wanted to be because I didn't know anybody'' (54i). On the other hand, mobile lives entailed experiences of uncertainty and isolation. One person said that even though his employer had offered him several interesting assignments, he never took for granted that this would continue and ''looked at every job at [Company] as my last job'' (49i). Another complained, ''The problem today is that everybody is so mobile that it's very hard to say you are going to be in the same city for the next few years and these are my bunch of friends. Everybody moves around'' (29ii). Of course, not ''everybody'' does. We interpret such quotes as manifestations of participants' immersion in mobile working lives that forced them to remain at some distance from stable communities.

Career aspirations: Dual aims. Participants' experiences in mobile lives informed their motives for applying to Blue and their aspirations for what might happen afterward. One engineer, for example, expected the MBA to expand his professional and geographical mobility:

> I don't think I would get into the sort of corporate roles that I am considering for another 15 years if I didn't have the MBA. So Blue will have a huge impact on the type of work I do and also the places [I work]. In [my past role] you cannot work in places like London, Melbourne, or Sydney. You tend to be working in places like [small town]. So it will have a big impact on my personal life as well as my career. (43i)

All participants expressed hopes that their time at Blue would enhance their opportunities. One remarked, ''My 20-year goal is to be a leader in industry, head a business unit, or something along those lines, and so to me an MBA is a way to gain that outcome'' (24i). They also highlighted the value of gaining access to a community of peers. ''The profile of participants regarding age, experience, and background was something that I really identified with,'' (46i) said another. As references to ''being a leader'' and ''identifying'' with classmates suggest, identity was central to many participants' accounts. People did not just hope that Blue would help them do something more or different somewhere else. They hoped that it would help them become someone.

Our analysis revealed two types of identity-related aims—achievement aims and discovery aims—that most people reported in combination as they anticipated their entry into Blue. Both types related to groups that participants had been or hoped to become members of and encompassed expectations for how Blue might help them achieve both.

Achievement aims consisted of hopes that Blue would help one attain a desired future identity. These accounts usually started with the words ''I want to become . . .'' as in ''I want to become a generalist rather than a specialist'' (19i). These accounts often mentioned reference groups or role models that participants sought to emulate. For example, a consultant who hoped to become a technology industry executive said that he had decided to go to Blue when he realized that ''most of these executives who run Microsoft have MBAs. So if you want to be in that league, if you want to gel with them, to have their respect, having a graduate education from a very established institution gives you a lot more credibility'' (29i). When they articulated achievement aims, people cast Blue as a test for their ability to claim a role. ''[Blue] will help me understand whether I will be able to realize myself at a senior position in a

global organization'' (31i), said one. Participants also cast it as a source of skills that would make identity claims readily granted. ''I really want to become a general manager that has in his backpack the MBA of a good and famous school,'' explained another before describing whom he aspired to emulate: ''As a consultant, I admired people that had an MBA at a good school. They told me how much they got out of it. So I wanted to do it myself'' (25i).

Discovery aims consisted of hopes that Blue would help one gain clarity about current and future identities. These accounts described a wish to address the questions ''Who am I?'' and ''Who do I want to become?'' and often featured, as distractions or constraints, groups that participants belonged to or were expected to join. One participant noted:

> I am hoping that Blue will take me a step further. I don't know what that step further is. I like to think there is a whole new way of thinking of myself, of thinking of my life, of thinking how I am going to be facing work that is not just overcoming my weaknesses. It is something that I am not seeing right now and I will see after Blue. (18i)

One person wrestling with expectations about joining her family's business said, ''I am quite uncertain whether my happy life is to go into top management, which is what it will be going into my family business. I am quite sure that I will get some of those answers next year'' (22i). When expressing discovery aims, participants cast Blue as a retreat that afforded the opportunity to revisit their life trajectories. As one put it, ''I am glad I'm here for 10 months, away from everyone. It gives me a lot of time for soul searching'' (48i).

Participants' Institutional Context: A Temporary Identity Workspace

Blue's institutional features, our data suggest, reflected and perhaps amplified the experiences and aspirations we just described. Its appeal as a temporary identity workspace rested on a promise of ''transformation,'' as its brochure put it: a promise of fostering professional and personal changes that would outlast people's membership in it. The kind of changes that Blue promised, and that bolstered its standing in the crowded MBA market, reflected participants' achievement and discovery aims. They involved successful placements in global companies and personal growth for each student. Blue's reputation for doing both attracted participants. ''It is very important that [Blue] is well recognized in the sector where I want to continue my career'' (26i), said one. Another remarked, ''When the [newspaper] said you had your own shrink, I thought, that's for me, it's good to reflect'' (50i). The article he referred to, which analyzed Blue's success, hinted at both aims, reporting that ''recruiters repeatedly cite the students' maturity and global perspective as two of Blue's most impressive features.'' To serve its key constituencies, Blue had to produce the kind of managers whom recruiters wanted to hire and participants wanted to become. To do so, it could neither overprescribe people's trajectories nor leave them unconstrained. As one participant put it, ''Blue is like a canvas. You have the framework to work in, the size that Blue gives you, but you still have the opportunity to paint whatever you want'' (15iii).

Dual ideologies. Two ideologies underpinned Blue's efforts to fulfill its promises and served as organizing principles for all activities throughout the year.

The instrumental ideology centered on delivering performance, understood as the capacity to act credibly and competently in a role. Acquiring and demonstrating knowledge and skills were central to the project of self-definition. The instrumental ideology translated into a range of activities—within and across functional courses and career services—that pushed participants to think and act like competent managers in a range of circumstances. The statement of purpose of Blue's accounting course exemplified this ideology. ''All managers make use of accounting data,'' the professor wrote. ''My objective is to make sure that you reach a competence in the subject sufficient to prepare you for any general management role.'' Activities tied to the instrumental ideology subjected participants to heavy workloads and demanding standards. The rationale was that dealing with such demands at Blue prepared participants to perform with poise and competence under pressure in the business world or, as brochures and syllabi described it, the ''real world.'' One participant summarized this rationale this way:

> You can learn to live in a jungle in three ways. You can read about it in a book and then go to that jungle and see how you do. You may not even read the book, and go straight to the jungle. Or you can spend some time in a zoo and understand how the animals work, realizing that it is not the real world but learning a bit about a tiger before it's about to charge at you. Coming to Blue is like living in that zoo for a year. (54ii)

In contrast, the humanistic ideology centered on finding meaning, understood as the ability to make sense of one's own behavior and social context and to lead a life grounded in clear values and infused with purpose. Understanding oneself and others was central to the project of self-definition. The humanistic ideology translated into a range of activities, primarily in a yearlong ''leadership stream'' of courses, that pushed participants to examine the motives and meaning of their behavior. The statement of purpose of the leadership stream exemplified this ideology: it ''invites you to engage actively in the enterprise of discovering, articulating, and shaping your unique identity in order to help you to recognize and exercise your capacity to lead—responsibly—while at Blue and in the future.'' Alongside traditional classes were reflective papers about students' histories and aspirations, the functioning of their groups, and their roles in them; personal coaching; and the option of seeing a psychotherapist framed as a ''tutorial in self-awareness.'' The rationale behind such practices was that scrutinizing one's experience at Blue prepared participants to operate reflexively and purposefully in the ''real world.'' As one participant put it:

> [At Blue] I am always waiting for somebody to say, ''Go explore further. You've got to go deeper. Question yourself.'' . . . We are constantly being asked, and I started to ask myself more frequently: ''Why did you react that way? Why did you behave that way? Why do you think he behaved that way?'' I am reminded to always ask why. (11iii)

Brochures, deans' speeches, and media reports presented the two ideologies as complementary, as reflected in the following passage from Blue's brochure, which portrayed personal exhilaration and challenges, self-discovery and survival as going hand in hand:

> Blue offers participants the exhilaration of self-discovery and of developing their creative and leadership abilities. This enhances their capacity and courage to make

> meaningful timely business decisions in an increasingly challenging environment where only the best will survive and win.

Temporary encapsulation. While the dual ideologies sustained Blue's efforts to fulfill participants' achievement and discovery aims, participants' temporary encapsulation within the institution reflected their experiences in mobile careers. Blue demanded almost total commitment while offering only time-limited membership. Opportunity and uncertainty abounded. People were cast in what many referred to as a ''bubble.'' As one explained:

> We are in a little glass, sheltered from everything else. You don't have time to read the newspaper or see the news and all that. You don't have time to do anything. You only have time to do your studies and be together. . . . So it feels as if you only have each other and the learning that comes from being together. (35iii)

And yet participants were mindful that the encapsulation would not last. Both their internal and external social worlds remained significant. One participant explained it this way: ''The outside world for the first half [of the year] is, for the most part, shut off. You have some interactions, but Blue does a good job of putting you in a bubble. They open it in the second half, and you realize, well, there is much more I need to be focusing on'' (17iii). Rather than a liminal state of being in between, neither here nor there, participants faced the challenge of crafting selves that would be recognized and valued both ''here''—at Blue—and ''there''—in the organizations that would host them in the future.

Portable Selves

The fulfillment of participants' expectations and the institution's promises, our analysis revealed, rested on the construction of what we call portable selves: selves endowed with definitions, motives, and abilities that can be deployed across roles and organizations over time. We found two categories of portable selves: externally anchored and internally anchored. Although their features differed, both enabled people to feel that they fit at Blue and to feel better suited for mobile lives in the long term. Table B1 in the Online Appendix provides additional evidence of these two categories.

Externally anchored portable selves had an external basis of definition and were tied to broad social identities such as ''international,'' ''manager,'' and ''leader'' that referent others within and outside Blue would most likely see as valuable. One participant, who worried at first that he might not have the skills to claim such an identity, described how fitting in at Blue boded well for his future: ''I am not that different from other people who will be leaders tomorrow, so I can also be a leader tomorrow'' (41ii). Another explained that the MBA gave him ''a baseline from which to feel good about becoming a business leader. There's nothing more I could have done to train for it'' (24iii). Such definitions made the self portable because people believed that they would be recognized and valued beyond Blue. At the same time, the definitions were vague enough that they could be adapted to local circumstances. The motive animating this category of portable selves was broadening opportunities. As one person said, ''My motivation to get an MBA was always to balance the background and the skill that I had in a way that would position me to be more versatile, to be more international, and to be able to really go after anything'' (15iii). Another person

felt that ''many more things are doable now, not just in terms of career but also in terms of what I could do in life in general'' (7iii). Flexibility was the principal ability these selves required. ''I am completely committed to being a global manager in the future,'' explained one person, ''so I have to really maintain my marketability while having a kid and family and all that'' (37iii).

Internally anchored portable selves had an internal basis of definition. Rather than using broad labels, participants described having a strong sense of self that felt authentically core to them in all realms of life. As one participant put it, ''It is very much a feeling that comes into my conscious mind in terms of this is really you, this is more your true self. . . . [This] part of me that's tugging is certainly the more pure, creative, expressionistic [part]'' (55iii). She went on to note that her major accomplishment at Blue was ''identifying the three things that are important to me: the relationships with people that surround me, living in or having access to nature and beauty, and then the same sort of expression, exploration. Now I'll find jobs that fall into that category'' (55iii). While discussing how Blue had surpassed his expectations, a third person said that the year had ''made it much clearer what's important in my life'' (47iii). Another reported, ''I emerged as . . . not exactly a new self, but more conscious about myself and with a clear definition'' (34iii). Such clarity made the self portable because it spurred participants to select contexts in which it might be expressed freely. The motive animating this category of portable selves was consistency of self-expression. One participant put it this way:

> I feel like I had a very siloed life—personal life, school life, career life, this life, that life. I think it is important to step back and look at yourself in the absence of all of those things and really understand who you are, and, you know, it kind of helps you be that person in each of those different lives. (51ii)

Resolve was the ability these selves required. ''I discovered that I'm not afraid of challenges,'' said another. ''I have internal passion. I don't want that my life will not belong to me'' (13iii).

Our analysis revealed two pathways that led participants, informed and assisted by the institution's practices, to craft portable selves. We labeled adaptive the pathway that led to externally anchored portable selves and exploratory the pathway that led to internally anchored ones. The process unfolded in three phases. First, people oriented their aims toward one or the other pathway; second, they pursued that pathway; and third, they strove to affirm the portability of the self they had crafted through it. In each phase, people made meaning of their selves in relation to others and the institution. For additional supporting evidence, see table B2 in the Online Appendix.

Crafting Portable Selves: The Orientation Phase

The orientation phase unfolded as participants crossed the boundary into Blue and encountered each other and the institution's practices. Through these interactions, participants narrowed their focus to either achievement or discovery aims and began to see Blue through the lens of one of its two ideologies. This phase ended when participants had a relatively firm answer to the question ''Why am I here?''

Making meaning of the self and others. As participants entered Blue, the social systems in which their aims had taken shape receded into the

background. Concurrently, the Blue social system moved to the foreground, and participants had to define themselves and negotiate their place in relation to each other and to Blue's activities. Informal interactions featured repeated questions about participants' motives and aspirations. ''In the beginning,'' one person recalled, ''there was a lot of figuring people out, people trying to figure you out, and a lot of pigeonholing'' (49iii). People were sensitive to how others perceived them. ''Everyone is putting up a little bit of a front,'' said one, ''and being a little more cautious or more aggressive depending upon what they feel the group wants'' (15ii). Meanwhile, formal activities led participants to question their dedication and ability. Activities aligned with Blue's instrumental ideology highlighted people's need to improve the self. Activities aligned with its humanistic ideology highlighted their need to understand the self. The twin demands to produce deliverables and examine one's experience at the same time created much pressure. As one participant put it, ''There was such high pressure to perform and yet there was a parallel force asking, why did that happen?'' (20iii) Another described the relentless scrutiny as follows:

> People are always watching you, always evaluating you, always thinking about you as you are with them, whether you realize it or not. [It happens] in class, in groups, at the pub. That wave of feedback has constantly been coming. It is pretty significant, because it makes it clearer for me to see the truth but just as importantly because it reminds me of this constant evaluation happening. (51iii)

Faced with such scrutiny, participants came to see different truths about the self. Some saw it as lacking ability. Others saw it as lacking clarity. Although before arriving at Blue most participants held a mixture of achievement and discovery aims, as the orientation phase progressed, each seemed to embrace one and let go of the other.

Our data suggest that participants who could face the Blue scrutiny with personalized and agentic accounts of their trajectories, portraying ''what I want to do'' as an expression of ''who I am'' and a result of ''my choices,'' embraced achievement aims. Before arriving at Blue, for example, one participant tied his career goals to a valued personal identity. He felt there was a ''high chance I will go back into the oil industry because I am an empirical person.'' At the same time, he also expressed discovery aims in stating that an MBA ''forces you to think through what choices to make in terms of career, so it makes you older mentally. It puts a wise head on young shoulders.'' Once at Blue, however, he noted that interacting with his peers had made him realize that ''I am into the oil industry. I haven't found anything else that combines politics, economics, and money'' (2ii). He made no more mention of career questioning. By mid-program, such participants let go of discovery aims that they might have held prior to entry. They saw little value in exploring who they were because they already knew. As one put it, ''I asked whether I am doing the right thing with my life, at least it gave me clarity that I am on the right track and I am doing what I am good at. I enjoy it'' (16ii). Participants who settled on achievement aims expressed performance anxiety related to their perceived lack of ability. ''For the first time since maybe grade school I had sort of heartburn before a quiz,'' said one, ''[and it] was really, really uncomfortable'' (24ii). Another said, ''You think you are a top performer in your old job. Then you come here . . . and you give what you think is a brilliant idea, and others go

'yeah, whatever.' In my previous job I would sit and think, 'Yeah, I'm the man.' But here you realize you're not'' (23ii).

Participants who could not meet the scrutiny at Blue with personalized and agentic accounts became unsure of whose aspirations they really held, and their lack of clarity led them to embrace discovery aims. How could they focus on pursuing who they wanted to become if they did not know who they were? One described how classmates led him to question his aims:

> Six months ago I was very focused in terms of what I wanted to do in my life. Now I find myself questioning my initial career choice. This question pops up working in my groups. They see how I behave and how I do things, and the suggestion is that maybe it is not a good career fit for me. (33ii)

By the program's midpoint, these participants made few claims to achievement aims they might have expressed before Blue, expressing instead a desire to move from a life path determined by the expectations of others to a path of their own choosing. As one reflected,

> When I finished my undergraduate degree I got arguably the most enviable job in my class in the university, and of course I took it. . . . I've always looked at people around and said, 'Well of course you'd do that,' because it was the prestigious thing to do. I've never really sat back in myself and thought, do I really want to do this? (51iii)

Participants who settled on discovery aims reported experiencing existential anxiety related to their lack of clarity about who they were and wanted to be. ''I came here and everything impacted me in the same moment,'' explained one describing what worried him most. ''You are in a new environment, you are under a lot of pressure, you are alone, and you don't know what to do with your life, with the life you left there and the life after the MBA. So a lot of questions are going on all the time'' (36ii). Whereas participants expressing performance anxiety were concerned with meeting external demands, those plagued by existential anxiety described a more ''internal struggle, questioning, and self-doubt'' (26ii).

Making meaning of the self and the institution. As they embraced one or the other identity aim and experienced related anxieties, participants began to regard the institution as an opportunity for the self to achieve the former and assuage the latter. Their images of what Blue had to offer, we found, portrayed Blue as seen through the lens of one of its two ideologies. Participants who embraced achievement aims portrayed the opportunities Blue afforded through the lens of the instrumental ideology and saw it as a potential source of knowledge and skills. One explained that ''the focus on convincing skills and communication skills is enormous here. If you cannot communicate your message, you are totally screwed. I have to improve if I am to pursue my dream of being a general manager'' (31ii). In contrast, participants who embraced discovery aims portrayed the opportunities Blue afforded through the lens of its humanistic ideology and saw Blue as providing a space to become clearer about who they were. One noted, ''What is most important is that I am able to reflect here. I am not the kind of person that wants to explore a case and discuss it for ages. I just want to comply with that side'' (18ii). Note the contrast between personal reflection and case discussions, with one cast as an opportunity and

the other as an obligation. This making of sides allows the taking of sides, which in turn facilitates an assertion of the kind of person one is or is not. This distinction reflects a bifurcation between what participants perceived and valued at Blue, a theme to which we will return later.

Crafting Portable Selves: The Consolidation Phase

By the end of the orientation phase, participants had sorted themselves and each other onto two pathways for crafting portable selves. Whereas participants aiming for achievement located their desired self outside, in the future, and feared not getting there, participants aiming for discovery located it within, in the present, and feared not finding it. The former pursued the pathway we termed adaptive, and the latter the one we termed exploratory. If the key question of the orientation phase had been ''Why am I here?,'' that of the consolidation phase was ''What work do I need to do?''

Making meaning of the self and others. During this phase, participants described the self as working with others to assuage the fears and fulfill the aims identified earlier. For people on the adaptive pathway, the work consisted of repeated cycles of social observation, experimentation, and evaluative self-reflection. It involved scanning the social environment to identify appropriate scripts, colloquially referred to as ''the rules of the game,'' and testing their enactment with others who provided ''feedback.'' One described how he had identified and worked to change his habit of disengaging when not listened to:

> I noticed that if I felt that the group was not doing what I wanted, I have a habit of disengaging. Then I get anxious because I believe the group is shutting me out. I have become completely aware of that now, so it is easy for me to deal with it. I can join the conversation and it makes a huge difference, because that used to build up tension on both sides. They felt I was withdrawing, I felt shoved out. (54ii)

Another recalled working through the performance anxiety of adapting to a way of being that he understood, through social observations, was better suited to being ''a leader'':

> I realized that leadership is somehow connected with respect, and respect in the class is commanded by people who have humanity and the ability to listen. It was a great discovery for me. Before, I thought that the more you talk, the more populist you are and the more people vote for you. But I realized that it is not like that. Silence actually sometimes is better, and it pays off. It was very unnatural for me, especially at the beginning; it brought stress and anxiety to suppress my natural inclination, but I think it was very good. (31ii)

Although mentions of peers as key supporters for one's development pervaded our sample, participants on each pathway gave different descriptions of the role of others. For those on the adaptive pathway, others were referents and sources of feedback. As one participant put it, ''[My learning] has been mostly from the groups, the interactions with the people I talk to, the classmates, and the feedback that I have had over and over again'' (29iii). Others' feedback was interpreted as information about the gap between the person's current and desired self. ''People tell you to your face what they think about you, and I

didn't have this experience before. This is difficult to hear, because you are not objective about yourself. But you analyze it afterward to try to change something which is wrong'' (6ii). Underlying these interactions with others was an understanding of the self as an object that could and should be molded with others' help. The same person concluded, ''I can change my personality if I want to, but I have to decide whether I want [to]'' (6ii). Few described these strategies as chameleon like, acting, or faking it. Instead, they viewed them as genuine development, as they interpreted the term—that is, shaping, refining, or polishing the selves they aspired to be. For example, one participant said, ''A classmate said to me, 'Well [Name], you are at the core like a stone, like a diamond. What you can do here at Blue is to put nice cuts to it, so it is shiny and people will like it more.' Somehow I have a feeling that there is truth to it'' (10ii).

For participants on the exploratory pathway, the work of clarifying a self and trajectory that felt their own consisted of ongoing introspection, both by themselves and assisted by others. It involved examining the scripts they habitually used as these manifested within the Blue context and attempting to understand how past experience, personal idiosyncrasies, relational demands, and collective pressures shaped their habits of thinking, feeling, and behaving. ''It's all about awareness'' (11iii), said one participant. Another explained,

> I discovered a whole thing about where I come from, and how this all impacted my development, my thinking; it is much clearer in many ways. It is very interesting because nothing has changed. My family hasn't changed, my past hasn't changed, I am not somebody else. But a lot of things have become much clearer. (14ii)

People on the exploratory pathway described others as sounding boards, sources of emotional support, and at times irritants to stand up against. One noted how at the beginning of the program he was ''struggling and alone'' because he ''was looking at the people who would not give me support at all because they are in this competitive group.'' But he found his feet and began to discover his path once he ''[found] this new group of friends. They give me comfort and enough support to realize that I can go a different way'' (8iii). Feedback was less important for this group. As one person put it, ''Nobody can point out what I did wrong, or in which respect I need to improve. It's very hard, and it's also hard for me to figure it out. You just try to figure out what you really like to do in your life to connect with your personality and your philosophy of life'' (27ii). Rather than experimenting with different scripts, these people aspired, as one put it, ''to deliver who I am in a single way to everybody'' (30iii). Underlying these interactions with others lay an understanding of the self as a mystery that might never be solved but that was imperative to tackle despite its social cost. ''Basically this is a matter of discovery,'' said one. ''Discovery of self, to know where everything is coming from'' (13iii). People spent time examining inner states and social interactions for clues that might reveal their essence, which in turn had to be seconded by removing obstacles to its expression. This is what development meant for them. These participants used terms such as consciousness, growth, and maturation, often in combination, as in this quote: ''I'm much more conscious about myself and about the place that I'm taking my life. . . . I have changed and grown more mature as a person'' (36iii).

Making meaning of the self and the institution. As participants worked on their selves in relation to others, their understanding of and relationship to the

institution evolved accordingly. During this phase, they came to regard the institution as a microcosm of the outside world. Participants on the adaptive pathway tended to conceptualize and experience Blue as distinct from, even if comparable to, their previous or future work contexts. They viewed it as a safer training ground, one in which they could experiment freely and prepare for the ''real world.'' One participant articulated this conceptualization by describing Blue as ''a safe place to make mistakes'' (1iii). Another described one of the activities as ''a really grueling experience, but in the end the output was excellent. [It] was like looking at a microcosm of how things work and don't work'' (4ii). Holding an understanding of the institution as a training ground—with features similar to those of work environments but more forgiving—sustained the belief that successful adaptation at Blue would yield a self that had value beyond it.

Conversely, participants on the exploratory pathway experienced Blue as hyperreal, a magnifying glass of everyday experience. As much as adaptive-identity participants experienced the temporary lack of a work role as freeing and safe, exploratory ones experienced it as exposing. One participant noted how the pressure was suited to self-discovery: ''The great thing about here is the pressure that they put us through, the immense pressure. . . . At work, you hide it. At Blue you are totally exposed'' (17ii). Holding an understanding of the institution as a magnifying glass—because of its intensity and focus on personal exploration—sustained the belief that one's identity could be more easily revealed. This belief, in turn, justified the efforts at self-reflection and self-expression because they would clarify and strengthen an identity that could be held onto beyond Blue. One participant explained, ''I would have come here even if I knew this level of self-reflection would be achieved studying veterinary. I would have come here anyway because the content of the courses is not as important as the process or the flow that made me reflect'' (18ii).

Crafting Portable Selves: The Validation Phase

While engaging in different work and holding different understandings of the institution, all participants strove to craft selves recognized and valued within and outside of Blue. To be portable, such selves could not just be honed at Blue; they had to be affirmed by outside parties. Gaining such validation was the central concern of the last phase of their crafting, whose principal question was ''Where can I go next?''

Making meaning of the self and others. The process of validating portable selves began to unfold as the institution's encapsulation gave way to more interaction with the outside world. ''The first half of the year I couldn't sleep because I didn't have time,'' said one person describing the shift. ''The second half of the year I couldn't sleep because of the pressure of getting a job'' (6iii).[2] If scrutiny within Blue had led people to revisit and refine their selves, outsiders

[2] Blue discouraged participants from engaging in a year-long job search so as to have at least half of the year dedicated to reflection and academic pursuits, but it could hardly escape concern for participants' employment prospects and its impact on the status of the MBA program. Blue had traditionally fared very well on this dimension, made significant investment in career services to ensure that this remained the case, and had a relatively small class to place.

were now the referents who helped people determine whether those selves would outlive their membership. The self in this phase was not lacking or working; it was performing, to gain the recognition that would validate its portability.

Participants on the adaptive pathway sought affirmation from a broad range of outsiders. They saw the number and variety of job offers as a reflection of the appeal of their portable selves. As one put it, ''I wanted basically to get the highest number of [job] offers in the year. But it wasn't an explicit goal. It was an implicit goal that I wanted to make sure that I could find a job at will, and that's something I've been able to do'' (2iii). Participants who received validation on the adaptive pathway expressed confidence in relation to feeling flexible enough to adapt to a variety of work environments. One, for example, shared his belief that a range of options would be available to him from now on: ''I can sell myself, and also it is something that I could enjoy,'' he said about his choice to join a consultancy. But he envisaged that in five years or so he might ''go to the international public sector, or NGO sector or into the private sector where I would fit quite well in business development and even strategy'' (3ii).

In contrast, participants on the exploratory pathway used outsiders to affirm their resolve to stay true to themselves in a range of circumstances. They saw finding and securing jobs with high fit as a reflection of the appeal of their portable selves. One noted, ''I certainly have a clearer picture of myself. It is clear that I am more comfortable being balanced in private life and work life. It is also my very true vision. So I am talking to [company X]; the culture there seems to be quite attractive'' (14ii). As the quotation suggests, these participants felt that the viability of their portable selves was affirmed when they were resolute enough to resist the lure of opportunities that did not fit them and stuck with the companies that they found attractive instead. Participants on the exploratory pathway also reported that validation gave them confidence, but their confidence was associated with feeling clear and resolute enough to select and gain entry into work environments that would allow them to express their clarified selves. One person, who had resolved to join his partner's family business, explained:

> Several companies e-mailed me with interesting positions, and I declined all those invitations. I may live to regret it, but it's the decision I wanted to make. I've really been consciously trying to paint myself into the corner and making sure that I don't get those kinds of easy options, because they're just too tempting sometimes. (51iii)

Making meaning of the self and the institution. As participants transitioned out of Blue, they articulated an understanding of the function it would serve in their lives. Two people, one on each pathway, described the year with metaphors of predators moving through vast landscapes. The one on the adaptive pathway said Blue was ''like an eagle that comes once in your life, and you decide whether or not to step on it. Once you step on it, it will take you places that you've never been before. You just don't look back'' (42iii). The one on the exploratory pathway likened herself to a young leopard emerging from a cave. She cast Blue as an open plain through which she grows up and sets off to an even larger space—not to explore it all but to find within it a place of her own:

> [The leopard] is about six weeks old, taking her time in the cave. The plain is extremely open but very exciting. It's a lot of territory to explore, and as she runs,

> almost like a movie in slow motion, the leopard grows up. She never goes back to the cave, but she does know that the space is extremely big. Whether she goes east, north, or west it's not going to look so different. So she is after finding an area that she prefers. (55iii)

As the metaphors hint, participants on the adaptive pathway tended to see Blue as a fast track to their goals, whereas those on the exploratory pathway internalized Blue as an inner journey of discovery. As one participant on the adaptive pathway explained, ''It's an accelerator, so I think in 11 months you get what you could have done in several years'' (41iii). In contrast, a participant on the exploratory pathway described the year as ''a journey of self-exploration, learning new things definitely and learning new things about myself'' (33iii). Although in earlier phases participants had been striving to understand what Blue was like and how to make the most of it, now they strove to make sense of what had happened to them and others during their year at Blue and how they could carry it with them.

The Systems Psychodynamics of Crafting Portable Selves

As we examined how participants crafted portable selves at Blue, we were struck by the distinctiveness of accounts from people pursuing the two pathways—and the separation between the pathways and people following them. We employed a systems psychodynamic lens to examine why that separation might have emerged—within and between people—and to explain what crafting portable selves, and doing so in this particular way, accomplished for individuals and the institution. As noted earlier, systems psychodynamic theorizing is particularly useful to explain seemingly irrational arrangements, such as, in our case, people forfeiting the opportunities and relations afforded by one of the two pathways, hence missing out on part of the institution they had invested in. Seen through this lens, we theorize that the separation of the pathways constituted a ''functional polarization,'' which divides a group into opposing factions. At Blue it divided the group into subgroups holding different aims, anxieties, and views of each other and the institution. We regard it as functional because it advanced a significant purpose: crafting portable selves that allowed people to prove their worth in and beyond Blue and allowed Blue to prove its value during and beyond people's membership. Below we illustrate our inferences that the mechanisms of splitting, introjection, projective identification, and partial reintegration underpinned the functional polarization and elaborate on the function of portable selves for people in contemporary careers. Table B3 in the Online Appendix provides additional evidence of these systems psychodynamic processes.

Splitting and introjection. Our analysis suggests that the orientation phase crystallized an intrapsychic split within participants. Splitting occurs when people partition a set of conflicting thoughts or feelings into two distinct subsets and then claim one subset while ignoring or disowning the other. It is a psychological defense mechanism because it reduces the discomfort of ambiguity and ambivalence (Klein, 1959). Consider the case of ''Elizabeth,'' who joined Blue after working on three continents for a global manufacturing company over 12 years. Before arriving, like most people in our sample, she expressed a mixture

of achievement and discovery aims. Asked why she had chosen Blue, she explained that she ''always wanted to be a senior VP . . . and I think the MBA can help me jump a few hurdles and get there quicker'' (35i). A few minutes later, she also noted, ''The problem is that there is another reason why I'm doing this, that I don't know what I want. I suddenly woke up at 33 years old, thinking, what is it that I want?'' The tension between those aims—one driving her to jump hurdles on her trajectory, the other to wake up and question it—was a ''problem'' and a source of discomfort. ''Honestly, I am really scared,'' she confessed. ''How am I going to sit with a guy and talk about corporate finance, [I] don't know anything, everybody will think that I am a stupid student. [And] maybe I'll find out during the course that that is not what I want at all.'' Doubling down on proving herself suited to being a ''senior VP,'' while at the same time questioning if that is what she really wanted, would likely intensify Elizabeth's discomfort.

Yet this doubling down is precisely what Blue encouraged. The activities infused by its two ideologies—one instrumental and the other humanistic—were in principle complementary and mutually supportive but in practice made conflicting demands and offered conflicting prescriptions, so that pursuing both aims at once was a source of tension. For example, in one class, a group's failure to turn in a deliverable on time could be chastised as a problem to be fixed, consistent with Blue's instrumental ideology, whereas in the next it might be celebrated as an opportunity, consistent with its humanistic ideology, to examine why groups stall.

The tension between the two ideologies generated friction between participants and faculty as well. ''Some of the faculty didn't get a bit of our expectations,'' one participant lamented in a turn of phrase that hints of a split whereby one ''gets,'' as in understands and owns, only one ''bit'' of a whole. He recalled a discussion during which a professor ''said 'you know, you have to learn,' and that's a fact. And another person replied, 'But we are also here to get a positive NPV [net present value]''' (25iii). Though learning and getting a positive NPV need not be contradictory, the simultaneous pursuit of discovery and achievement aims and upholding instrumental and humanistic ideologies created a problematic tension that people managed, we suggest, through splitting: embracing one set of aims and anxieties and one ideology while ignoring or disowning the other.

Elizabeth, who initially had mixed aims and confessed to being ''really scared,'' for example, appeared clearer if not entirely relaxed a few months later. Reflecting then on why she had come to Blue, she replied, ''The answer would still be the same [as in my first interview]. I didn't know what I wanted to do, and I wanted to give myself a little break to figure out what I wanted'' (35ii). That answer, however, was hardly the same. She did not mention her intent to rise faster in her company or her concerns about financial savvy and others' judgment. When we inquired about what had happened to that intent, she minimized it and swiftly returned to emphasizing her lack of self-knowledge:

> I was a little nervous that I wouldn't fit in with engineers and accountants and finance people. I'm not an expert in anything, but I know a little bit about all subjects. The thing I don't know [is] what I want to do after. I don't even know where I want to be or what industry. . . . Whereas six months ago I probably leaned towards my old

> industry, now I would say a new industry, and I see myself in the Far East or the Middle East.

By splitting their two original aims, participants were able to give clear, consistent meanings to success and failure, thus minimizing conflicts between the demands and prescriptions of Blue's ideologies. During the orientation phase, they introjected the ideology whose images of what to hope for and what to fear resonated with their aims. Introjection is the process by which someone internalizes narratives, ideologies, and prescriptions from external sources and incorporates them into his or her own self so as to protect or bolster it (Ogden, 1979; Sandler, 1990). While embracing discovery aims and dismissing achievement ones, Elizabeth praised the activities associated with the humanistic ideology as essential to remedying her lack of self-knowledge and credited Blue for making her concerns intelligible and manageable, settling on the exploratory pathway. As she put it, ''I've never learnt so many things about myself as I have in the last six months. I can feel myself thinking about the things that I do. . . . I'm recognizing patterns and stuff like that. I don't think I would realize that without the amount of time we spend on [examining] personal behavior here'' (35ii).

Subgroup formation and projective identification. In the consolidation phase, participants described having formed informal subgroups characterized by similar outlooks on Blue and life in general. ''I'm seeing a pattern here,'' Elizabeth reflected. ''As soon as I put people into certain categories, I behave one way towards one type of people and a different way towards other people.'' These ''types of people'' were not just different; they were ''big opposites,'' she added. ''The group got split and there's no glue.'' Participants saw the emergence of subgroups as a result of their choice to affiliate with like-minded peers. As one put it, ''People have all kinds of motivations for coming [to Blue]. A lot of the people that I am close to all have a very similar motivation for spending a year doing this. That is probably the biggest thing [that brings us together]'' (51ii).

The emergence and progressive distancing of subgroups defined by shared aims and attitudes toward each other and toward the MBA increased the polarization that had germinated in the orientation phase. Groups coalesced around the pathways that made self and institution more intelligible and manageable. A participant on the exploratory pathway noted that he ''basically . . . split the group in two'' and went on to describe their differences as follows: ''one [subgroup, on the adaptive pathway] is the most competitive people in Blue—they approach you, like, 'Oh, you have to be a leader, otherwise you are out of the group.' And then there are others [on the exploratory pathway] that are more friendly'' (8iii). In reciprocal fashion, a participant on the adaptive pathway remarked disparagingly about those on the exploratory pathway: ''Most of the people that are here seem to be searching for something, but I don't really know what they are going to do with their lives'' (16ii).

This intergroup polarization, we infer, both enabled and was sustained by projective identification, a defense mechanism whereby members of one group project the split-off, disowned part of themselves onto another group and distance themselves from it, while at the same time keeping the other group

close enough that they can identify with it—an identification that is usually negative (Klein, 1959). It is defensive because the simultaneous dismissal, while not completely letting go of the other group, bolsters the self's clarity and value while sustaining some semblance of wholeness through identification with the other (Petriglieri and Stein, 2012). It is most potent when it is reciprocal so that each side regards the other as puzzling and misguided but never ignores or completely loses sight of it.

At the same time that participants created distance from those on the other pathway, we found no evidence that their dismissal turned into exclusion. On the contrary, after disowning aims that the other group embraced, participants tended to express, if not appreciation or understanding, at least recognition of the value of the other group, all telltale signs of projective identification. As one participant on the adaptive pathway remarked, ''We have the crazy people, but you still accept them, you know who they are. You appreciate them for being their personality, for being themselves, regardless of whether you like them'' (15ii). Another, on the exploratory pathway, divided the cohort into people who shared his career pursuits and those who did not, initially feeling irritated by the latter but ultimately accepting them: ''I spent a lot of time thinking about what I want to do, and I get annoyed with the lack of understanding that [members of] the class [have] about what I am doing. There are people who totally get it and want to do the same thing, and people who just don't get it really. But it's OK'' (51iii). What makes being misunderstood ''OK'' is a systemic effort to keep the two groups far away yet close enough to reap the benefits of projective identification. One person captured it by describing the cohort culture as ''competitive friendliness'':

> It's difficult because [the cohort] includes very deeply diverse people, people who are looking at life and what they want to take out of [Blue] from very different points of view. That shows, and there is no need for everybody to agree on that. It's good that you have those perspectives not only because it enriches discussions, but also because you can reflect on ''I don't like that'' or ''I like that.'' There is a diversity that comes from the individuals, and then there are some things that have been formed throughout the time at Blue, and this is the competitive friendliness that is out there. (20ii)

This participant portrays people's different outlooks on life and aspirations as the most salient dimension of diversity at Blue and a source of difficulty. He then describes the value of such diversity as enabling one to clarify one's choices by comparing and contrasting the self to others, suggesting he recognizes that clarifying his identity at Blue is a social and not simply individual-level phenomenon.

Through projective identification, the cohort remained supportive of contradictory aims and ideologies even while individuals distanced themselves, at least consciously, from one set. As a result, intrapsychic and institutional tensions were lodged in intergroup polarization. Such polarization segregated the pathways and in so doing helped to sustain clarity and possibilities in personal lives, relationships, and an institution that might otherwise have been fraught with ambiguity, ambivalence, and conflict.

Further data for this inference came from participants who found themselves at times straying from one pathway or caught between the two. Their

accounts featured confusion, anxiety, and struggle. Following some reflective activities that made her reconsider her achievement aims, for example, one participant began trying out some exploratory strategies:

> I've gone through an emotional rollercoaster. When I started I felt that I was myself, who I normally am, very dynamic. Now I feel like I've got the life sucked out of me. At this point, I want to keep myself in an emotional space where I can present myself to a company, have a good attitude, get the job I want, and be done with this place. (53ii).

For her, the introspection revealed intense anxiety that pulled her back onto the adaptive pathway where she could get the job she wanted. Her comments about having the ''life sucked out of me'' and wanting to ''be done with this place'' hint at the sense of despair entailed in straying from one's pathway. Another person, who had settled on the exploratory pathway, described the difficulty he experienced when attempting a shift to adaptive work for the job search: ''It was very intense, you find yourself even in competition with yourself, driving yourself further than your personal limits. . . . Honestly, I was a time bomb.'' He found solace in reverting to personal exploration, which ''stabilized me'' (48ii).

Partial reintegration. As the end of the program approached, the polarization decreased and participants began to reclaim the parts of themselves that they had earlier split off, though not entirely or without some degree of discomfort. The recognition of belonging to one cohort, albeit with differences within, prevailed in the later interviews. As one participant put it, ''There is a feeling that we are one large group, but then you know there are different subgroups too that get along well, and there is acceptance and awareness of that'' (39iii). We interpret these expressions of acceptance as attempts to reclaim the aims and anxieties that participants had projected onto others. The intergroup reconciliation, however, did not amount to a full integration of the two pathways. Participants remained anchored to one or the other. For example, one participant, who had been pursuing the exploratory pathway, expressed inner conflict in reflecting on his job search. Whereas for people on the adaptive pathway getting several job offers was a source of validation and pride, his tone when discussing his job offers was confessional and revealed far more ambivalence:

> I interviewed with many companies. It was important for me to have lots of offers, honestly speaking. Getting that kind of recognition, also, maybe, it's not so nice to say, assuring to myself that I can do better than others. I am competitive. I learned that during the year. [It] was not clear to me before. It kind of released me. It's like a burden off my shoulders. . . . I was not interested in a consulting job, but it was the one offer that I got happiest about. I am aware that the search for reassurance is not always, necessarily, very good. At [Blue] they encouraged me to get this reassurance, and until I get it I probably won't be released and free to really act as myself. I'm maybe trying to fulfill expectations that are out there so that I will get the reassurance, and then I will get a green card to act as I think I am, to act as myself. (12iii)

He acknowledges a part of himself that seeks the achievement aims of the adaptive pathway while clearly remaining steeped in the humanistic ideology.

Hence the achievement part is portrayed as a burden, a potential derailer, and something to be tempered with awareness. His relationship to that part remains uneasy, akin to a marriage of convenience to eventually ''get a green card'' that will set him free to be himself in the workplace.

Another participant who had been firmly entrenched in the exploratory pathway explained in his third interview his pragmatic need to also be adaptive and thus imagined having to pursue achievement aims in the short run:

> I really dislike what somebody will call hypocrisy and some may call adapting. It goes on in corporations when you need to deal with people, and these are the people that you have for dinner but you wanted other people and you hate those [you have]. But in the end you put a smile on your face because you need to. I will not be able to tolerate that forever, so I am going to do something of my own in two to five years from now. (18iii)

In this quotation, again, efforts to adapt are acknowledged but not fully owned; they are portrayed as a necessary evil and spoken about in the more distant second person.

As relations between groups on different pathways shifted toward reconciliation, people acknowledged the value of activities associated with the ideology they had neglected. One on the adaptive pathway noted, ''One of the things that I wasn't really doing the MBA for was self-development. But it seems to be a nice side effect . . . having these opportunities—sometimes they don't feel as much opportunities as chores—to reflect on how you behaved in groups, and understand yourself'' (52iii). The mention of self-understanding as a chore with positive side effects illustrates how participants came to appreciate the opportunities afforded by the other ideology: as a collateral benefit. A participant on the exploratory pathway, after portraying reflection and action as conflicting, explained how he had shifted his focus to engage in the job search. At that point, he took advantage of opportunities afforded by the instrumental ideology:

> During the first six months [I was] analyzing myself, doing a lot of introspection. Now I need to get my job, and for that I need to be strong enough. I [couldn't be] doubting myself or be like ''Am I doing it right? Am I not doing it right?'' So these five months have been more like, let it go, don't dig inside so much. (18iii)

Here too, adaptive work is not described as self-defining but as a necessity, a complement to his primary pursuits, acknowledged as useful but not owned as expressive.

On the cusp of departing Blue, Elizabeth, who previously indicated that she might take a job outside of her industry in the Far or Middle East, expressed appreciation for the opportunities that Blue had generated to find jobs in her European home town. But she subordinated her appreciation of adaptive themes—flexibility and opportunity—to the purpose of ongoing exploration: ''I don't know if I want [a family,] but at least living in [City] will give me a great opportunity to discover what I want. Because once you are in the Far East, or wherever expat life takes you, it becomes something you don't think about. It is just work.'' By this time, she had entirely reframed her circumstances before Blue. Whereas she had once described the MBA as a step toward senior

management, she now reported that she had been stuck professionally. ''I was not happy, and if I had to really think about it, probably not just professionally. I was just unhappy in general, and I didn't know how to get out of that.''

The Functions of Portable Selves

Participants' aspirations in mobile working lives, together with the institution's efforts to prove itself transformative, motivated the pursuit of portable selves. When it was successful, regardless of the pathway taken, this pursuit helped participants make sense of, act within, and feel good about the institution; smoothed transitions to the organizations that they would join next; and prepared participants for mobile working lives over the long term. ''Before, I thought I was more tied to people and to places and to organizations, and now I think that I can go anywhere'' (8iii), said one person reflecting on how he had changed. Portable selves gave participants the perception of relative stability even as they would remain on the move. One participant captured the sense of stability in motion with the image of learning to ride a bicycle: ''I left parental help before, but probably I was in between. I was riding the bicycle with the small stabilizers on the back wheels. And now I am riding the bicycle without them. I am ready just to go and explore things on my own'' (36iii). Our analysis suggests that portable selves made these developments possible and desirable by affording people a sense of agentic direction and enduring connections that buffered them against the potential uncertainty, powerlessness, and loneliness of mobile working lives.

Participants' sense of agentic direction appeared in their narratives of work as a personal choice. If the future held little certainty, at least they had agency to face it. Although still not sure about his long-term destination, one person explained:

> What I am really hoping to do with [my next] position is to cap the résumé off. That will position me to do almost whatever I want, if I decide that I don't want to stay in industry and I want to go back to politics, or if I want to do something hybrid with an NGO, or something like that. (15iii)

Externally anchored portable selves, crafted through the adaptive pathway, gave participants a sense of agentic direction through the belief that they could adapt to new situations. As one said, ''I have a generally positive feeling that I could do anything that I was excited about. . . . I don't like to be the deep kind of guy, I like to be the broad kind of guy'' (24ii). In contrast, internally anchored portable selves, crafted through the exploratory pathway, gave people a sense of agentic direction through the belief that they could recognize and access settings in which they could stay true to themselves. One explained, ''I got two offers and [company] wants to continue discussions, but I didn't even look [at it]. I don't want to waste our time'' (44iii). In either case, agentic direction defended people against feeling powerless in the face of career uncertainty. ''[Before Blue] my company was more in power to make the call on where I should go next,'' said one, ''whereas now I think that I have power back, and I can make choices of where I am going to go'' (20iii). Comments from friends, old colleagues, and family affirmed participants' sense of agency. One reported, ''One of the things they said was,

'You are less naïve than before, and it looks like you are really in charge of the future now''' (10iii).

Portable selves were grounded in the enduring connections participants developed at Blue and in their Blue affiliation. The conviction that those connections would last was widespread and gave people membership in a community that, like them, was not anchored to a single place. It also gave permanent value to participants' temporary membership at Blue, because affiliations developed there would transcend it. ''I was able to connect with people throughout the world,'' said one, ''and that will give me a sensation that I can always count on somebody'' (18iii). Participants who had successfully crafted and validated portable selves expressed deep appreciation for Blue. Either as a platform or as a retreat, Blue had changed them, and they would carry those changes with them. Belonging to a community that shared the Blue affiliation, dispersed as it might be, defended people against the potential isolation of mobile lives. Reflecting on how he had benefited from Blue, one said,

> It's very comforting. If I find myself in a situation where I am just not happy doing what I am doing, I should proactively do something and change. I shouldn't feel insecure about making drastic changes. I have more confidence in my ability to do that, and I don't think I would have had it going to another company. I can refer that to the skills I've gained, it gives me confidence knowing those, and there is a lot more. (51iii)

We found further evidence that portable selves served these functions in the (notably few) accounts of participants who seemed to have been unable to craft such selves and either could not secure a broad range of opportunities on the adaptive pathway or find access to a setting that felt clearly conducive to self-expression in the exploratory pathway. In both situations, existing identities limited participants' agency in crafting and claiming who they were and who they could become and made them feel powerless in the face of strong constraints. As a result, they questioned the value of Blue and the benefits of all their work there. These people did not report feeling confident upon leaving Blue but were instead disappointed. People who had pursued the adaptive pathway unsuccessfully were disappointed if they perceived that part of their identity was incongruent with, say, being international or a leader, and this perception diminished the portability of their self. For example, one participant focused his concerns on how the status of his native country reflected negatively on his credibility: ''Lots of people are looking at you in relation to the country you come from, and sometimes my opinions were not heard because I am from a country that is not so important'' (6ii). People who had pursued the exploratory pathway unsuccessfully were disappointed if they perceived that they remained bound to constricting social settings that would limit their self-expression. One participant who had to return to support the family business in unforeseen circumstances noted bitterly, ''I know that very soon I'll be just a damn suit with a smile on my face and fitting a mold'' (17iii). A participant who had declined a move because of family constraints told us before leaving that his ''biggest question'' was ''why I did the MBA and what I actually achieved from Blue and whether it was worth doing'' (16iii).

DISCUSSION

Our study casts light on how workers and organizations try to seize the opportunities and overcome the challenges presented by contemporary careers and fluid workplaces. Our findings reveal that the expectation of mobility that defines contemporary careers, combined with the awareness that membership in one's organization is temporary, leads people to craft selves that can be valued within and across the organization's boundaries. We found two categories of such portable selves. One was anchored in external sources of self-definition, such as leader; its portability hinged on being able to adapt to its meaning in different settings. The other was anchored in internal sources of self-definition, such as the feeling of being creative; its portability hinged on being able to find settings in which to express that self. In both cases, self-definitions did not depend on one's current organization even though they were refined within it. Our theorizing explains the functions of portable selves and the process through which people craft them in temporary identity workspaces.

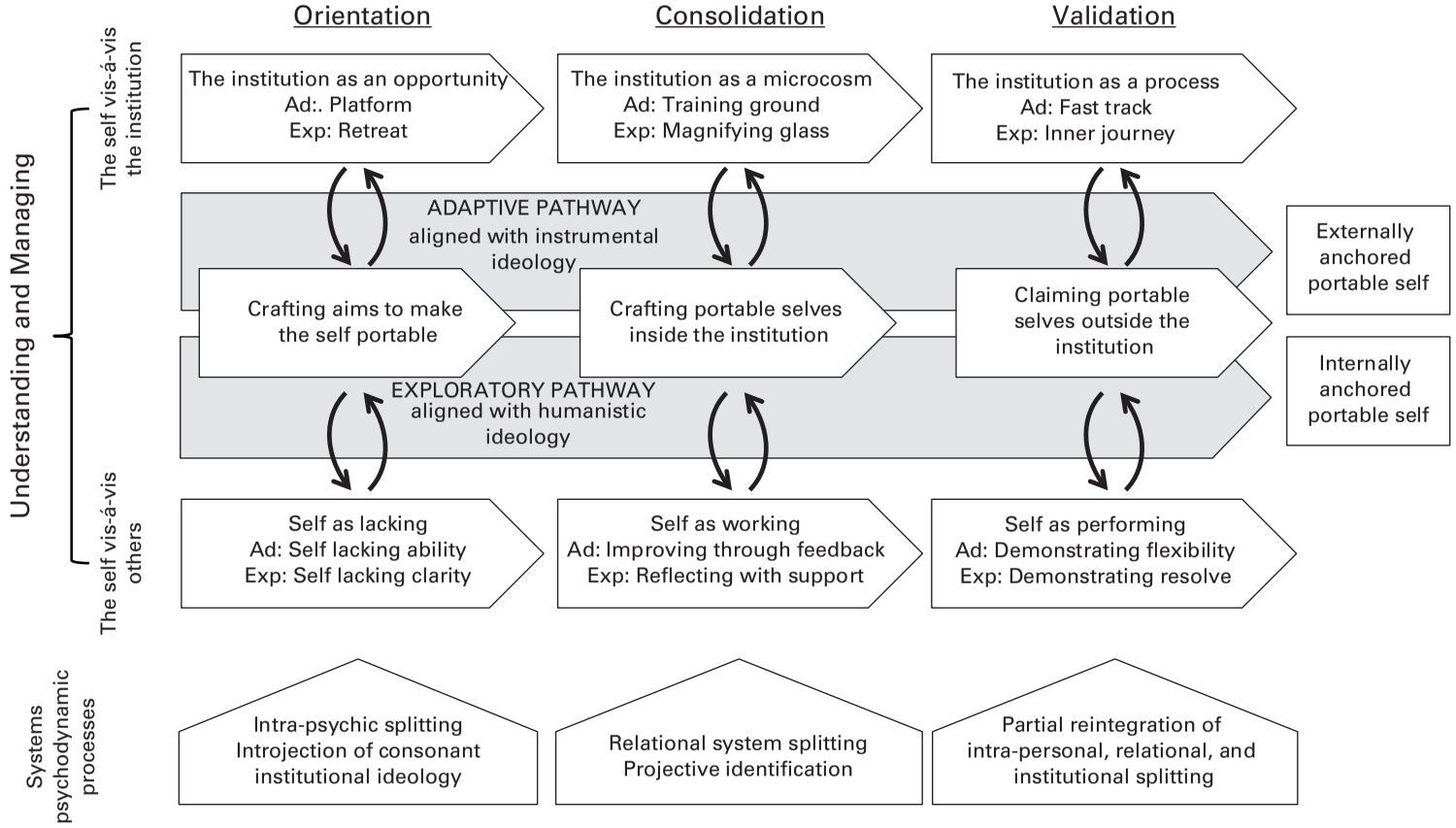
The psychological function of portable selves is to bolster people's sense of agentic direction and to provide enduring connections, which buffers them from the uncertainty and isolation attendant to mobile working lives. Portable selves offer identity narratives of life and career trajectories in which personal choice is central. They afford enduring connection by strengthening bonds with others engaged in similar careers and to an institution of which they remain alumni. Thus these selves are both an adaptation to contemporary careers and a defense against the anxieties they provoke.

The social function of portable selves is to foster identification with the communities and institutions in which they are crafted. In the context of eroded social contracts, organizations that promise to help people be more portable become very attractive. Regardless of how long their membership might last, people entrust such organizations as identity workspaces because they assume that selves and relationships developed there will be valuable outside and in the future. By forging bonds not confined to one organization, members are able to manage the paradox of needing firm attachments in order to be self-reliant (Kahn, 2002).

As a theoretical construct, the portable self bridges levels of analysis and returns meaning and value to the bond among individual, career, and organization even when careers are not expected to unfold within a single organization. The pursuit of portable selves binds people to institutions they do not expect to remain members of and reduces conflicts and contradictions within both the self—as between achievement and discovery aims—and the institution—as between instrumental and humanistic ideologies.

Our model, shown in figure 1, suggests that the process of crafting portable selves in a temporary identity workspace unfolds in three stages—orientation, consolidation, and verification—along one of two pathways. Each pathway features distinct ways of making meaning of the self in relation to others and the institution, shaping and being shaped by social interactions within the temporary identity workspace. By attending to verbal and thematic associations, we inferred that the systemic psychodynamic processes of splitting and introjection, projective identification, and partial reintegration underpinned the functional polarization of subgroups pursuing each pathway.

Figure 1. A model of crafting portable selves in a temporary identity workspace.



The orientation phase unfolds across the entry boundary of the temporary identity workspace. During this phase the need for portability is thrown into stark relief as members face the challenge of parting from their communities, finding a place in the one they have just joined, and preparing for the ones they may join in the future. People enter the organization with a mix of potentially conflicting aims, ranging from achieving a future self to discovering a current one. Prompted by institutional activities and scrutiny by others, members revisit and revise their aims. In the process, a dichotomy emerges. Members who are able to account for their trajectories as expressions of personal interests and choices embrace achievement aims. Members who are unable to articulate such aims, or are unable to express them as personalized and agentic, embrace exploratory aims. Either way, this process casts the self as lacking, and longing for, either the ability or the clarity that would make the self portable. It also casts the institution as a place where ability and clarity may be cultivated or found. This process foreshadows two potential ways of achieving portability: competently enacting one's desired self or finding settings in which that self might be manifested.

The progressive splitting of aims, and of anxieties related to not being able to achieve them, leads members to introject the interpretations and follow the prescriptions of the institutional ideology that promises to help them fulfill their aims and soothe their anxieties. It also allows them to disown conflicting aims and anxieties they may have held. Members whose aims focus on achievement introject the instrumental ideology; members whose aims focus on discovery introject the humanistic ideology. The processes of splitting and introjection underpin the emergence of two pathways for crafting portable selves. These pathways, in turn, position members in relation to each other, the current institution, and the communities and institutions they came from and may join next.

The consolidation phase unfolds within the temporary identity workspace as members conduct identity work and internalize images of the institution congruent with their work. Those on the adaptive pathway engage in cycles of experimentation and feedback to close the gap between their current and desired future selves. Those on the exploratory pathway engage in assisted introspection to clarify and express their current self. Adaptive identity workers anchor their portability in external, social definitions—such as leader—and view the institution as a training ground in which attitudes and behaviors consistent with these definitions may be practiced and internalized. Exploratory identity workers anchor it instead in internal, personal definitions—such as creative—and view the institution as a magnifying glass through which attitudes and behaviors consistent with those definitions may be revealed. In doing this work, people practice adapting to local interpretations of broad social definitions or holding on to the expression of personal definitions, abilities that promise to help in their future transitions.

The consolidation of different definitions of portability and ways to pursue it polarizes the relational system as members affiliate with those on the same pathway and create distance from those on the other. These subgroups then engage in a process of projective identification whereby denigration of and puzzlement about the other group helps affirm the value and clarity of their own group. As each group splits off and projects disowned aims and anxieties onto the other, the groups become both alien and necessary to each other. Each

holds one pole of the community's hopes, anxieties, and ideologies, thus relieving individuals from having to experience the tension within themselves. When members stray from one pathway or stand between the two, they experience the confusion and anxiety that having separate pathways keeps at bay.

The validation phase unfolds as members cross—first intermittently and then permanently—the organization's exit boundary. During this phase, members seek confirmation that the selves they have been crafting are portable by claiming them in relation to outsiders. For members on the adaptive pathway, portable selves are affirmed by receiving validation for claims of broad social identities in multiple settings. Obtaining it requires them to demonstrate flexibility by adapting to local interpretations of those categories. For members on the exploratory pathway, portable selves are affirmed by receiving validation for their claims of personal identities in specific settings. Obtaining it requires them to demonstrate resolve by selecting only environments in which those identities are valued.

Outside recognition affirms the lasting value of members' work in the temporary identity workspace, of the relationships that supported that work, and of the institution. In doing so, it anchors people to the institution they are on the cusp of leaving. Members who cannot validate their selves as portable find themselves constrained outside and loosely tied inside the institution and find little value in the time spent there. As uncertainty and anxiety decrease among those who receive validation of their portability, the need for splitting becomes less pressing and the two pathways are partially reconciled. Successful members come to appreciate the ideology and activities associated with the pathway not taken, which allows them to recover some inner complexity and to feel gratitude for the whole of the institution.

Contributions to Theory

Our study makes five theoretical contributions to the literatures on identity work, contemporary careers, and systems psychodynamics. First, it contributes to identity and career scholarship by introducing the construct of portable selves and theorizing how such selves help people deal with and thrive in mobile working lives. Our findings show that the agentic direction and enduring connections that portable selves afford reduce the strain posed by the frequent discontinuities and loose affiliations of contemporary careers.

We hypothesize that the pursuit of portability may be a defense against the chronic liminality that contemporary careers can engender (Ibarra and Obodaru, 2016). Despite being involved in an uncertain transition in a temporary institution, participants in our study did not describe themselves in ways consistent with the liminality usually associated with such transitions and spaces (Van Gennep, 1960; Eliade, 1995). Their accounts were not of being ''neither here nor there'' (Turner, 1969: 95) but rather of being *both* here *and* there. Their identity work in the institution had meaning only in relation to the communities from which they came and those they hoped to join. Padavic (2005: 129) argued that ''it is difficult to rearrange one's personality to be tough and flexible enough to avoid dependence on an employer (Leinberger and Tucker, 1991).'' Our study suggests that portable selves might be one way for people to do so.

Some would argue that efforts to secure the self are illusory (Knights and Clarke, 2013), but that does not make portable selves matter any less. People's

lives and actions are often rendered intelligible and tolerable by illusions and fantasies, which are an ''unavoidable accompaniment of real experiences, constantly interacting with them'' (Frosh, 2001: 51). All identities may be grounded fantasies—emotionally containing, embedded in social relations, and bound to institutional images (Gabriel, 2015). This makes them consequential both for individuals' psychic economy and for the social systems they affiliate with or take distance from and oppose. Although the reasons for actual choices may be disputable, as Ashford, George, and Blatt (2007: 85) suggested, for outcomes, ''narratives of choice may matter more.''

The second contribution of this study to identity scholarship is the articulation of alternative pathways to craft portable selves that emerge as conflicted members navigate and are managed by conflicted institutions. The efforts of individuals undertaking adaptive identity work mirror existing research on identity work in adaptation to desired professional roles (Ibarra, 1999; Pratt, Rockmann, and Kaufmann, 2006). About half of our sample, however, conducted their identity work differently. The identity work of individuals pursuing the exploratory pathway resembles the ''soliloquies'' characteristic of individuals during significant life experiences and times of personal change (Athens, 1994). Much of these people's work seemed aimed at recognizing and coming to terms with the ''phantom community'' (Athens, 1994) of internalized significant others. We found that others were fundamental to the pursuit of both pathways, whether as sources of feedback or witnesses. Portable selves were a way to relate both to local and remote others, embodied and imaginary ones. These findings support the view that trusted others are necessary for the development of self-reliance (Kahn, 2002) and independent selves (Silva, 2012). Such others not only grant individuals' identity claims (Bartel and Dutton, 2001) but also shape their desires (Voronov and Vince, 2012) and career expectations (Gersick, Bartunek, and Dutton, 2000).

Our third contribution bridges the literatures on identity, careers, and systems psychodynamics by theorizing about temporary identity workspaces. Through the functional polarization of instrumental and humanistic ideologies that are complementary in principle and contradictory in practice, we suggest, these institutions help people pursue agentic selves and forge affiliations that outlive their membership. Portable selves affirmed participants' worth and the value of the institution, which implies that despite the erosion of secure social contracts, we should not regard all institutions as dominated by transactionalism. Institutions able to position themselves as temporary identity workspaces may be able to extend their members' identification in the long term by fostering enduring affiliations.

We extend scholarship on the unfolding of individuals' identities, which has thus far privileged the ways individuals protect or change their self-conceptions in response to their social context (Kunda, 1992; Van Maanen, 1998; Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007). This work commonly portrays people and collectivities in a state of tension—the former attempting to craft or regain some individuality in response to the latter's pull toward conformity. Less attention has been paid to how ''organizations might shape identities in a direction desired by members'' (Anteby, 2008: 203; see also Cable, Gino, and Staats, 2013), inducing conformity and allowing individuation simultaneously (Scott, 2010; Nicholson and Carroll, 2013; Ekman, 2014) as they orient members' careers (Van Maanen, 1998; Anteby and Wrzesniewski, 2014). Our study highlights how

these processes may happen in concert in temporary identity workspaces as people interpret and internalize these institutions' dual ideologies.

Our study contributes to research on dual ideologies in organizations by theorizing how they might affect members' identity work. Our work may help explain why, in recent studies on duality, members seemed to identify with one organizational identity and ignored or denigrated the other: because doing so allows them to craft a variety of clear and valuable identities while in the same institution. Like Anteby and Wrzesniewski (2014) and Ashforth and Reingen (2014), we found little evidence of the kind of intrapsychic integration that Besharov (2014) described among the leaders of the organization she studied. Though the polarization in our setting eased enough to remain functional, participants remained anchored to one or the other ideology as the primary lens through which they understood their experience, their development, and the institution. This may be due to the limited time frame of our study. Ashforth and Reingen (2014) contended that defensive mechanisms such as the splitting and projective identification we observed might be steps toward later integration. The absence of integration may also be due to the pressure of the institution and the uncertainty of members' prospects, which increased their anxieties and made defensive reactions more likely. Finally, it may be due to participants' temporary membership. Integration may occur when time allows and seniority demands it—that is, when one is in a position that requires representing both ideologies of one's institution (Besharov, 2014).

The fourth contribution our study makes, to the systems psychodynamics literature, is to theorize the functional polarization that sustains the crafting of portable selves. Seminal work has suggested that tensions among aims, principles, and ideologies can be defining for groups and organizations (Smith and Berg, 1987), showing how lodging such dualities in separate and conflicting subgroups can be valuable for the institution but restrictive for its individual members (Ashforth and Reingen, 2014). In contrast, we show how polarization can prove functional for both the institution and its members—allowing the former to fulfill its promises and the latter to realize their ambitions—thus suggesting that intrapsychic and institutional conflicts that manifest themselves in intergroup tension might be more than a defensive, conservative move. For temporary members, like Blue participants, it may be more convenient to let the institution hold the tension between conflicting identities and ideologies, thereby preserving the institution's duality, both because avoiding inner conflict is "psychologically comfortable" (Ashforth and Reingen, 2014: 502) in the present and because, as our study shows, each side of a duality may provide different yet consistent prescriptions that bolster hope for the self and regard for the institution in the future.

Fifth, this paper enriches research on learning as becoming, rather than simple knowledge acquisition (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Carlsen, 2006), by examining the processual, existential, and emotional aspects of management learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Willmott, 1997; Thomas and Linstead, 2002). Our investigation of identity construction in the context of contemporary careers complements recent scholarship on the acquisition of knowledge and expertise within these careers (Barley and Kunda, 2004; O'Mahony and Bechky, 2006) and enriches claims that "the more fluid the corporate environment, the more management education and learning become closely related to, and potentially overlap with, managers' identity work" (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010: 55). The

psychological and social functions of management education are of great significance for two reasons. The first is the sheer number of people these institutions affect directly (Walsh, 2011): degrees in business are the most popular degrees in the United States, accounting for 25 percent of all master's degrees (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). The second is that schools of management socialize elites who move on to exercise leadership in a broad range of other organizations (Khurana, 2007; Anteby, 2013; Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2015).

Generalizability

Building theory from accounts of a single MBA program exposes our study to generalizability challenges that are common to inductive research. Naturalistic generalizability (Stake, 2000) suggests that our findings might apply most readily to mobile professionals in educational institutions. Theoretical generalizability (Firestone, 1993), however, makes our theory potentially applicable to other organizations that do not host members for their whole career but promise to help them develop beyond what is necessary to deliver results in and for the organization. This description no longer applies only to educational institutions.

As former General Electric CEO Jack Welch stated in a 2001 address at the Harvard Business School, ''You can guarantee lifetime employability by training people, making them adaptable, making them mobile to go other places to do other things. But you can't guarantee lifetime employment'' (Davis, 2015: 1). Over a decade later, the promise of learning instead of loyalty is widespread in business and beyond. Professional service and technology firms, most notably, strive to portray themselves as ''talent factories.'' Many refer to their headquarters as ''campuses'' and to former employees as ''alumni.'' These organizations strive to foster identification among workers to whom they neither promise loyalty nor prescribe career trajectories. They promise lasting transformation but only temporary membership, and scholars have shown that employees find this offer to have economic value in volatile labor markets (Bidwell, 2011). Keeping such a valuable promise, we contend, hinges on balancing instrumental and humanistic ideologies so that members can acquire and claim the portable selves of ''leader'' or ''talent'' within and beyond the organization's premises.

Limitations and Future Research

While offering a potentially generalizable account of the crafting of portable selves within a temporary identity workspace, our theory remains the product of a deep immersion in one setting. Future research, in different settings, will be able to test its validity and boundaries. For example, scholars might investigate the influence on the process we outlined of different job market conditions (during the year of our study, most students had several job offers), organizations (work versus education focused), managers' age and work experience, structure (partial versus complete encapsulation), internationalism (presence versus absence of a dominant national culture), and status (high versus low). Comparing settings with different balances of the instrumental and humanistic ideologies could also yield useful insights, as could comparing populations such as ours, whose members were certain that organizational membership would be temporary, with populations of workers who only

assume that it will be but have no set date for leaving the organization. Although we found that individuals conducted either adaptive or exploratory identity work, studies with a longer time frame might reveal whether and how individuals use both pathways at different points in their lives.

We have tried to balance the richness and holism of psychodynamic theorizing (Westen, 1992) with the methodological and theoretical precision required of any inductive study. Nevertheless, any theorizing that investigates unconscious processes, which are not directly observable, must be regarded as tentative and intended to provoke further research and discussion. Psychodynamic interpretations might be at best plausible or useful rather than ever proven and, much like the unconscious as we understand it, appear compelling but not entirely convincing. Thus a psychodynamic theoretical map should be regarded more like a political map than a geographic one, illustrating boundaries and distinctions set by human aspirations and conflicts. Although a political map might incorporate features not observable from an aerial picture, it will still prove useful to anyone traveling through the area or attempting to understand and relate to its residents. In an effort to problematize the meaning and illustrate the psychological function of taken-for-granted social arrangements, we have followed Hackman's (1985) admonition to document the process through which we came to our interpretations. We have also attempted to provide abundant evidence for the processes we infer throughout the description of the pathways and the illustration of the systems psychodynamics underpinning them. As in Schabram and Maitlis's (2016) study of the social construction of callings, not everyone we studied fit each pathway perfectly all the time, but as a whole they were the best representation of the data we gathered at Blue. Scholars studying different populations will undoubtedly be able to refine, dispute, and extend various elements of our theory.

We have focused on the effects of social interactions, but the processes we examined might also be influenced by individual variables, such as learning orientations (Dweck, 1986), stages of adult development (Kegan, 1982), and personality traits, as well as by cultural trends such as the glorification of ''meritocratic individualism'' (Newman, 1988; Anteby, 2013). Future research might elucidate the influence of such individual and cultural factors on the identity dynamics outlined here. The concept of portable selves may also provide rich ground for future investigations in this area of role transitions. One promising avenue would be to explore how either type of portable self affects role entry (Nicholson, 1984; Ashforth, 2001) and adaptation processes (Ibarra, 1999). In providing connection and agency, portable selves of both types are likely to motivate and filter the process of crafting and experimenting with provisional selves (Ibarra, 1999). It may be that individuals who craft portable selves based on internal self-definitions tend to identify with future organizations through affinity rather than changing the self (Pratt, 1998), bring more of their personal experience into new roles early on (Beyer and Hannah, 2002), or are more likely to experience their work as a calling (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). Also, those who craft portable selves based on external self-definitions might experiment with a broader range of provisional selves during role adaptation.

For workers hoping to succeed in fluid and uncertain organizations and careers, the pursuit of mobile working lives is a choice as much as a necessity. Such lives loosen one's roots while expanding one's reach. Our study casts light on how people and organizations might still form attachments even if their

relationship is not meant to last. We have argued that the crafting of portable selves helps people fit into and make the most of organizations that they might leave, allowing them to have a place while they continue to be going places. We hope our findings will prove interesting to scholars moving their theorizing beyond the boundaries of organizations and useful to workers journeying through those boundaries.

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