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# **Managers' identity construction at work: Artistic interventions as triggers for identity work**

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**Abstract:** Many scholars discuss how experiences from work are an important source for the construction of the personal identity. In this paper the various contextual dimensions at work that influence identity construction, are discussed. The empirical data consists of interviews with 33 Swedish managers with experiences in bringing arts into business. These, so called artistic interventions, are a growing phenomenon mainly initiated by managers. The findings are twofold: First to identify and describe a typology of five identity-related dimensions in the work context (built on Zambrell, 2004), dimensions that emerge in managers' expressed experiences, both from work in general and from the artistic intervention. In particular, among these managers a touching dimension emerges, i.e. experiencing honest appreciation and trust at work, which touches the inner self. Second, to discuss artistic interventions as triggers for identity work. Since interventions with arts are non-traditional projects, they challenge the participants' identity construction, especially the identities of the managers that introduce such different activities. The awareness of identity-related dimensions is important for understanding work experiences and its influence on identity. It is especially important for managers, who may influence the identity-related dimensions through organizing work and shaping its conditions.

**Keywords:** Artistic interventions, triggers for identity work, identity-related dimensions, identity construction, manager identity, touching dimension.

## **Managers' identity construction at work: Artistic interventions as triggers for identity work**

Bringing an identity perspective into research about organizations has become increasingly popular (Miscenko & Day, 2015). One perspective is to discuss experiences from work and its importance for personal identity construction. Alvesson, Lee Ashcraft, and Thomas (2008:8-9) claim, "identity holds a vital key to understanding the complex, unfolding and dynamic relationship between self, work and organization". In this paper, managers' experiences from work are in focus. Clarke, Brown, and Hailey (2009:346-347) write, "work identities are contingent and perpetual works-in-progress [...] In complex, ever-changing organizations people are engaged constantly in identity work [...] all our selves are always, at least potentially, provisional". Hence, the identity construction at *work* (work in a broad sense, including all experiences related to work), are important since, as Dutton, Roberts, and Bednar (2010:266) argue, it focuses on, "the aspects of identity and self-definition that are tied to participation in the activities of work".

Awareness of how work influences the identity may be helpful both for managers, organizing the work, and for the employed (including managers) reflecting about their work and the experiences it causes. "Identity" as it is understood in this paper, is a notion about "who you are" and how you have become "who you are" (inspired by Giddens (1991), Husen (1994), Alvesson (1993), (2009) among others). This personal identity is constructed in continuing processes based on everyday life experiences and interaction with others.

There are many scholars discussing identity construction at work. In most research the main focus is on the actual identity, i.e. the outcome of the construction process. In this paper I examine a less discussed aspect of work-related identity: the more specific dimensions in the work context that influence the construction of the personal identity. Based on interviews with managers I identify five dimensions that influence the personal identity construction in a work context<sup>1</sup>.

The empirical ground consists of managers that are special in that sense that they brought artists into their organizations in an artistic intervention project called Airis (short for Artists in residence). The premise is that these managers have implicitly challenged their identity, by initiating such uncertain and untraditional projects with arts, as Airis. It is thought that artistic interventions challenge the participants' identities, including the managers', as well as these activities with arts influence the climate and relations within the organization. Neither the manager perspective, nor the identity aspects related to artistic interventions, has been much discussed in research, so far.

The main purpose of this paper is to identify those dimensions at work that influence managers' identity construction. Another purpose is to discuss artistic interventions as exciting triggers for identity work, especially for the initiating manager. This research will contribute to, and enrich, identity theory as well as research about artistic interventions. Another contribution is to make employees and managers aware of these identity-related dimensions at work, and to inspire changes, if needed. Awareness is especially important among managers as they influence the dimensions at work, when organizing.

In next section the empirical context is presented including a description about the studied artistic intervention project – Airis. Then the paper consists of five main sections: The theoretical framework, with a brief introduction to the concept of identity and identity

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<sup>1</sup> Earlier versions are presented in conference papers: Zambrell 2012, 2013, 2014.

construction, presenting identity-related dimensions at work, concluded with a section about identity work. Then the method and the empirical sample will be presented, followed by findings and discussion. Finally the conclusion and ideas for further research ends this paper.

### **The empirical context – Artistic Interventions**

Bringing arts into business is a management initiative with the aim of developing the organization in different ways, for example, by stimulating creativity. These initiatives, also named artistic interventions, are an increasing phenomenon both in Sweden and in other countries (Berthoin Antal (2013b), Schiuma (2011), Darsø (2004) and others). The purpose of artistic interventions, according to TiltEurope (2011:2) is, "to encourage creativity, self development, disruptive thinking, new interactions with a view to make the organisation more effective and productive, better equipped to confront challenges, inspired by increased solidarity and better working conditions. Artistic intervention is a creative management tool". Bringing arts into organizations can also be described as an "instrument" for "transforming" organizations. Artistic interventions can, for example, "ignite positive feelings within and around an organization, or can be deployed to support the creation of intrinsic benefits for people" (Schiuma, 2011:161).

#### *Airis, an artistic intervention*

Airis is a specific form of artistic interventions where actors from the world of arts, i.e. musicians, writers, painters and other kinds of artists, work part time over a period of 10 –12 months in business or public organizations. Their mission is to lead the artistic interventions and to work together with the responsible manager and the employees to specify the focus of the intervention, plan activities, and then to realize them (Zambrell, 2015). The specific activities, and the way in which each artistic intervention is displayed, differ from case to case. Examples from Airis are: to create a ballet with trucks, to depict the company values with photographs of employees, or to make paintings representing the tracks the janitors make while working (see [www.tillt.se](http://www.tillt.se) for more information). However, such "results" are only the artifacts that symbolize the processes and experiences that the participants have gone through together with the artist. During the artist-led activities, which many regarded as foreign and intimidating, cooperation, discussions and development occurred. The managers' own participation in the activities, together with the employees and the artist, enables and enforces, for example, trustful relationships within the group.

Of course one may consider artistic interventions as just another consultancy approach. Some of the participating managers actually made remarks about the difference in Airis, compared to more traditional kick offs and activities for the employees. In their point of view Airis was different in sundry ways. One distinction was the Airis project's continuity. Activities weekly during 10 months result in more permanent and lasting changes/effects. Another distinction is these Airis projects' unpredictability. Neither the manager nor the artist knew how the project would develop or end, since, as one of the managers expressed it, the project "*lives its own life and cannot be controlled*". This uncertainty is an interesting trigger for creativity as well as for identity work. A third difference that appears in the interviews is that arts are an unknown arena for more or less everyone, even the managers. In artistic activities all participants "play" under similar, inexperienced conditions, regardless of position or title. These differences are important grounds when the impacts of Airis are discussed.

#### *Airis as trigger for identity construction and ground for empirical selection*

In this paper, the possible "transforming" outcomes of arts at work, and the experiences they create, are discussed as sources for identity construction. Different activities with arts may,

as Sacco (2013:29, my translation) claims, "challenge these persons [...] to expand their ability to express themselves, revise their expectations and convictions, and to revise their social identity". Of special interest here are managers who have initiated Airis, a Swedish artistic intervention project and how their venture may be understood in terms of identity construction and identity work.

The empirical selection is inspired also by the fact that only a small number of the managers that have been invited to conduct an artistic intervention like Airis, accept. Based on Pia Areblad, the former director of Tillt<sup>2</sup>, that have tried to sell Airis-projects for many years, only one out of forty invited managers were interested. My idea is that these untraditional *Airis managers* (short for managers with experiences from Airis projects) have challenged their identity by opening their organization for this controversial Airis project, a project they often get questioned for, both by employees and management colleagues. Bringing arts into companies and organizations may generate tensions (as several managers testified) for example between the manager and the unwilling and critical employees, and between the artist and the participants. This illustrates the possible tensions between the arts world and business world (Berthoin Antal & Debucquet (2013), Meisiek & Hatch, (2008)).

I consider these kinds of tensions also as a way to intensify reflections about daily experiences at work, and by extension, also reflections about identity. This means that these managers also are an interesting empirical selection for a study about identity construction in a work context.

These artistic interventions are furthermore discussed as implicit, or explicit, expressions of Airis managers' identity work, such as activities with the intention to influence, strengthen and confirm their work-related identity. The idea of relating artistic processes to identity and identity changes is also described by Berthoin Antal and Debucquet (2013) and Meisiek and Hatch (2008). Some reasons for such identity change, according to Berthoin Antal and Strauß (2014b)<sup>3</sup> are the conversations and reflections that are stimulated by artistic interventions.

### **Theoretical framework**

To discuss the reasons for management ventures and leadership approaches in the framework of identity is an attempt to get a richer understanding of aspects concerning employees and managers. This theory section consists of a short overview of the concept of identity and its construction, a section about identity work, artistic intervention research and a summarized reflection about studying Airis managers' identity construction.

#### *Identity*

Theorizing about identity (the self) is often associated with Mead who proposes that identity, "arises in the process of social experience and activity, that is, develops in the given individual as a result of his relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals within that process" (1934:135, in Hatch & Schultz (2002:992)). In studying people's identity construction at work both the "connections 'outwards' to social others as well as 'inwards' towards the self" (Hatch & Schultz, 2002:991) are important. Another way of expressing the relational aspect of identity, important when discussing identities at work, is suggested by

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<sup>2</sup>Tillt is an intermediary organization that operates in the west part of Sweden since 1973, organizing these projects. They are working with artistic interventions since early 2000.

<sup>3</sup>Their paper highlights the *organizational* identity and the organizational learning that is enabled or impeded through artistic interventions while in my study *personal* identity is at stake.

Hammarén and Johansson (2009:90), "Identities are [...] *contextual*, depending on the environment [or context], but also *relational*, i.e. shaped in relation to something else, to what one is not" (italics in original, my translation).

The meaning of *identity* in this paper refers to personal identity (or self identity) and is grounded on the idea that identity is constructed in continuing processes. An identity is based on experiences related to, for example childhood, gender, age, looks, education, family, ethnicity, and private and professional roles. Each person develops a unique identity during life through the continuous impressions, reactions and mirroring from others. This identity also needs to be expressed and reflected to others in a coherent and consistent life narrative (Zambrell, 2004). Ways of intentionally influence identity, i.e. *identity work*, are for example by choosing different work, professions or organizations, or, as this paper suggests, by engaging in activities like Airis that challenge the work-related identity.

### *Identity construction at work*

Different identity constructing approaches can be seen in several studies (for a theoretical overview, more comprehensive than this paper could cover, see for example Muhr (2012), Dutton et al. (2010), Alvesson (2010), Watson (2008)). Applying an identity perspective when discussing managers, finds support in for example Watson (2008:121) who contributes, "Managerial identities' take their place among the multiplicity of social-identities to which any particular manager may relate in both their 'inward facing' and their 'outward facing' identity work." This inward aspect is especially interesting and, as it will be shown in this paper, is of special concern in discussing identity construction since many of these managers express experiences that influence their inner self.

Several scholars discuss identity and identity work in different contexts, both for managers and leaders. Some examples are: Andersson (2005), observing experiences from management training, Lahdesmaki (2012) looking at manager identity construction in the context of a Corporate Social Responsibility discourse, and Alvesson and Lundholm (2014) discussing HR-managers' identity. They, like me, focus on the managers' identity. However, there are other approaches, such as Derue and Ashford (2010), who focus more specifically on "leadership" identity construction. In this study the empirical base is managers and their ongoing identity construction at work. Their managerial work is thus regarded as one important source for identity construction, among other sources, for example being a parent or sources related to spare time activities. I find it less important to discuss "manager" or "leader" identity separately, since they are strongly linked and hard to separate (which several scholars support, for example Tengblad and Alvesson (2013:172)).

Findings from two earlier studies based on experiences at work for middle managers' (Zambrell, 2004) and cultural workers' (Zambrell, 2007), are the basis for the analysis here. It is shown that four different dimensions, i.e. aspects at work related to conditions, environment and work content, are an important source for identity construction. The connection between work and identity is interpreted as the main reason why the respondents found work so vital (Zambrell, 2004). The four identity-related dimensions are presented, with comments regarding similar research, as follow:

**The enabling dimension** emphasizes what work may enable and make possible for a person. For example: having a platform for a career and possible success, developing professionally or privately, having power, and a good salary.

Theoretical similarities are, for example the instrumental attitudes discussed by Eriksson (1999), and the importance of salary, an enabling aspect, discussed by Trollestad (2003). Budd (2011) also discusses work as a source for independence thanks to the salary.

**The legitimacy dimension** emphasizes the affirmation that develops one's legitimacy and authority, mainly in the eyes of others. For example: as a person who holds a certain position or title, who is attractive in the labour market, or who contributes to society by working.

This aspect is frequently discussed in research. Husen (1994) refers to the importance of work in society. Gustafsson (1994) regards work as legitimacy and Thomas and Linstead (2002) discuss social legitimacy. Professional identity, especially for managers, is often described (for example Sveningsson & Alvesson (2014), Sinclair (2011), Jönsson & Strannegård (2009)).

**The strengthening dimension** emphasizes work situations that highlight the fact of being reinforced and supported, expressed for example: as being in demand as a professional, holding special qualities like being creative, bold, able, and when one develops ability and competence.

Similar confirmation is expressed in Schein (1994) who discusses the satisfaction due to one's effort at work. A related strengthening aspect is the "symbolic management" that a manager position enables (Tengblad & Alvesson, 2013:171). Alvesson and Billing (1999) also discuss the importance of confirming and strengthening the identity, like Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) who discuss identity strengthening, along with other ways the identity may develop.

**The constraining dimension** emphasizes problems concerning work and how its negative aspects influence the experiences, and also the identity. Examples are: when there exists an imbalance between private and professional life, when having a heavy workload, imbalance between work identity and personal identity or scanty confirmation and feedback. Note: In the origin (Zambrell, 2004) the notion *dilemma* dimension was used. However in this Airis-study I chose the notion, *constraining* dimension, in addition to get a broader term that includes the variation of constraining experiences.

There are several examples of scholars who discuss constraints in the workplace: Thomas and Linstead (2002:71,87) refer to middle managers' "constraining views" in, for example, a downsizing situation. Collin et al. (2008:191) refer to the lack of organizational "weness", and Budd (2011:19) finds, "work can be physically, mentally, and emotionally draining".

### *Similar approaches*

Dutton et al. (2010:285) argue for organizations as sites for positive identity construction. Thomas-Gregory (2014:620) presents findings from studying professional identities of middle managers. She demonstrates that there is a "complex array of circumstances, social processes, critical incidents, key people and opportunities that play an influential role in the development of the middle managers professional identity" (ibid. 2014:621). In this paper I also recognize these kinds of aspects, but I categorize them in different "identity-related dimensions" (Zambrell, 2004), based on the managers' stories and statements. This will be explored in the findings below.

The work context and all its dimensions are important in my approach. Kira and Balkin (2014:134) discuss the work content and working practices, but also different outcomes (which depends on if the preferred identity aligns or misaligns with the "experiences" at work). Compared to my approach, their approach is much broader as it describes the whole

identity process. The identity-related dimensions from Zambrell (2004), which are used for interpretation of the Airis managers' expressions here, can be seen as a more detailed description of the "experience" part from Kira's and Balkin's approach. In comparing their "experience" with the identity-related dimensions, I find some similarities both regarding the conforming "experience" and the negative encounters.

In this paper the aim is to explore a limited, less discussed part of the work-related identity, namely the contextual dimensions at work that influence the identity construction. Other studies briefly mention this area but seldom discuss it more deeply. The aim is also to develop an understanding of how managers' initiatives for artistic interventions influence the work context and the related identity construction. That means that artistic interventions are regarded as triggers for identity work, through the creative environment it enables. These environments, or "intercultural relational spaces", as Berthoin Antal and Debucquet (2013:2) describe it, challenge all the participants' identities when the arts world meets the business world.

### *Identity work*

*Identity work* refers to the continuous activities in life that aim at constructing and/or reconstructing identity. The differences between the notions *work identity* and *identity work* may need some clarifying. Work identity means the connection to the actual organization/company and its related professional identity (for example being a nurse, a teacher or a middle manager). Identity work refers to the conscious activities in order to re-establish, change or strengthen the identity. Examples of identity work are choosing education, profession and work. "Through describing oneself in a certain way, one exposes and strengthens a particular identity", Alvesson and Billing (1999:108, my translation) declare. Moreover Alvesson and Willmott (2002) plus Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003:1165) express how people are, "engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening and revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness". Watson (2008:129) has similar thoughts about identity work, "the mutually constitutive processes whereby people strive to shape a relatively coherent and distinctive notion of personal self-identity".

Theorizing about identity work is growing and, for example Brown (2015:20) discusses how scholars understand and articulate the concept of identity work. Some examples are: the agency in identity work, the generic processes, the individual and collective implications of identity work and so forth (ibid. 2015: 23–25). One "understanding" that is especially relevant for Airis managers and the tensions their artistic intervention projects may cause, is that: "Identity work, it seems, is more necessary, frequent and intense in situations where strains, tensions and surprises are prevalent, as these prompt feelings of confusion, contradiction and self-doubt, which in turn tend to lead to examination of the self" (ibid. 2015:25). When the self gets exposed to tensions, uncertainties or challenges of any kind, a heightened awareness of the self will occur, leading to inner reflections. Like Wiklund (2007:1) writes, it is a matter of "repeated identity work the individual must undertake when confronted with a changeable context".

The complexity and insecurity an Airis project/artistic intervention might cause, are in my study considered to be a ground and trigger for identity work, as well as for identity construction. This "blur" is discussed as tensions that, "constitute the motor of the dynamics of identity development" in Berthoin Antal and Debucquet (2013:13), while blurs like this are referred to as "frictions" by Sveningsson and Alvesson (2014) and as ways to "shape" identity by Ramarajan and Reid (2013). Such activities that can be experienced as, "being destabilized, unravelled and deconstructed" (Nicholson & Carroll, 2013:1226) are not always

positive since this “identity undoing” may lead to discomfort and a wish to let the actual identity go.

Regarding managers, the empirical focus in this paper, Sveningsson and Alvesson (2014:240, my translation) mean that there are several ways, positive, neutral and negative, that the manager identity may adjust to the frictions at work. Accordingly, identities change more or less continuously throughout working life. These examples above are different reactions to how work experiences and the outcome, i.e. the identity, may be “shaped”. As discussed above, the focus of this study is unusual, since the interest is the different identity-related dimensions that cause this “shaping”, not the specific identity per se. Artistic interventions influence such dimensions at work (with the purpose of, among other things, increasing creativity in the organization). Creativity itself is also a source of challenges due to, for example, the demand of forcing oneself to think outside the box or the challenges that occur when one expands one’s comfort-zone (Eriksson, 2009). “To think differently doesn’t mean revising the thoughts one already has, but identifying those one doesn’t have, those that are hard to express” (Rehn, 2010:50, my translation). Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003:1165) regard “specific events, encounters, transitions and surprises”, (just like an artistic intervention may be regarded as) as causes for conscious identity work. Another way of describing is suggested by Berthoin Antal (2013a) who highlights the learning potential when people engage with the uncertainty and experience “not-knowing”, due to artists’ exploration of the unknown context in organizations. This paper emphasizes the identity-related aspects in such unknown contexts.

### **Artistic intervention research and Airis managers’ identity construction**

The research interest in arts-based initiatives and its outcomes is growing<sup>4</sup>. One example is the anthology by Johansson Sköldberg, Woodilla, and Berthoin Antal (2015) that provide an international overview of the field, from different perspectives. Another example is *Scandinavian Journal of Management* (2014, 30) with its special issue about arts and management. The editors, Meisiek and Barry (2014b:83) point at two reasons for the growing interest in arts and management: First, “the arts could bring about more human-centred, esthetically [sic] pleasing, creative, and culturally responsive management and organizations”. And, second, that management, “has become more receptive to some of art’s attributes and practices [...] a heightened need for innovation, originality and difference, things that have long been part of art’s DNA”. Meisiek and Barry (2014a) observe that studies related to both art and management is a relatively recent phenomenon with “anecdotal pieces about artistic leaders, but little or no empirical research” (ibid. 2014:139). Accordingly, this empirically based paper will hopefully fill part of the gap by contributing to the understanding of managers in such contexts.

Even if research concerning artistic interventions is increasing, not so many scholars acknowledge identity aspects related to artistic interventions so far. One exception is Berthoin Antal and Debucquet (2013) who explore identity aspects in artistic interventions in a Spanish context. They describe artistic interventions as an intercultural space for identity development. They find “the tensions between the culturally distinct worlds” (ibid. 2013:1) as important “process-drivers” for identity development, a statement that also my study is based upon. So, while their study contains perspectives from three stakeholders: managers, artists and employees, this study focuses solely on the managers’ perspectives. Another

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<sup>4</sup>It is important to clarify that this paper focuses on the managers in artistic interventions. That means I will not discuss the values that artistic interventions can generate in general (as other scholars, like Berthoin Antal & Strauß (2013), Berthoin Antal (2009, 2011, 2013), Berthoin Antal (2012) and Darsø (2004) already have done extensively).

difference between our studies is that in my study, questions regarding how the managers approach their leadership are discussed, besides their experiences from their artistic intervention. Also Meisiek and Hatch (2008) explore identity aspects but they focus on organization's identity. However they, as well as I, see the potential for identity change thanks to these projects, "the playfulness of the artistic process is enacted within the context of work, and is designed to help organizational members reflect upon the organization's identity" (ibid. 2008:414).

### *The managers in Airis*

The managers' perspectives in artistic interventions per se, are so far, rarely discussed in research. Adler (2006) discusses such approaches (like artistic interventions) and finds that a traditional "motivation strategy" isn't enough: "The leadership challenge today is to inspire people, not simply to motivate them" (ibid. 2006:496). This is a crucial question for managers in every organization. The interviews with Airis managers show a leadership approach having such inspiring elements. Much focus is on human growth and development, among other things. In Zambrell (2015) I find that managers express ambitions to create culture and trigger creativity, but also a desire to foster relationships and express a liking for the employees. Accordingly, they have considered artistic interventions to be an interesting contribution in their efforts of developing the employees. Through this Airis project, which meant having an artist as a colleague for almost a year, they and their employees had some totally different experiences together.

Management positions in general are often exposed and being a manager demands constant "work" on the manager identity. Sveningsson and Blom (2012:43, my translation) discuss it as, "a matter of continuous search for updating it [the identity] in relation to the latest models for management and leadership". In other words and up dating, activities that bring arts into business may be regarded as an identity work, implementing a "new" and different type of management approach.

The purpose of this paper is to enrich the understanding of identity-construction at work, and to discuss identity work through a study of Airis managers. Bringing arts into an organization is an exciting way to influence the work context and to trigger the identity work. Still, many scholars mainly discuss the outcomes of the identity construction, i.e. the identity changes and the shaped identity per se. My approach is to study *what dimensions at work that influence the identity construction and to discuss artistic interventions as triggers for identity work.*

### **Method and empirical sample**

With a focus on increasing the understanding of managers' approaches to artistic interventions and leadership, the methodological ground here are the hermeneutics and the method is qualitative. Phenomenon are thus studied and described in order to increase the understanding of both details and the overall picture, based on the individuals' expressed experiences from reality (Jönsson, 1990, my translation). With such an approach, combined with my theoretical pre-understanding, the methodological aim is to illustrate, interpret and reflect upon the managers' stories, with a focus on identity-related dimensions at work.

The interviews are conducted by phone between January and April 2012. I use an interview guide (13 semi-structured questions with follow-up questions. The interview guide is enclosed below) and the managers got the opportunity to read these questions in advance, as well as having the opportunity to read and confirm the transcription afterwards. Each interview varied in length from 30 to 60 minutes and our conversation, with these questions as a base,

is recorded and transcribed by myself. The illustrations from the empirical data are translations from Swedish (for grammatical reasons some small language changes have been made in some cases).

The analysis and the interpretation of the interviews are made in several steps, inspired by the research principles of the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss (1967), Strauss & Corbin (1998)). Initially, during the interviews, I make notes about aspects that instantly seem important and afterwards it was possible to make the first remarks about possible sub categories. These sub categories and the patterns of statements are used as a starting point in the more in-depth reading of the transcribed interviews. Of special interest in the analyses are the identity-related dimensions and their meaning, identified in Zambrell (2004). I search for expressions or answers that can be interpreted as a statement of, for example, the strengthening dimension (or any of the other dimensions). The list of sub categories grows, emerging from the texts and they are finally categorized as the main categories. Every interview is read a large number of times in the attempt to understand the meaning behind the stories, with various categories and themes in focus. My understanding increases and deepens when analysing interviews, studying related research and discussing my observations with others (for example at research seminars or conferences such as EGOS).

Finally I can clarify the occurrence of each dimension by constructing an overview showing what dimensions that are found in each managers' story (see table 3), i.e. illustrate "what dimensions at work that influence the identity construction", among these Airis managers.

*From data to findings: An example of how empirical statements are interpreted and categorized as identity-related dimensions*

As an example of how each interview is analysed, interpreted and understood, short statements from one interviewee are presented below. The table shows how the various statements are categorized according to the typology of identity related dimensions at work (presented at table 2). The purpose with the study is not to analyse single respondents individually. It is the overall occurrence of dimensions, and to deepen the meaning of the sub categories, that is my focus.

Example of how empirical statements are interpreted and categorized as identity-related dimensions			
Empirical statements	Sub category	Main category	Type of category
Statements by an operations manager	Experiences at work	Identity construction through...	Identity-related dimension
To find new perspectives... [through work] I've changed companies (work) a number of times and it has influenced me. Find new characteristics of oneself or to develop existing ones. I thought it was really exciting to meet [the artist]... Personally, it gave me a lot. In these leadership courses one develops very much personally... ...the opportunities to be involved. Being able to have goals and visions.	→ Work is a platform for career/success/ life quality → Professional development as well as personal development → Having influence - (Power) → Achieve personal dreams - visions	↘ Being enabled ↗	→ <b>The ENABLING dimension</b>
It was my confidence as a manager that affected that I had the permission to do it [the Airis project].	→ Professional role, title and professional status	→ Being legitimated	→ <b>The LEGITIMATING dimension</b>
Simply to strengthening the human... One can certainly affect their sense of work. Ensuring more features than the traditional ones. How I, as a manager can use my staff in a more creative way... It [making people grow] requires time for each employee Being able to have goals and visions. ... if one has stable and secure people who work, then you can definitely affect the work environment, the workplace, each other, and even the company, positively. ...my driving force, stubbornness, to question, to not be afraid of other people regardless their position. To become stronger as a person.	→ Feeling pride in the org. & its employees, strong "we-ness" → Professional role, title and professional status → Adapt and meet challenges, achieve results → Strengthen self confidence through positive affirmations	↘ Being strengtened ↗	→ <b>The STRENGTHENING dimension</b>
I have a stronger belief in people and how to work together. ...when you work with people then you constantly develop too. ...only there is [enough] time to work with the staff [to get related]. ...sees each individual's strengths and weaknesses and continuously work with them.	→ Grow as a person through emotional experiences at work → Feel passion, pleasure and a strong feeling for the work/org. → Having strong positive relationships with colleagues/manager	↘ Being touched ↗	→ <b>The TOUCHING dimension</b>
The two consultancies [Airis and a different project] were mixed up and that was interpreted very negatively [by the staff].	→ Conflicts with others or subject to criticism	→ Being constrained	→ <b>The CONSTRAINING dimension</b>

**Table 1: Example of how empirical statements are interpreted and categorized as identity-related dimensions. (Note: The "new" dimension, the touching dimension is also illustrated since it appeared in this interview. It will be explained later.)**

The findings are grounded within the empirical stories of a group of managers with experiences from an artistic intervention. This will be further described and illustrated below but first a short presentation of the sample.

*The sample*

This paper is based on interviews with 33 managers, representing approximately 75% of all the Airis projects implemented by the intermediary, Tillt, during the period 2006-2011. The access to these managers is possible thanks to Tillt's project leader, who introduced my research and me, to each manager. There is no other strategy behind the selection apart from contacting managers from the most recent Airis projects first. 33 managers agreed to participate after the first request (and more interviews were possible). After approximately 25

interviews I recognize several similarities within the stories, something I judge as a sign of empirical saturation. However I fulfilled the already arranged interviews, but decided not to interview the remaining managers on the list of projects.

Also, secondary material is important in increasing my understanding. Examples are presentations and reports describing Tillt's artistic interventions, both on their homepage ([www.tillt.se](http://www.tillt.se)) but also printed reports. This material helps me to get an overview of the different types of Airis projects that have been conducted over the years.

The characteristics of the empirical sample show that the interviewed managers have a long experience in a management positions (an average of 17 years). Accordingly, their ages are quite high (the average is 52 years). Both men and women are represented (58% women) and they represent different types of organizations: 55% are from public sector (municipalities, hospitals, schools or the state) and the rest represent private enterprises and industries.

## Findings

There are several examples in the empirical material of how work in general influence identity construction, and how artistic interventions in particular trigger identity work. The focus here is on the managers' identity construction in such work contexts. In this section I will first present the managers' answers and reflections regarding how work and identity are related. Then some examples are listed that confirm the initial four identity-related dimensions (Zambrell, 2004), supplemented with examples of the new touching dimension that emerged in the empirical statements. Then the developed typology of identity-related dimensions is presented, followed by an overview, showing the occurrence of identity-related dimensions for each respondent (and summarized). Finally I discuss artistic interventions as triggers for identity work and what conditions are important for these Airis managers' identity construction.

### *Managers' reflections about work and identity*

The Airis managers were asked about their opinion regarding the relation between work and identity. For example Ms CS answers: *"For us Swedes especially, a big part of our identity comes from work since we work so much of our time"*. Ms AK has similar thoughts:

*We spend a lot of our lives at work so it has a huge importance for how I will develop as a person. If I have a secure, good and stimulating workplace, I will hopefully become a secure and stable person as well.*

And Mr HA reflects about the importance of having an identity that includes all possible context-related identities as a genuine unity and the trustworthiness it enables:

*I'm fairly convinced that the identity and the position have to be inseparable in order to be able to do a really good job. Otherwise one might as well stand on an assembly line and drive in the same screw each day and think of other things. [...] I believe that with successful managers, their inspiration and their leadership and work commitment are based on their values and their own essential experiences and knowledge, somewhere deep down in their stomach. The employees feel such things: This is genuine; this is honest, all the way through. The best employees also work like that. One feels that the person, the professional role and their "delivery"[what they accomplish]- they fit together as a whole. There is no one who is annoyed or upset if I do something wrong. They really*

*feel it comes from within ... When the identity and the position are closely related; it creates some kind of credibility that increases the tolerance for mistakes.*

A majority of the managers (31 of 33) declare that they have reflected about identity-related issues and more than 50% of this group expressed a strong relation. For example Mr LL says: "For me the connection is strong between me as person and my work", Mr PJ: "It is obvious you see a connection [...] to identify yourself strongly to it [the work] or Ms BA: "They grow together. You are shaped [by work]". Noteworthy is that this question also raises some uncertainty: "What do you mean? Identity? I don't understand?" Such reactions indicate that people don't normally reflect about their identity. A discussion about identity constructing and work conditions could apparently be fruitful to familiarise and explore further, as well as how managers influence the identity construction for all members in an organization.

### *Identity-related dimensions found in managers' stories*

Findings in earlier studies show that conditions at work can be an important source for the construction of identity (see for example Kira & Balkin (2014) and Zambrell (2004, 2007)). The identity-related dimensions (ibid. 2004) are the main basis for the analysis here, as discussed above. In this study all the stories included statements that could be interpreted as expressions for: the enabling dimension, the legitimating dimension, the strengthening dimension, and the constraining dimension (see table 3 showing an overview). These dimensions will contribute, alone or together, to the work-related identity construction. For the Airis managers, activities like Airis have influenced their experiences at work (mostly positive) and hence even the identity-related dimensions. The fact that events may influence identity work is confirmed by Andersson (2005), "it is suggested that certain specific events or encounters can compel people on more 'serious' identity work". In other words, people can be seen to engage in more conscious and concentrated identity work "when the routinized reproduction of a self-identity in a stable setting is discontinued" (Alvesson et al., 2008:15).

The big occurrence of the identity-related dimensions accordingly confirms the findings in Zambrell (2004, 2007). Below, each identity-related dimension are presented and exemplified with a selection of illustrations from the Airis managers' interviews:

**The enabling dimension** illuminates the context, like work, that for example: facilitates a platform for careers, professional development, power and in these cases, exciting ventures like Airis. The artistic interventions have resulted in different enabling dimensions, such as building relations, making work more fun or being a source for new/creative thoughts. All 33 Airis managers express this dimension. Examples are:

Ms PH: "To be able to develop oneself and also develop others. I really love my work and think it is super." (1)<sup>5</sup>

Mr JI: "[Airis]...is a source for actually thinking in a different way [...] to create new ideas for oneself due to new impressions from that [arts]. (2)

**The legitimacy dimension** emphasizes the development of one's legitimacy by, for example: holding a certain position or title, or being attractive in the labour market. The legitimacy dimension is expressed by a majority (94 %) of the Airis managers. The artistic interventions (Airis) have legitimated the managers through new/better images of their

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<sup>5</sup> The number refers to the overview in Table 3 – showing which respondents that have been quoted.

organization, of their occupation and/or of them as managers, thanks to, for example, media coverage and related official discussions. Some examples are:

*Ms AK2: "To be an stand-up manager gives respect (and not letting your own career be the main focus)". (3)*

*Mr TB: "We got a lot of media coverage thanks to Airis. It was noticed and it has stuck in peoples memories." (4)*

**The strengthening dimension** emphasizes work situations that, for example: support being enforced thanks to occupation, position, special qualities and competences. This dimension (together with the enabling dimension) is the most frequently expressed dimension among the Airis managers. In every manager's story, expressions that can be interpreted as the strengthening dimension are found. Artistic interventions generate confirming experiences that strengthen the manager and his/her identity. This appears when the manager dares to show a softer side of him/herself, when taking risks and "stepping outside the box", and other activities, that means confirming from others. The following examples give a range of how this strengthening is experienced and expressed:

*Mr LL: "I felt strengthened in my position as manager since if I have been making unorthodox decisions. So I also may reach exceptional goals as well. Of course it is always a risk to do such ventures since it is quite unclear what it is supposed to achieve. In that sense it has strengthened my self-confidence for continuing to try different ventures with the aim of reaching other and better results." (5)*

*Mr HA: "The project has made me more bold [...] I am a bit more secure knowing it isn't that dangerous to take a step outside the box." (6)*

**Finally, the constraining dimension** emphasizes problems at work, such as an imbalance between private and professional life, or having a too heavy workload. The constraining aspects related to the Airis project are mainly connected to the manager in her/his role as decision maker, initiator and/or performer. Also, the work situation per se could be constraining due to, for example, high demands on the performance. The Airis managers here seem altogether quite content and their constraining experiences seem manageable.

In the Airis context, there were a few examples of negative experiences from, for example, critical employees:

*Mr PJ: "they laughed behind my back." [when Airis was initiated] [...] [I experienced] a lack of feedback from the top-managers". (7)*

Other negative examples from Airis were: having to persuade disinterested participants or spending a lot of time on "managing" the Airis project.

Expressed constraints are also related to the work as manager:

*Ms UK: "The pressure to achieve as CEO. To handle the economy." (8)*

*Ms GT: "Arts have to be defended [she works in a library]. I constantly work myself until I'm exhausted from it." (9)*

In conclusion, an artistic intervention like Airis imposes experiences that also expose identity-related dimensions. All of the Airis managers (100%) expressed aspects that could be related

to both the strengthening dimension and the enabling dimension, i.e. aspects of importance for identity construction. The Airis project also draws attention to, and legitimizes the manager (and/or her organization), for example by media exposure. In addition, the constraining dimension is also identified, both as a result of the Airis project as well as the management position itself. These findings also mean that the identity-related dimensions were confirmed in a new empirical context and that the sub categories for each dimension were developed, see table 2.

However, there is an additional dimension that emerged in the Airis managers' reflections, to be developed in next section.

*A more emotional identity-related dimension emerges: The touching dimension*

While interpreting the Airis managers' stories, expressions concerning care, empathy and more in-depth emotional reflections appeared. These statements were initially categorized as the strengthening dimension. However, after reflecting over all the examples, I realized that these more sensitive and emotional expressions could be better understood through another, new dimension: An identity-related dimension that touches one's inner self. The strengthening dimension does not really include such "inward" aspects. One statement that illustrates this aspect is:

Mr TL: *"People have so much to give, so much to contribute with, to become happy [...] that is why I choose to work with people, to make people feel well because they then may perform. They feel important, involved in the "business". It [Airis] gave me a lot. It convinced me to continue with what I believe in. People are able, machines are not. It is people who think and have ideas ... The type of person I am, it [Airis] confirmed that picture [...] If one is noticed, noticed as a human being, if you may be involved in the business – of course you dare more and work better. One takes a step outside the box, if one knows one is allowed to. One knows one is expected to do something, than the efficiency rises. That [being noticed] is a well-known source for energizing. One will behave in another way if one is treated like a human being."* (10)

This quote illustrates an ambition to respect and consider the human-centred aspects within his organization, convinced of its benefits and importance. My interpretation is that such a caring approach touches the individual. First of all the employee who experiences such a manager, but also the manager her/himself will be touched since the received reactions and confirmations from others will likely confirm and emotionally touch even her/him. An artistic intervention like Airis appears to enable and enforce such feelings.

Other illustrations for this sensitive dimension, denominated the "touching dimension", express reflections both about Airis and the work as manager:

Ms AB: *"I am dedicated to working with personnel. To be able to contribute to others' well-being. To be able to reach those employees who normally have no contact with the arts. I like working with people"*. (11)

Ms CB: *"To feel drive and faith at work. Reaching a sense of "us". The biggest joy was seeing the pride all the employees showed, thanks to Airis. It felt [touching]"*. (12)

Finally, the following quote shows a reflection about the importance of the manager for reaching such inner feelings:

Ms YÅ: *"The manager has a crucial role for the impression of work. The manager has to see the employees' competence [...] Making space for the employees' growth. Then the drive will emerge among them. It is a matter of being present, and being without prestige. [Regarding the artistic interventions] It is both about being outgoing, open minded for expressions and at the same time feel feeling inward what is happening to me and what I then will be able to give back". (13)*

These kinds of examples, namely expressions of how inner reflections can be effected and experienced, appear among most of the managers (79%) in this study. This *touching dimension* suggests that identity confirmation may arise, in particular when someone gets emotionally touched. It is a feeling comparable with arts experiences, like being touched by a moving book or beautiful music. In a work context, being touched can mean, for example, when one grows as a person through experiences at work, having really meaningful and highly valuable tasks, when feeling joy, well-being, empathies at work, when having strong relationships with colleagues/employees or being energized by others' feedback and care. The Airis managers' experiences draw attention to a confirmation that all individuals would appreciate, no matter what position. The reflections concerning artistic interventions have helped to enlighten this aspect.

How this touching dimension can be understood related to research will be explored in the "Discussion" below, but first a summary of the developed typology of identity-related dimensions, a presentation of the dimensions' occurrence and important conditions for the identity construction.

### **A typology of identity-related dimensions**

In Zambrell (2004) four identity-related dimensions were identified. In current Airis-study the four dimensions also appear and a fifth dimension, the touching dimension, is found. Several different sub categories ("experiences at work"), illustrating each main category, emerge in the managers' stories. An overview of the typology of identity-related dimensions at work is developed to illustrate the five dimensions (my analyse is described above, see table 1).

Typology of identity-related dimensions at work					
Dimensions	The ENABLING dimension	The LEGITIMATING dimension	The STRENGTHENING dimension	The CONSTRAINING dimension	The TOUCHING dimension
Main category: Identity construction through...	Being enabled	Being legitimated	Being strengthened	Being constrained	Being touched
Sub category: Experiences at work (examples)	Work is a platform for career/success/life quality	Being attractive in the labour market	Feeling pride in the org. & its employees, strong "we-ness"	Imbalance or poor integration: private - professional role	Grow as person through emotional experiences at work
	Professional development as well as personal development	Doing the right thing by working (to benefit socially)	Professional role, title and professional status	Imbalance regarding the workload, the pressure and/or expectations	Meaningful and high valued tasks
	Having influence - (Power)	Professional role, title and professional status	Adapt and meet challenges, achieve results	Lack of responsibility, self-control, challenges, having monotonous work tasks	Feeling passion, pleasure and a strong feeling for work/org.
	Getting interesting tasks / having fun at work	Being educated, having a profession	To develop skills	Discomfort, lack of energy, lack of feedback, feeling unease	Having strong positive relationships with colleagues/manager
	Achieve personal dreams - visions	The organization/the company has good reputation	To be in demand at work	Conflicts with others or subject to criticism	Getting energy through encouragement, feedback and other persons' genuine involvement
	Reward/Salary (as condition for livelihood)	The organization or the profession represents a valuable contribution to society	Strengthen self confidence through positive affirmations	Insufficiency in any of the other dimensions	Experiencing confidence and trust, both from, and to, colleagues/ employees/ manager

**Table 2: Typology of identity-related dimensions at work**

### The occurrence of identity-related dimensions among the Airis managers

In the following table, an overview of all the participating managers is presented. Statements from their stories that I find relate to the five dimensions are marked with an "x" in the table. The overview shows that a majority of the managers show expressions for almost all dimensions. More than half of the managers express indications for all five dimensions. Such presence of dimensions can be understood as a verification of the identity-related dimensions in this group of managers. The touching dimension is the least present dimension in the Airis managers' stories (which is commented in the discussion below). In former studies, the presence of dimensions for middle managers and cultural workers did not show such high "frequency" as the Airis managers do (Zambrell (2004, 2007).

<b>OVERVIEW: Identity-related dimensions found in Airis-managers' stories about their work (n=33)</b>					
Note: x with number (x(1), x(2) etc.) indicates that the manager is quoted in the Finding section above)					
<b>Respondent (Manager)</b>	<b>The ENABLING dimension</b>	<b>The LEGITIMATING dimension</b>	<b>The STRENGTHENING dimension</b>	<b>The CONSTRAINING dimension</b>	<b>The TOUCHING dimension</b>
Mr LL	x	x	<b>x (5)</b>	x	x
Mr HD	x	x	<b>x</b>	x	x
Mr TL	x		x	x	<b>x (10)</b>
Ms PH	<b>x (1)</b>	x	x	x	x
Ms AK	x	x	x	x	x
Mr JI	<b>x (2)</b>		x	x	x
Ms BH	x	x	x	x	x
Ms CB	x	x	x	x	<b>x (12)</b>
Mr PJ	x	x	x	<b>x (7)</b>	x
Ms ME	<b>x</b>	x	x		x
Ms AM	x	<b>x</b>	x	x	x
Mr HA	x	x	<b>x (6)</b>	x	x
Ms YÅ	x	x	x	x	<b>x (13)</b>
Ms UK	x	x	x	<b>x (8)</b>	x
Mr LÅ	<b>x</b>	x	x	x	x
Ms LG	x	x	x	<b>x</b>	x
Mr KL	x	x	x	<b>x</b>	x
Ms LW	x	x	<b>x</b>	x	
Mr PC	x	x	x	x	
Ms ED	x	x	x		
Ms CS	x	x	x	x	
Ms GW	x	x	x	x	x
Ms AK2	x	<b>x (3)</b>	x		x
Mr TB	x	<b>x (4)</b>	x	x	
Ms AB	x	x	x		<b>x(11)</b>
Mr TI	x	x	x	x	
Mr PS	x	x	x	x	x
Ms AB2	x	x	x		x
Ms GT	x	x	x	<b>x (9)</b>	
Mr LO	x	<b>x</b>	x	x	x
Ms BA	x	x	x	x	x
Ms KA	x	x	x	x	x
Mr LG	x	x	x	x	x
<b>Total presence of each dimension</b>	<b>33 (100%)</b>	<b>31 (94%)</b>	<b>33 (100%)</b>	<b>28 (85%)</b>	<b>26 (79%)</b>

Table 3: Overview of identity-related dimensions at work

### Artistic interventions and managers' identity work

Another interest in this study is to explore if "conducting an Airis-project" is an expression of the managers' identity work. None of them explicitly use the term identity work, but in every story there are signs of how they relate intended choices, approaches and actions to their own position, and accordingly, to their personal identity. A majority (17 managers) relate identity work to their position as manager. For example, Ms UK talks about how she

intentionally takes part in risky activities and how she wants to have influence. Mr PS wants to be someone who is capable as manager. Mr PC is one who intentionally pushes the employees, is energetic and wants to be one who works with the arts. Others (14 managers) relate identity work to the artistic intervention (and some express the identity work in relation to both their position and artistic interventions). Examples are: Mr LL who wants to be someone who dares to let the employees run the Airis project themselves, Ms PH declares "*We who say yes to Airis are probably 'outside the box' already*", and Mr LS strengthens his image as one who dares to do different things like Airis. So, the managers either relate their identity work to their position, or to the Airis-project. They seem quite aware of how their choice of action will influence others perception of them. There are many expressions in the managers' stories showing how the artistic intervention establishes a thrilling environment, or a space, that enables challenging activities, activities that may trigger the identity construction.

### **Important conditions for managers' identity construction in an Airis context**

Several conditions are important for experiencing an artistic intervention as a trigger for identity construction. The managers mention such aspects when discussing the experiences from their Airis projects. The three conditions<sup>6</sup> that are expressed the most are: to be able to argue for the intervention, to handle resistance, and to participate in the activities along with the employees.

#### *To be able to express relevant arguments for the venture*

The purposes behind initiating such ventures vary and are not always explicit. The main arguments for conducting an Airis project, according to the interviews, are (percentage of the sample in parenthesis):

- To develop the creative potential within the organization (73%)
- To improve the collaboration and trust among the employees (58%)
- To participate in activities together with colleagues, for pleasure and fun (45%)

These arguments align with those opinions identified in Berthoin Antal and Strauß (2013) and similar arguments are presented in Schiuma (2011), Eriksson (2009), Styhre and Eriksson (2008), and Darsø (2004).

There are also several managers who decided to implement an Airis project more based on a "gut feeling" than strategic considerations. Nevertheless, even they justify their decisions explicitly using similar arguments as the other managers, i.e. to define arguments that can be accepted by the surrounding people. This is one way the manager, who stands behind the venture, can be *legitimized* at work.

#### *To be able to meet the resistance from employees, management colleagues and others, and still remain positive*

The manager who initiates an artistic intervention often finds her/himself to be questioned and meets resistance from her/his organization. Mr PJ, one of the managers, gives an example:

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<sup>6</sup> These arguments are presented also in Zambrell (2015)

*It [The Airis project] was very different and not everyone thought it was good. Maybe it was too different for some? [...] People from other departments were wondering what we were doing. They probably thought I was insane for working with an artist in my department.*

This, and similar reactions, imply that the manager has to stand in front of her/his organizational members, and in many cases defend the “different” artistic intervention and the artist’s presence. The quote is an example of how being questioned due to the artistic intervention challenges, and even sets pressure on, the manager’s identity. On the other hand, if the Airis project becomes successful, it will *strengthen* the manager in the end as well.

*To participate along with the employees*

The manager who is present during the activities and participates together with the employees will consequently take a position as one group member among others. She/he will act under the same conditions as the employees, i.e. as a beginner in the arts world. The interactions together with the employees (and with the artist) are an important condition for managers to build relationships and organizational climate and culture. The interactions are also important for developing the artistic project and its participants, but above all, for developing her/his own identity. Mr TB explains:

*In traditional ventures, like skiing or conferences, then the managers are managers [...] There are expectations of the manager. When this [Airis] happens, the manager gets down on the same level as the others. All become equal. In this dance project – what were the expectations of me as manager? Am I supposed to do choreography? No, of course not. Here we were all equal in the face of the challenge. This was the greatest advantage of the project.*

Managers participating in the activities together with their employees are quite typical for Swedish conditions, while in other contexts their presence may restrict the employees’ behaviour (Berthoin Antal & Strauß, 2014a:10). Among this group of managers there are a few examples of “decision makers” that do not personally get involved in the artistic activities. There is an obvious difference between these and those who really “shared” the artistic interventions with the employees. The former managers appear to be less dedicated to the project and they express fewer confirmation aspects in general. This conclusion, regarding participation, indicates that there is a great deal of potential for developing managers’ experiences from artistic interventions by involving them more in the actual activities.

Also, the managers’ personal experiences throughout the artistic interventions, which may include unusual activities such as dancing ballet, illustrating the company values with one’s body or weaving a wall illustration symbolizing the workplace, will surely influence the manager, as well as the employees. These experiences will underpin different kinds of identity confirmations. One example is described in Meisiek and Hatch (2008:419), saying that the intervention, “helped managers explore their roles and promoted their identity as leaders”.

Illustrations from my study show when a manager’s identity is confirmed when implementing the artistic intervention, as Mr LÅ says: “*I felt safe in being bold and exposing myself [...] was strengthened by getting the employees to follow me*”. Other examples are when they experience recognition and strengthened legitimacy in the interactions with the artist and the employees, and when they got motivated intrinsically, through the artistic processes. Mr LS explains: “*The artist stretched our borders very much and it became exciting. There were a*

*lot of discussions and even some frustration. We met in a new way and our own limitations were expanded, at least mine". Ms ME reflects: "[It was] different. Getting a new dimension in life. Giving peoples an opportunity to meet, having something in common to chat about".*

To summarize: Many Airis managers express a strong relation between work and their personal identity. In their stories I find experiences that I interpret as expressions for five identity-related dimensions that influence identity in diverse, mostly positive ways. Most frequent is expressions for dimensions that strengthen and enable the identity construction, along with the legitimating dimension, the touching dimension (a new dimension that emerged among the Airis manager) and the constraining dimension. The conditions for conducting intervention projects with arts are strongly connected to the manager: Willingness to argue for the intervention, to meet the resistance from the organization, and to participate as one among others in the artistic intervention.

Artistic intervention in an organization establishes a thrilling environment where different situations, cooperation and relationships occur. The reactions in the work place differ and several managers talk about the challenges they felt. Bringing arts into non-artistic contexts may be a source for different "happenings", sometimes experienced with dislike and insecurity, but at the same time providing an exciting experience. In both cases the artistic intervention impinge the work context (and its identity-related dimensions) and it will trigger the identity work as well. In the final section findings will be discussed and related to research.

## **Discussion**

In this paper I argue that a way to understand experiences at work, and how bringing arts into the organization enforce these experiences, is to acknowledge their influence on the identity construction. Five identity-related dimensions are found in the managers' stories from work. A question is also raised whether artistic interventions are a part of the managers' identity work. Both these aspects will be discussed in the following section, especially arguments for the new dimension that is developed, the "touching dimension".

### *Dimensions that influence managers' identity construction at work*

The identified influence on identity construction is based on managers' different expressions of experiences at work (and in this case, especially triggered by the Airis-project). Of course there are a lot of situations and contexts that create reactions and confirmations outside the work context as well. The reflections from important "others", like colleagues (and artists!), support this identity construction. "We all actively attempt to influence how others see us and we work hard to make sense of what we read in the eyes of the multiplicity of significant and non-significant others with whom we interact" (Watson, 2009:256). The managers' stories about their artistic interventions are interpreted with identity-related dimensions in mind. Such an approach finds support in Taylor and Ladkin (2009:67) in that sense that they regard arts as a way to, "facilitate a process of becoming more holistically aligned within ourselves". The individual development that it refers to may be related to their identity, as I suggest in this study. Several statements from the managers' stories fit with those four identity-related dimensions that were developed in my earlier research (Zambrell, 2004, 2007). As described above, the Airis managers express reflections from artistic interventions (and also from their daily experiences at work) that verify the existence of the work-related dimensions found among middle managers and cultural workers in former studies. Compared to those groups, the managers here express identity-related dimensions to a higher degree, and both the strengthening and the enabling dimensions were equally frequent expressed (by every manager). Most frequent among middle managers were the strengthening dimension

(Zambrell, 2004:133) and among the cultural workers, the enabling dimension (Zambrell, 2007:247). This difference can be understood by the fact that these groups have diverse hierarchical positions. Since the empirical base in current study consists of well-established and experienced managers, where the majority have chosen to work in a leadership position for many years, is it not surprising that their experiences show a broad picture of identity-related dimensions at work. A manager position is continually exposed and imposes a lot of demands for the individual. If their work as managers had not entailed affirmations that are perceived positive and developmental, they would probably not have stayed in their management position.

### *The touching dimension*

Among the Airis managers a new, fifth dimension emerged. It is shown when they, for example, experience well-being and joy at work, when they felt happy about employees' personal growth, when they themselves get touched when experiencing positive reactions among the employees in the Airis-project, and the strong relationships that followed. These expressions for the managers' human-centred approach regarding the employees, and also the experienced reactions to these ambitions that the managers describe, are found in a majority of the Airis managers' stories. Such statements are thus interpreted as expressions for this more emotional aspect, the touching dimension. The four original identity-related dimensions occurred to a higher extent, than the touching dimension. The data shows different aspects that can explain why the managers did not experience "to be touched", as often as the other dimensions. For example in cases when the manager did not participate in the artistic activities, and/or the manager had a top position (CEO), or if she/he works in a less "moving" organization (for example a heavy industry).

There are researchers that discuss the emotional aspect of work, especially the arts' influence on humans. Schein (2013:2-4) claims, "the arts and artists stimulate and legitimize our own aesthetic sense [...] the artist puts us in touch with our creative self". He means such activities make the employees feel, "fully human even at work". Bozic and Köping Olsson (2013:79) declare, "Art can be particularly effective at eliciting emotional response and influencing the intrinsic motivations for employees", and Berthoin Antal and Debucquet (2013:14) discuss the human value of artistic interventions, "When the artists bring in these kinds of techniques [games or physical exercises] the employees might 'have fun' and develop their 'creative potential' but at a deeper level the intention is to stimulate the employees to 'search themselves' and 'question themselves'". Similarly, Guillet de Monthoux (2004:8ff) argues for, "arts, aesthetics and creative activities as a way for re-creating life energy for humans".

There are researchers that mean that these tendencies are signs of, what might be called, a new artistic management. For example, Schiuma<sup>7</sup> refers to the importance of a new kind of management, "managing energy and emotion, experience and ethics" (ibid. 2012:2). Pink (2009:11) claims we are in a phase of shifting paradigms where creativity, empathy and holistic thinking are fruitful aspects for all development. Also Darsø (2004:18) identifies a paradigm drawing on "our full human potential (body, mind, heart, spirit)." Accordingly, arts and aesthetics correspond well with the touching dimension. This "inner" confirmation also resembles, for example, how managers may relate to the inward facing identity work (Watson, 2008), the connections inwards towards the self (Hatch & Schultz, 2002) and to Mead's discussion about the two phases "I" and "Me", and in this case reactions that impinge on "I" (Mead, 2004/1934). Other similar approaches are to consider arts as an influence on

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<sup>7</sup> Speech held in the British Library, UK, in March 2012, published at [www.guardian.co.uk/culture-professionals-network](http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture-professionals-network), 2012-03-29.

feelings (for example Schein, 2013) and Iszatt-White (2012:173f) who expresses the importance of feelings at work and being "valued at work". Budd (2011:89) discusses work as personal fulfilment and "being intrinsically rewarding" and Bowman (2011:47) emphasize the calling: "a calling provides a sense of deep meaning at work and authentic engagement in work". Also Walsh and Gordon (2008) discuss the calling aspect.

All together, I find support in research for the emerging emotional aspects at work. In this paper it is understood as a touching dimension, one of five identity-related dimensions, which is regarded as an important ingredient in the ongoing identity construction.

### *Managers' identity enhanced in artistic interventions*

The importance of a valid, or preferred work identity, as Kira and Balkin (2014) put it, is especially central for individuals in leading positions because they influence the people in their organization. Therefore, his or her leadership has a strong impact on the identity work for everyone in the organization, which can be referred to as conducting "identity management". Haslam, Reicher, and Platow (2011:170) suggest: "Those [managers/leaders] who can present their version of identity as valid, and themselves as an embodiment of it, do not just change their psychological relationship with followers. They are in a position to shape how groups of people act and to use them as a source of social power"<sup>8</sup>. The embodiment of the manager identity is also discussed as "the value of leading beautifully" by Ladkin (2008:31-41). This means how the followers apprehend the leaders and their performance. She also highlights the human purposes that are connected to such leadership, which is similar to those purposes noted among the Airis managers. Artistic interventions, and the emotional touch it enables, draw attention to what it is to be human. My contribution in this discussion is to recognize such emotional aspects in an organization and relate it to the identity construction and the identity work, claiming that the touching dimension influences how work is perceived and thereby also enhances the identity construction.

Even if the managers in this study seldom mention the identity aspects spontaneously, there are signs of its presence in their stories. Many of these signs are directly connected to the managers' experiences of the artistic interventions, such as being strengthened due to implementing untraditional activities, or when the employees get another picture of them as more creative managers. Other signs are related to their work as managers per se, such as feeling good when employees "grow" at work, or when cooperation between group members develops.

One Airis manager (of 33) expresses mostly bad experiences from Airis. A way to understand him, and managers who reject offers to conduct artistic interventions (and thereby avoid this kind of insecure context that an artistic intervention establishes), is to regard this reactions as a way to confirm the existing identity. Perhaps they think like this: "I am a person who doesn't engage in such silly activities". This reaction could accordingly be understood as an example of identifying "what one is not" (Hammarén & Johansson, 2009), in this case not wanting to put their actual identity at risk by being regarded as a "dopey manager".

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<sup>8</sup> The source of social power, as Haslam et al. (2011) discuss, and identity regulation aspects, for example discussed by Alvesson & Willmott (2002), are of course an important discussion regarding how managers may have hidden intentions to regulate the employees. However it is not within the limits of this paper to discuss the regulating effects, even if it is important to be aware of.

*Artistic interventions as triggers for identity work*

To discuss artistic interventions as exciting triggers for identity work is one purpose with this paper. Since interventions with arts are untraditional and controversial projects, they challenge the participants' identities in diverse ways, especially the identities of the managers that introduce such different interventions. Ways that may be triggering are many, such as to work and interact with artists, "whose identities they expect have been shaped by different cultural orientations than their own" (Berthoin Antal & Debucquet, 2013:15). There are several empirical remarks regarding the cooperation with the artist, both negative like, "*the artist was annoying and a disturbance*", and positive, "*the employees felt uncomfortable with the project, but they loved Maria [the artist]*". Either way, the interaction is different and triggers reflections about themselves.

Maria, one of the artists, describes an example of how the managers are challenged: "The method means one has to abandon one's fixed positions and meet on neutral ground. That is of course highly uncomfortable for a manager who is used to sheltering behind his armour expecting everybody except himself to change" (Berthoin Antal, 2011:41). Some of the Airis managers emphasized the challenge of not being too much involved and trying to "manage" the artistic processes. Instead it is important to let the project "*live its on life*". Another comment regards how inspiring it is to work with art, with the same conditions as the employees. When "*limitations were expanded*" and "*the artist stretched our borders*", the identity work was triggered.

I find that implementing artistic interventions can be seen as a way to establish a creative environment in the organization. As noted above, also Berthoin Antal and Debucquet (2013) find the artistic intervention as a trigger for the reflexive processes, which influence the identity. Their interpretation focuses on the "resonance" that is experienced between the worlds of arts and the worlds of organizations and they describe it as: "*a space of possibilities for co-evaluation of identities for all stakeholders*" (ibid. 2013:16f, italics in original). This created organizational "space", thanks to the artistic intervention, enables challenges and triggers for identity work. In this environment (or space), "participants experience new ways of seeing, thinking and doing things that add value to them personally" (Berthoin Antal & Strauß, 2015:39). The interactions and activities also lead to "relationships and collaborative ways of working" (ibid. 2015:41). Several of the Airis managers emphasize the good relationships that emerge, and the trustful approaches among the participants. This triggering environment turns out to be a permitting space where each person feels secure and comfortable to come up with new ideas, challenging thoughts and so forth. Within this space they are able to develop and grow as persons (which influence their identity).

Are these artistic interventions explicit ways for managers to develop themselves and their identity? The findings show that both their actions, such as accepting a manager position, and actions like implementing an artistic intervention, can be understood as a kind of identity work, even if the managers do not explicitly express it in such terms.

A way to develop oneself as manager is thus to be a bold and different manager who initiates artistic interventions, illustrated by this quote (Ms YÅ): "*to have the courage to leave the traditional concept of how a manager should be*". Many Airis managers (as well as Tillt, the intermediary), express the importance of being bold. This attribute is confirmed by Berthoin Antal (2009:143): "The decision to take part in a programme of these characteristics is a risky one that, in many cases, requires a great deal of courage, on both behalf of the managers in the organisation and the artists, because the intrinsic value of these processes is not yet commonly recognized and generally accepted". See also Ladkin and Taylor (2010:239) who discuss leaders' courage as an essential requirement for leading.

Moreover, since the managers in this study have been in leading position for almost twenty years in average, their stories show that they have a good self-confidence, thanks to their long experience (and they obviously had the courage to accept an Airis project). Their leader experience can be interpreted as the reason for their willingness to expose themselves by affirming a different venture like Airis. Such exposure can be understood as a way to put one's self on the edge, grasping the opportunity to challenge and trigger the identity, especially if they long for some exciting development at the end of their careers.

The quote from Mr HA is a good example of how artistic interventions in organizations, may both challenge and confirm the manager:

*Sometime in the middle of the project my staff wondered if I was sensible, I who had dragged them into this [the Airis project] but now they are proud of being involved. I think they respect me more since then because I showed I knew what I was doing.*

A more critical approach about management ventures like Airis is expressed by Gilmore and Warren (2007). They describe the management literature to be "overly romantic [...] prizing the intangible ideas of 'flow' and 'aesthetic experience'" (ibid. 2007:107). They continue, "what unites these approaches [...] is an assumption that by using aesthetic/artistic methods, employees' creativity and innate talents can be 'freed' for the good of the organization" (ibid. 2007:111).

Gilmore and Warren have a good point worth considering. Ventures like Airis can appear overly positive, especially when looking back at its realization. If a manager initiates a venture like Airis, that appears risky and has to be defended against a lot of opponents, there is a strong wish for successful evaluations and positive feedback from the organization. However, my understanding of the Airis managers is that a majority of them are not "overly romantic", even if it occurs. They openly express the problems that occur (for example regarding non-interested employees or when the cooperation with the artist didn't work as expected) and thus express both positive and negative aspects even if the positive experiences from Airis dominate. They also seem quite aware of the limited amount of tangible results to be expected, when they accepted the Airis project.

This study shows that working with arts in organizations, have an impact on participants' identity construction. This aspect is an added value from artistic interventions, which can be raised, together with the other added values mentioned in research, when intermediaries try to convince managers to affirm arts-based projects like Airis.

## **Conclusion**

The interest in this empirically grounded paper is to develop an understanding that highlights managers' identity construction at work. The base is a study of Swedish managers who are special in the sense that they have initiated an artistic intervention project, called Airis. These "Airis managers'" stories about how they understand and experience such projects, as well as work in general, are the empirical base for the findings.

My point is that all experiences at work influence the identity construction. Among the Airis managers, five identity-related dimensions are frequently expressed in their stories. These five dimensions at work may: "enable", "legitimize", "strengthen", "touch", and/or "constrain" managers' identity construction. Especially notable in this Airis study is the dimension that emotionally touches the inner self, the touching dimension.

Bringing artistic interventions into a work context is a different way to enable, support and challenge the participants. One way to interpret and understand artistic interventions, parallel with describing other values and effects, is to explore how these experiences influence the identity construction. My understanding of the managers' initiatives is to recognize the artistic intervention as a trigger for their identity work.

The practical implications based on these findings are that individuals may become aware of the five identity-related dimensions that may appear in a work context. This awareness can stimulate reflections about work, and the experiences work enables. It is possible to discuss which dimensions that are missing, and/or how to deal with the experienced constraints. Depending on how important each dimension is perceived by the individual, actions may be taken to "solve" the "constraints" or missing dimensions. Another implication concerns the managers who actually may influence the employees' identity construction when organizing work. The managers' awareness of these dimensions may accordingly be of help for such organizing. A third implication relates to both the intermediaries and the artists in artistic interventions, since they can raise the identity confirming aspect, together with other values, when they argue for artistic initiatives in organizations.

Managers' identity constructions are, as I show in this study, influenced by work. Performing artistic interventions may challenge this construction. Researchers who discuss identity aspects related to artistic interventions are so far quite scarce (some exceptions are Berthoin Antal (2014a) and Berthoin Antal & Debucquet (2013)). An artistic intervention like Airis, with its mostly different and unfamiliar arts-activities, may generate uncertainty and tensions but create, at the same time, an exciting organizational environment that stimulates creativity and development. The permitting "space" the group activities together with artists shape, may also challenge and trigger the participants' identities. In other words, the intervention both enables and enforces different dimensions at work for identity construction.

The theoretical contribution is the findings that emphasize that artistic interventions may challenge and trigger identity construction at work. The findings also contribute to identity theory, since dimensions in the work context are identified that highlight more detailed contextual aspects regarding identity construction at work. Finally this study has implications for identity work research, since controversial projects like Airis may be regarded as triggers for managers' identity work.

### **Further research**

This research describes conditions for a group of Swedish managers representing different types of organizations. They all have experiences from Airis, an artistic intervention project, in common. In other countries, other organizations and other contexts the experiences are likely to be somewhat different. An interesting next step would be to apply the five identity-related dimensions both on experiences from other stakeholders in artistic interventions (like Berthoin Antal & Debucquet (2013) do), as well as on experiences from members in non-artistic contexts, i.e. traditional organizations.

Another way to use this typology of identity-related dimensions is to let members of organizations discuss how these dimensions occur in their work context and how important each dimension is experienced. Such discussions may deepen the understanding and the meaning of the dimensions.

The discursive aspects are interesting and can give important insights, especially in discussions about identity work (Ybema, Vroemisse, and Van Marrewijk, 2012). For example Parush and Koivunen (2014:105) discuss the "art-and-management discourse". They declare

that, "People [...] may identify with them [the discourses], reject them, re-combine them and reconstruct them". One discourse that is constantly relevant concerns managers' emphasis on "leadership" (rather than on "management"). The ambition with this paper was not to discuss the discourses that make ventures like "arts in business" possible (or if a collaboration with artists is perhaps "the discourse of the day", as Sveningsson & Alvesson (2003) describe new, fashion discourses). How managers try to position themselves, in relation to the discourse, is an interesting angle to explore, as also Sveningsson and Larsson (2006) discuss. So, in order to get more interesting insights about those managers who accept artistic interventions, and about those who don't, a discussion about the discourses that influence such decisions may be fruitful.

There are some managers who are critical about the instrumental view of arts and they experience a presumption that "all" problems can be solved with arts. Such aspects are also raised in Gilmore and Warren (2007:112) who describe artistic interventions as, "a colonisation of the arts by capitalism and an 'instrumentalisation' of artistic/aesthetic experience through corporate involvement". Aspects regarding the utilisation of arts and the "management-tool"-perspective would be interesting to investigate further.

Finally, the five identity-related dimensions are here found in a work context. An interesting development of these findings could be to investigate if other contexts, like family-life, schools, spare time activities or similar, enable comparable identity-related dimensions. Since the identity construction has an ongoing nature (Giddens, 1991), is it likely that the different dimensions can be found in various milieus, which are to be studied in coming research.

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<sup>9</sup> The translations from Swedish titles to English are my own.

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### Comments about the interview guide

The guide had four interrelated parts (here translated from Swedish):

A: Experiences concerning Airis, B: Work-related identity aspects, C: Approaches concerning being a manager including attitudes towards employees and leadership, D: Aspects concerning contemporary society and discourses. In this paper the questions concerning identity aspects and approaches towards leadership have had the strongest implications. Note that some questions were possible to interpret in more than one way. For example number 13 (see below) can relate to both experiences concerning Airis as well as identity aspects (when the respondent discussed values from arts that confirm the self). The specific questions that were supposed to relate to identity were number 5, 8, 9, 13.

### Interview guide (my translation)

#### Interviewee Nr:

#### Questions to Airis managers:      **Date**                      **Time**

Name:	Age:
Position:	Time as manager:
Education:	Project year:
(Siblings?)	Organization

1. Can you tell me about your experiences from your AIRIS project?
  2. What expectations did you have and how do you assess that they were met?
  3. What were your main reasons for this venture (including your argument when initiating it to your organization)?  
Did you have the mandate to decide yourself?
  4. What do you think makes these kinds of investments in arts in organizations possible?
  5. How has your role as manager been affected by the AIRIS project?  
What about your employee's view of you?
  6. What are your personal experiences of the project?
  7. How do you feel that you, as a manager, may influence your employees 'feeling' for work?
  8. How are you personally affected by your work and your professional role?
  9. How do you find the connection between work and (personal) identity?
  10. Why do you think you got into a leadership position?  
Can one speak of a "gaze" for leadership?
  11. Are there some crucial events in your own manager career?
  12. What kinds of leaders do you think is needed for in the future?
  13. What are the most important benefits from arts and culture for individuals in an organization?
- Finally, you're one of few managers who hired an artist. What is your own reflection about that?

Do you see any common denominator?