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The Myth of the Ideal Graduate: A Critical Perspective on Narrative Identity Formation in a Cohort of Graduates

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Abstract

Power is a defining feature of organizational life in general and in organisational socialisation in particular. In this study we aim at developing a deeper understanding of the tension between newcomers' search for expressing their authentic selves and the pressure to comply with what we call the myth of the ideal employee. We conceptualise the myth of the ideal employee as a dominant narrative that structures the process of membership negotiation as discussed by McPhee and Zaug (2000). Drawing on Alvesson and Wilmott (2002) and Ashforth and Schinoff (2016), we conceptualise the process as identity regulation pertaining to how newly hired graduates come to define "who they are" in a large corporation. We present findings from a longitudinal, qualitative study with data consisting of sixty-two interviews with a cohort of graduates in a corporate graduate programme. Over a period of six months, three interviews were conducted with each graduate; one before entering the organization, one after three months, and one after six months. As we conceptualise identity as embedded in narrative, the data has been analyzed through a narrative analysis, using Greimas' actantial model. Our analysis dives into each interview round as well as narrative trajectories across interview rounds with a central emphasis on identity regulation and becoming a member.

The findings demonstrate how the myth constrains graduates to match a specific narrative identity and ideology in accordance with the organization's own and how the newcomers strategize to establish a particular presence in the organization. It also reveals small but consequential attempts to "stay true to oneself", thus unravelling the complex, ongoing negotiation of "who one is" and the key stakeholders involved.

Keywords

1 Introduction

Since the term was coined by Edgar Schein in 1968 (Schein, 1968), the field of organisational socialisation has manifested itself as a vibrant domain of research (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016). More recently, the aspect of socialisation pertaining to newcomers has received a profound practitioner interest under the label "onboarding", as evidenced by the plethora of consultants, self-proclaimed experts, and technology offerings dedicated to the topic.

However, the recent trend in the present landscape of hyper-competitive organisational attraction, is the so-called Graduate Programme aimed at recruiting newcomers straight from college, that has received surprisingly little interest in academia. Usually targeted at top-of-class students from business schools and engineering and technical colleges, these programs typically consist of a temporary contractual agreement in which the student becomes part of a larger cohort of other students entering the program. Constituting a highly structured, institutionalised socialisation process (Jones, 1986), graduates typically attend a number of out-of-office courses planned by HR, they get a mentor and an onboarding buddy, and they get to socialise quite extensively with other graduates via specific events. A critique often aimed at this type of socialisation program is that it tends to strip away individuality in favour of indoctrinating the newcomer into a predefined mould (Cable, Gino, Staats, 2013). Since graduates have no prior experience and must learn, not only the job, but also what it means to be a working professional (Rajamäki & Mikkola, 2020), they are even more susceptible to corporate indoctrination and thus a domain demanding critical inquiry.

To understand the socialisation of graduates, the notion of "identity work" (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002) seems helpful as it describes the process through which newcomers test provisional selves (Ibarra, 1999) in their attempts to make sense of who they are. Previous research has shown how newcomers orient to a host of stakeholders and sources including, immediate supervisors (e.g. Jokisaari & Nurmi, 2009; Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013; Sluss & Thompson, 2012), mentors (e.g. Seibert, 1999), colleagues (e.g. Chao et al., 1994; Kammeyer-Mueller & Wanberg, 2003; Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013) and their social network in the workplace (Jokisaari & Vuori, 2014). Previous research has also documented how organisational myths (Gabriel, 1991) come to function as aspirational identities, thus enabling and constraining newcomer behaviours and self-perception serving a self-disciplining function in organisational settings (Thornborrow & Brown, 2009). As with narratives in general, myths are not mere neutral stories, but embedded in organisational structures of power (Mumby, 1987). In the context of Graduate Programmes, it may be reasonably assumed that myths are even more powerful given the newcomers lack of professional experience and the institutional pressures associated with being one of the selected few who made it into the program.

This paper thus is driven by the following research question: *How does the myth of the ideal graduate influence new graduates' identity narratives when negotiating organisational membership prior to and after the first six months of work?*

In the following, we will first elaborate the underlying theoretical framework supporting the investigation, beginning with unpacking the lens constituted by the CCO paradigm. We then follow up with a conceptual clarification of myth and identity with a basis in the narrative turn in organisation studies (Rhodes & Brown, 2005). With the theoretical backdrop thus clarified, we present the data and method before embarking on the analysis of graduate's identity trajectories and the role of myth of the ideal graduate herein. Specifically, we show how the performative logic embedded in the myth over time becomes the all-encompassing frame of self-understanding, resulting in a complete albeit somewhat contested immersion into neoliberal ideology. To counter this process, we argue for the importance of maintaining alternative identity frames, which offers a space for emancipation. We conclude by proposing further paths of research and offering practical guidance for practitioners, specifically those involved in graduate programs in large organisations.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Narratives and critical investigation

The past three decades have seen a rise in organisational research employing what may broadly be termed a narrative approach (Czarniawska-Jorges, 1995). While identities are often investigated as fragmentary images, a narrative approach to identities opens up for a more dynamic evolving perspective allowing insights into how organisational members construct identities relative to a plot and how certain participants are cast in specific roles (Humphreys & Brown, 2002). Indeed, Scott and Myers (2010) argue that membership negotiation entails the mastering of standard narrative schemes of the organisation and unit over time.

Moreover, a narrative perspective on identity has proven particularly fruitful for understanding identity dynamics during macro work role transitions such as organisational entries, exits, promotions and organisational changes (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). Arguably, the shift from being a full-time student to being a full-time professional, is one of the most drastic changes a person experiences during their career (Rajamäki & Mikkola, 2020).
Narratives in organisations are not mere stories, they constrain and enable certain employee behaviours and thus work as implicit means of organisational control (Mumby, 1987). This point was pertinently illustrated by Kärreman and

Alvesson (2004) who documented how both classical technocratic and socio-ideological forms of control are interwoven to generate relevant identity schemes in an IT consultancy firm. In the context of organisational socialisation, Ashforth and Schinoff (2016, p. 124) pointed out that "Organizations and occupations often facilitate narration by providing not only opportunities to share narratives, but prototypical narratives tied to the organization's identity and one's current role and expected career trajectory". Thus, individuals do not simply craft stories from a clean slate, they fit their narratives to existing narratives promoted by the organisation. Moreover, stories are often told from the middle, selectively incorporating past events, the current situation and anticipated future events (Shipp & Jansen, 2011). As new hires enter the organisation, they bring with them a catalogue of experiences from the hiring process and second-hand stories about the organisation. These combined with anticipations of the graduate role and desired future career trajectories are used to craft a narrative of who the newcomer is and might come to be in this particular setting. Moreover, different narrative accounts may be negotiated simultaneously with different audiences as shown by Sims (2003).

To this end, narratives have been shown to be effective for transmitting values in organisations (Parada & Dawson, 2017; Parada & Vilades, 2010), and indeed come to constitute the collective identity of the organisation as particularly potent "authoritative texts" (Koschmann, 2012; Kuhn, 2008). Prototypical narratives, or "authoritative texts" are constitutive of who we are and become in organisations. This notion will be further unpacked below when discussing the concept of organizational myths.

However, this does not mean that newcomers simply absorb narratives. Employees may resist dominant narratives (Brown et al., 2005) or use narratives to navigate the competing demands of specific stakeholder groups, including themselves (Clarke, Brown & Hailey, 2009). Thus, navigating the forces of competing narratives of "who I'm supposed to be" can be a rather complicated affair.

2.2 CCO

Organisational socialisation naturally implies that newcomers become members of "an organisation". Yet for the most part, what the organisation is, has remained undertheorised and largely taken for granted. However, since 2000, the field of organisational studies has witnessed the growth of a radical new branch of organisation theorising called the Communicative Constitution of Organizations perspective (Boivin, Brummans, & Barker, 2017). As the label implies, the main tenet of the perspective is a fundamental question of what organisations are and how they come to be. More specifically, CCO problematises the organisation-communication relationship, arguing that communication is not something that is done "inside" predefined, ontologically real organizations; rather, communication comprises the building blocks of organisations (Cooren, Kuhn, Cornelissen, & Clark, 2011).

CCO comprises three different schools, The Four Flows Model, The Montreal School, and Luhmann's Social Systems perspective. While in agreement on the notion that communication is what constitutes organisations, the three schools differ somewhat in terms of underlying theories, methods and emphasis (Schoeneborn et al., 2014). Although all three schools offer valuable avenues into the topic at hand, the perspective that has dealt most specifically with organisational socialisation is The Four Flows Model, which was proposed by Robert McPhee and Pamela Zaug (2000). Moreover, it has been argued that this approach is the one most attuned to identity matters (Chaput & Basque, 2022). The Four Flows Model posits that organizations emerge as a result of four interrelated flows of communication. Each flow comprises different stakeholders and different messages, but quite often communicative interactions contribute to more than one flow. Using Giddens'(1984) Structuration theory as a backdrop, the model suggests that organisations as overarching structures continuously produce a range of action opportunities, which in turn reproduce the structure in a dialectical manner. The organisation thus enables and constrains local interactions, which in turn produces and reproduces the organisation. This is not to say that organisations are stable and unchangeable structures, indeed people are capable of changing organisations when they do things differently by appropriating structural resources (Iverson, McPhee, & Spaulding, 2018).

Each of the four flows represent analytically distinct forms of communication that all contribute to the constitution of the organisation (McPhee & Zaug, 2000). The first flow, *Organizational Self-structuring*, refers to self-reflexive communication from the organisation about the formal structure of the organisation, such as organisational charts and policies. The second flow, *Activity Coordination*, includes the communicative flows involved in getting things done such as the ways in which members solve problems together and delegate tasks. The third flow, *Institutional Positioning* refers to how the organisation communicatively legitimises its existence and identity in relation to the wider environment of stakeholders. Finally, *Membership Negotiation*, pertains the communicative process through which organisational members negotiate their identity as member of the organisation (Scott & Myers, 2010). While not limited exclusively to socialisation of newcomers (McPhee, 2015), this last flow is particularly pertinent in onboarding processes, as illustrated by a number of studies. For instance, a recent study by Rajamäki and Mikkola (2020) demonstrated the social nature of the process and how communicative practices of feedback, social support, impression management and the creation of shared trust are some of the main constituents of membership

negation, whereas a case study by Iverson, McPhee and Spaulding (2018) show how membership is tied to responsibilities.

A common theme across these studies is that membership is not just something contractually granted by an organisation, nor is it just a matter of individual actions; rather, it is a process of "collective accomplishment" (Iverson et al., 2018, p.53). These continuous collective accomplishments are however not negotiated from scratch every time a newcomer enters. Rather they follow certain patterns of interaction (Scott & Myers, 2010). To account for the multiple agents involved in co-creating these patterns, and the ongoing nature of the process, the next section posits that narrative perspective on identity offers a viable lens for investigation.

2.3 Membership negotiation as identity construction

The central concern of membership negotiation is the communicative constitution of what it means to be a proper member of an organisation (McPhee & Zaug, 2000). Thus, becoming an organisational member can be described as a process of "identity construction" (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016), that is, how someone comes to define themselves as an organisational member. The process has also been described as "identity work" by Alvesson and Willmott (2002, p. 626) who described it as "forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a precarious sense of coherence and distinctiveness".

The process however is not straight forward, as shown by Ibarra (1999), it involves experimenting with a number of provisional selves that are not yet fully elaborated. The process involves identifying desired identity role-models, testing out aspects of the provisional selves and adjusting through the feedback from the environment. Moreover, these socialisation processes can be seen to happen across levels ranging from the intra-individual, to the intersubjective and generic taken for granted level (Ashforth, Rogers, & Corley, 2011).

2.4 Tying it all together with the notion of myth

We argue that myths account for a specific type of narratively embedded authoritative text drawn upon by newcomers as abstract role-model narratives. Myths are thus the common core of regularly employed narratives (Gabriel, 1991). For our study we will be particularly interested in myths pertaining to the aspirational identities (Thornborrow & Brown, 2009).

Myths are often construed as somehow the opposite of facts. However, as shown by Gabriel (1991) this is a simplification, maybe even a myth. His study shows how facts and events are turned into stories and thus embellished with meaning. The stories are then regularly attended to as fact by organisational members. Even if they are not factual, or at least only partially factual, in the objective sense, they are nevertheless very real for the organisational members telling them. They are not accurate accounts of reality, but meaningful reproductions which help negotiate membership. The literature on organisational myths has shown how they often serve to simplify complex reality (Gabriel 1991, Boje et al., 1982) for instance by inducing simple cause and effect relationships or categorising the world into binary opposites such as good versus evil. Given the uncertainty and complexity of the situation the graduates find themselves in, it would only make sense for them to rely to some extent on myths to make sense of the world. Moreover, they are about to enter a new phase of life as working professionals, which itself is permeated by myths about what it means to be successful or even a valuable member of society. More locally, myths have also been shown to work as a means to cultural socialisation making it a particularly pertinent concept for our analysis (Bowles 1989). The corporate Graduate Programme setting thus is a particularly fertile arena for the emergence of myths.

3 Methods

To unpack newcomer identity formation in a longitudinal manner and follow narrative developments, we needed to purposely sample an organisation that was planning on hiring a large number of graduates with the same starting date. After identifying and contacting relevant organisations, a fit was found with a large Danish organisation in the telecommunication sector that had just hired 21 graduates who were all starting at the same time in September 2020.
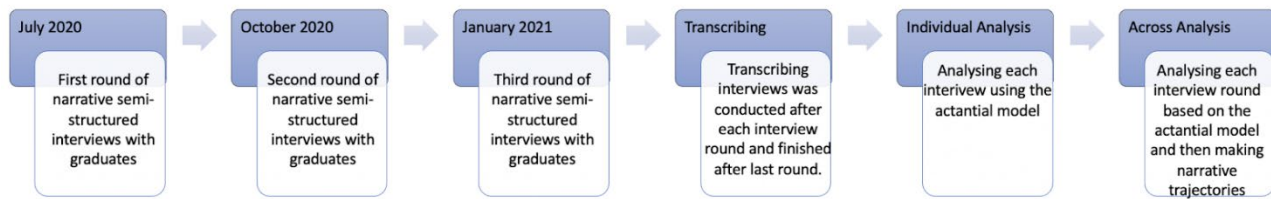
As such, the sampling of newcomers is linked to the sampling of the organisation, as it gave us access to the 21 graduates enrolled in their 2020 Graduate Programme, who were about to embark on their first full time job. Their Graduate Programme had a one-year duration consisting of a rotation halfway through, meaning that the graduates would get to experience two different areas of work. Our study followed the graduates through the first rotation, being the first six months of their graduate programme.

Each graduate was interviewed three times using a narrative semi-structured interview format. A total of 62 interviews were collected, as one person did not reply to our emails, and a few did not show up for some of their interviews. The longitudinal data allows for an investigation of how their experiences evolve.

Figure 1 illustrates the interview process: First interview round took place in July 2020 prior to entry, the next in October 2020 three months in and the last one in January 2021 six months in. This setup allows for an investigation of

how the graduates come to develop their identity narratives at work, and how tensions between different identities evolve throughout time.

Figure 1 Interview rounds

July 2020	October 2020	January 2021	Transcribing	Individual Analysis	Across Analysis
First round of narrative semi-structured interviews with graduates	Second round of narrative semi-structured interviews with graduates	Third round of narrative semi-structured interviews with graduates	Transcribing interviews was conducted after each interview round and finished after last round.	Analysing each interview using the actantial model	Analysing each interview round based on the actantial model and then making narrative trajectories

Interviews were conducted in 3 waves over the course half a year

To understand the graduates' experiences and behaviours in the best possible manner we conducted narrative interviews which enabled us to place the graduates at the heart of the study and moreover, privilege the meanings they assign to their own stories (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016). This also meant that we did not set a fixed agenda when interviewing the graduates as we wanted the participants to control the direction, content, and pace of the interview (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016). Therefore, a semi-structured interview guide was conducted to allow for the collection of similar data from each graduate, while still having the liberty to ask additional question depending on the experiences and narratives being told

Each interview round was separately analysed, as well as the narrative trajectories across interview rounds. The two identity narratives provided in our analysis were deducted from a coding framework developed bottom up (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016). When analysing our dataset, we noticed a pattern of the graduates striving towards conflicting identities and thus set out to code bottom-up from the data to look for quotes that adhered to either 'the ideal graduate' or 'the authentic best self'. This was done first for each individual interview, then for each interview round and ultimately across interview rounds to look for trajectories.

The analytical process has been illustrated in the figure below.

Figure 2 – Analysis process

| Transcribe | Analyse individual interview based on actantial model | Analyse each interview round based on the actantial model | Analyse narrative trajectories across interview rounds |

The analysis process comprised four steps that built onto each other

In order to extract the graduates' narratives from the data, Greimas' actantial model was applied. Greimasian narratology is considered one of the main theoretical roots of CCO (Cooren & Seidl, 2022), and has been applied in a number of CCO studies (see for instance Bencherki & Cooren 2011; Cooren & Fairhurst, 2004). In particular, we are interested in the polymical dimension of narratives, as some agents are positioned either obstacles or opponents, or as partners or helpers. Furthermore, given the longitudinal dataset, Greimasian narratology allows for an investigation of the dynamics of this attribution process over time.

The model was used to grasp how the graduates develop their own narrative workplace identity, and more so, who or what they describe as playing a part in their identity construction process. Importantly, the model a emphasizes the multiple agents involved in identity formation and their respective roles in the story as it unfolds.

Within the actantial model an action may be broken down into six components, also known as actants: Subject, object, sender, receiver, helper and opponent (Hébert & Tabler, 2019.) The actantial analysis is conducted by "assigning each element of the action being described to one of the actantial classes" (Hébert & Tabler, 2019, p. 80).

Figure 3 The Actantial Model

KNOWLEDGE

Sender ⟶ Object ⟶ Receiver

Helper ⟶ Subject ⟶ Opponent

POWER
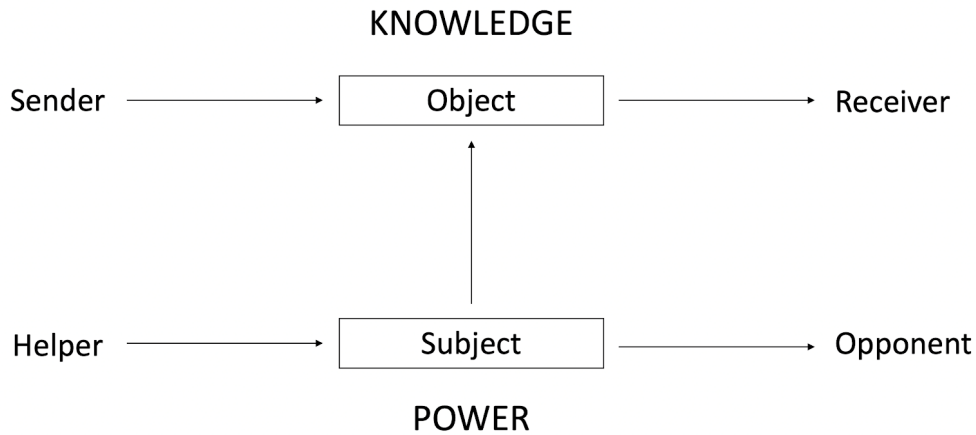
The Actantial Model describes the main actants in Greimasian Narratology

Once we had established which statements adhered to which identity narrative, we moved on to establishing which actants were involved in either helping or opposing to achieving this aspirational identity. Subsequently, we were able to count how many times each actant played a role as either a helper or opponent to achieving the objective of either becoming 'the ideal graduate' or 'the authentic best self' and in that way determine which actants played the largest role in the identity quest. The illustration below is an example of how we coded for helpers and opponents for each interview round.

Table 1 – Exemplary coding

Interview round 2 - Objective "the ideal graduate"	
Helpers:	**Opponents:**
Colleagues/the team (G9, G21, G3) Total: 3	Manager (G1, G9, G15) Total: 3
Mentor (G12) Total: 1	Mismatch between skills and tasks (G12, G4) Total: 2
Case camps (G1, G12) Total: 2	Corona (G14, G21, G4, G3) Total: 4
The Graduate Programme (G21) Total: 1	Being new (G14, G15, G18) Total: 3
Manager (G14, G15, G18, G19, G4) Total: 5	Buddy (G4) Total: 1
Rotation (G14) Total: 1	
Buddy (G2) Total: 1	
Being new (G1, G15) Total: 2	
Total helpers: 16	**Total opponents: 13**

Example of Coding for Helpers and Opponents. This example shows helpers and opponents to the 'ideal graduate' object from the second interview round. The parentheses indicate which graduates mentioned these actants as either a helper or an opponent.

Before we embark on the analysis a few notes on the use of quotes. As notes by Eldh, Årestedt and Berterö (2020), quotes are frequently used in qualitative research, but the specific purpose and justification seems to be somewhat taken

for granted or at least not explicated. In the analysis quotes are used to exemplify the broader and more "general" tendencies in the data. Therefore, quotes were chosen from different informants and grouped based on the theme that resulted from the coding process. The principal justification for doing so is transparency and trustworthiness, that is, allowing the reader to assess whether the coding and categorization is properly done. This is, to be clear, not a claim to the generalisability of the results, as understood in the positivist sciences (Creswell, 2009). Rather, the main criterion is that the quotes are representative of the particular sample of individuals we investigated. Most of the interviews were conducted in Danish and thus the quotes were translated to English while striving to stay as close to their original choice of words as possible - however, minor grammatical adjustments have been made when needed. All informants have been anonymized to G for graduate and a number, e.g. 'G1'.

4 Analysis

The analysis is structured into four parts that mirror the coding process. With the individual graduate as the main protagonist (Subject) we start out by characterising the two dominant aspirational identities portrayed across our sample. As the stories we investigate pertain to becoming someone, these function as the main Objects across the narratives. We then investigate the tension between them, showing how they are at least partly incommensurable from the onset. Seeing that socialisation is an inherently a social phenomenon we will then map out the remaining "cast". The cast is here understood both as human and non-human actors that act as either Helpers or Opponents in Greimas' model.

Finally, we show how the narratives follow a shared trajectory across the sample. Specifically, we show how the two identities, which seemed opposing in the beginning, ultimately converge.

4.1 The myth of the ideal graduate

From the coding of our first round of interviews, conducted before the graduates had started but after they had signed the contract, the data showed that the graduates did not enter the organisation as blank slates. Actually, they had already created internal assumptions of "how do I succeed here?" prior to their first day of work, hence, they had constructed their own idea of an aspirational self, functioning as the Object in their narratives. This aspirational self we have chosen to name the 'Ideal Graduate', as the graduates strive towards becoming ideal in the eyes of the employer and their own aspirations. Part of the myth pertained to the hardworking character of the mythical ideal graduate. In the interviews graduates would align with these traits quite consistently with statements such as "I don't have anything against working overtime. When I start a project, I have to finish it" (G1) and "One would like show that one is hardworking when you start out" (G4).

Another recurrent facet of the myth was that graduates were 'the chosen ones', as exemplified by the following statement "we were hired through the eye of a needle" (G11). The recruitment process supports this, as the graduate programme in question is known to attract hundreds of applicants, and the process itself quite lengthy comprising several interviews and tests. Yet another facet of the myth, which corroborates the two former two, is that the ideal graduate is particularly gifted, talented and/or intelligent, for instance the graduates consistently refer to the IQ tests conducted in the recruitment. Finally, they also orient to the importance of being "social" as indicated by G1 who says that "I expect to grow my network, that is also part of the reason why I applied for the graduate programme."

In summary, the Ideal Graduate is hardworking and uncompromising in terms of reaching targets, but they are also social and expand their network. Moreover, the Ideal Graduate is part of the select few who have the talent to cope with these demands; that is why they, specifically, were hired.

It becomes evident that the myth of the Ideal Graduate is a guiding frame of reference, even before the graduates start and encounter the organizational life. This goes some way in showing that the myth is not just locally bound folklore, but a persistent character to which graduates aspire even before they formally enter the organisation. It becomes evident that it is something that is institutionally embedded in the graduates' way of thinking. From the first round of interviews it was clear that it stems from the organisation's employer branding, the recruitment process, the anticipatory socialisation and role expectations, but also societal expectations more generally. the narrative they have created about the being the ideal graduate is something that plays a large role especially in the beginning of the graduate course, since the graduates can only relate to the preconditioned myth and their own expectations, as they have not yet had begun their work in the organization. They still have not had the chance to actually experience what their manager, coworkers and company expects from them as graduates in their everyday work, forcing them to rely on the myths and aspirations embedded in themselves.

4.2 The authentic best self

In the coding process, the myth of ideal graduate as an aspirational self, was what first caught our attention. However, we also saw the emergence another aspirational self as an object in across the graduates' narratives, which we have chosen to name the 'Authentic Best Self' following Cable, Gino and Staats (2013).

Contrary to the myth of the Ideal Graduate, which was all outcomes and targets, the myth of Authentic Best Self was described in much more processual terms. For instance, the Authentic Best Self is in a process of learning "I still think I have a lot to learn and I want to develop even more" (G9). The myth also ascribes a sense of self-worth to the character as illustrated by this quote from G4 who argues that even if others have more experience it "does not mean I have to compromise with how I feel and how I am treated at a more personal level". Furthermore, they describe this aspirational self as someone who is content, accepts failure and is confident "to still believe in your capabilities even though you are new" (G4).

As such, the quotes connected to each of these aspirational selves seem conflicting, and our data revealed tensions between the two. Thus, indicating the graduates' internal conflicts and difficulties balancing the two internalized aspirational selves. The following section will unravel further the narrative tensions that appear in the graduates' quest of pursuing their two main objects: becoming the ideal graduate while simultaneoasly becoming their best athentic self.

4.3 The tension between two objects: The authentic best self and the ideal graduate

As shown above, we identified two major myths projecting different aspirational selves. Before moving on to the cast taking part in these myths, we will juxtapose them in order to uncover the tensions that result when pursuing both identity projects at once.

Figure 4 The tension
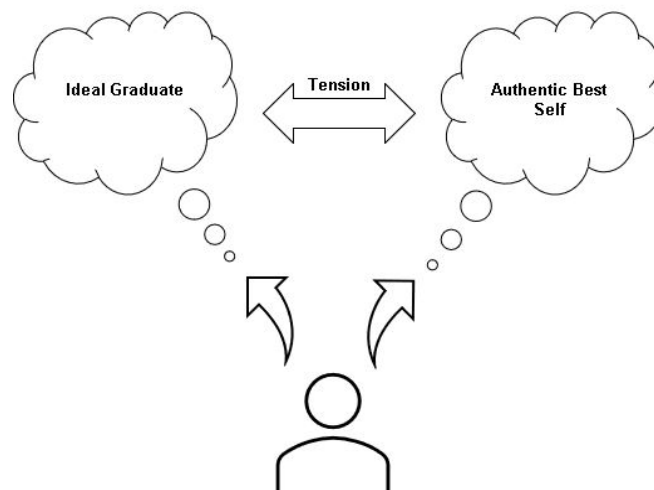
Illustrating the tension between the two aspirational selves

The model above showcases the tensions between the two objects.

As an example, G2 expresses on the one hand that he is "expecting that I am joining an organisation where I can develop as an individual", but on the other hand he also expresses that "there have also been frustrations about getting there and being able to provide value and all" (G2). The tension lies within the fact that he wants to develop as an individual but also wants to show the organisation that he can provide value and results i.e. not wanting to fail even though this leads to individual development in the end.

A second example is G9 expressing that "I still think I have a lot to learn and I want to develop even more. Which is also why I saw the graduate experience as a great opportunity for individual development" while also expressing that "I really wanted to nail it [the interview]! That's also why I consulted a number of my colleagues prior about how to crush the application" (G9). The tension arises between the felt need to be perfect and nailing it, on the one hand, while also recognizing that she is not 'there' yet and thus needs to develop.

Another example is G13 who mentions that "I really want to explore my knowledge fully in transmission line where I am now, because I find it quite interesting" orienting towards becoming his/her Authentic Best Self, since

learning is guided by interest. But then the tension arises because he/she also expresses that "I will put my hundred percent to learn all so that [organisation] will hire me permanently" steering more towards becoming the Ideal Graduate in order to be hired permanently after the graduate program. This emphasizes the means-end logic of the Ideal Graduate.

G4 mentions that "I mean, we might be at work and there might be someone who has four years more experience than I do. But that does not mean that I have to compromise with how I feel and how I'm treated at a more personal level" expressing that the Authentic Best Self wants to believe in their own capabilities and standing fast on who they are and what they feel. But then he also mentions that "It is hard - it is not because I'm trying to overachieve or anything. But you of course want to show that you are industrious and willing to work hard when you start" (G4). Here, the tension lies in the fact that the graduate wants to be looked upon as the ideal graduate from the organisation's perspective, but the actions for this to succeed might not always align with the actions it takes to evolve and become his/her authentic best self which is also an important object for the graduate.

We also saw a tendency in the graduates' narratives revolving around corporate network and what it means to meet people at work. It became evident that in order for the graduates to become the 'Ideal Graduate' it also meant that they should amass a broad corporate network as expressed by G1 "I hope to expand my corporate network. This is also one of the reasons why I chose to apply for a graduate position". However, a tension arises due to the graduates questioning whether this corporate network is actually benefiting them in their journey of becoming their best authentic self: "Well I get a bit tired of listening to HR and the former graduates who keep expressing the importance of expanding your network. Network network network network. And personally, I think that it can be tricky because I really want to shift my focus to enjoying meeting new people and talking to them, asking them what they do and telling them what I stand for. You know? Instead of just meeting a bunch of people in a formal setting." (G4). The tension here relates to how relations at work are supposed to construed. Are colleagues means to an end as implied in the networking logic, or can they be interesting in their own right without a specific professional purpose?

With the tensions between the two identity projects now laid bare, we will turn to cast in both of the myth and how these key agents further complicate the tensions in the graduates' quest towards either of the aspirational identities.

4.4 The role of helpers and opponents in navigating tensions

Due to the tension between the two objects, a tension will also rise for the actants involved in the quests towards the objects. This is because the same actant when cast as a helper in one myth will often be cast as an opponent in the other, while both are desired aspirational journeys. The coding of the data showed that the manager and the rotation were the most recurrent actants in either role.

Table 2: Other main actants

Actant:	Description:
Manager	The leader of the team in which the graduate is part of - the one who is responsible for their tasks and development.
Rotation	Thoughts and actions related to the rotation. Graduates have the opportunity to rotate and switch teams approximately halfway through the one-year programme. While the rotation is a non-human actor it excerpts significant agency in the graduates' narrative.

Description of the actants acting as both Main Helpers and Opponents to Graduates in their quest for the two objects

When it comes to the leader, they are one of the actants mentioned most often throughout all the interview rounds, telling us that the manager plays a large role in graduates' quest, whether it be the quest of reaching object 1, object 2 or both. Thus, it is inevitable that the manager has to subconsciously make a choice as to which object and aspirational self he or she wants to help the graduate pursue. An example can be seen with G4, who describes how her manager acts as a helper in the quest of becoming the best authentic self: "I have been given a lot of freedom to influence my tasks and say which way I think we should go and so on" (Interview 2). In this instance, this manager helps the graduate pursue his/her authentic best self by allowing the graduate to shape the work tasks, which inevitably then also places her as an opponent when it comes to pursuing the ideal graduate, as there are then no clear guidelines as to what the ideal

graduate looks like in the eyes of the manager. However, another graduate experiences her manager as an opponent to being her authentic best self: "There isn't really room for bringing your own ideas. He has already decided the direction and how to do it. But I would like to find my own way in this" (G9, Interview 2). Another example can be seen with G15, who on the other hand described his/her manager as someone who helps in the quest of becoming the ideal graduate: "I had gotten an email from my manager with different links and a book. The links were very useful. He had actually also made a prioritised order of what was most important and stuff like that" (Interview 2). As such, the manager assists the graduate in the quest for becoming the productive 'Ideal Graduate' while opposing the quest towards the curious Authentic Best Self.

The tension for the leader lies within the fact that whichever choice they make, it will place them as both a helper and an opponent for their graduate - if they choose to help them in the quest of becoming their best authentic self, they will oftentimes end up acting as an opponent in regards to the quest of becoming the ideal graduate and vice versa. Another tension lies within how leaders sometimes act as both a helper and opponent for the same object. For example, G20 mentions how his/her manager acts as an *opponent* to her being her authentic best self: "When it comes to personal development and professional development, there hasn't been much focus on it. We [my manager and I] haven't had that many talks about how it's going and what kind of goals I would like to reach and so on. She just admitted that she should have done these things to ensure my individual development" (G20, interview 3). However, at another point in time that same graduate mentions how the manager also *helps* with her being her authentic best self: "I mean, with the tasks I have been given, I really feel like I have gotten a lot of responsibility fast. For example, a current project where it is me that's the project manager. I think that is really cool - to be shown the trust that I can do it". As such, the leader will sometimes also act as a both a helper and opponent to reaching the same aspirational self.

The second actant identified as creating tension is the rotation, as it oftentimes acts as both an opponent and helper for the same exact graduate - depending on the object at hand. When the graduates are halfway through their graduate programme they are given the chance to rotate into another department or even another kind of position. Therefore, this rotation is sometimes seen as a helper to being your authentic best self, as it is seen as a chance to find your place and a spot in the organisation that fits better with your skills and talents. One graduate explains how he wants to rotate over to the strategy department as it is a better fit for him: "I have studied strategy, so it is a better match as to what I want to do" (G20, Interview 3). Another states: "I'm really excited for this rotation. I really hope that within the next six months I will get more clarity on what I want to do" (G15, interview 3). However, G20 also mentions how the rotation might help him in becoming the ideal graduate: "There has been some pressure for us to 'choose the right thing', as there is only one rotation. So because there is only this one chance, there is some pressure to choose the right thing. You really have to think about it" (Interview 3). This quote shows how the graduate feels pressure to make the right choice so that he can be seen as the ideal graduate in the eyes of the organisation. Another graduate mentions how the rotation makes it difficult to be the ideal graduate within the current department, as the mind already starts to wander towards the second department: "I feel like now that you start to think about the second rotation your thoughts are elsewhere. You really need to balance that you are going somewhere else, but that you still need to engage in what you are doing right now, because I'm going to have responsibilities here all the way until I rotate" (G15, interview 3).

As such, these quotes show how the rotation can create tension within graduates, as it makes it difficult for the graduates to reach both of their objectives, as it mostly acts as an opponent to being the ideal graduate in the first rotation and a helper to being your authentic best self in the second rotation.

4.5 Trajectories

This section will dive deeper into the graduate's narrative trajectories regarding the manager and rotation actants throughout the first six-month period of being a graduate. This is done to sort out the overall plot of their stories in order to look into how they have experienced the quest for reaching their objectives.

Starting off with the trajectories for the managers, the manager is most often mentioned as someone who helps the graduates in the quest of becoming their "best authentic self" as most of them are focused on helping the graduates reach their goals and get to where they want.

When it comes to the rotation, it is evident that it helps them mostly with the object of becoming their best authentic self, as it provides them with a chance to take control and choose a direction more suited for them - one could also argue, that this ultimately also helps them with the object of being the ideal graduate, as going in a direction more suited for your skills, will also help you perform better, which ultimately might also help them become the ideal graduate.

Examining the two identity narratives throughout the three interview rounds also present specific trajectories for the two: Prior to first day of work, none of the aspirational identities play a substantial role, yet the narrative about 'the ideal graduate' still dominated over 'the authentic best self, G2 mentions: "But still, I am an ambitious person so why not put in the extra hours and effort is that provides me with an advantage", thus documenting how the myth of the ideal graduate exists even prior to entering the organisation.

Moving on into the second interview round, about three months into employment, the tension starts to rise as both aspirational identities are found to have a significant influence on the graduates. Still their quest towards 'the ideal graduate' dominates over their quest for being their 'authentic best selves', however the latter has started to play a bigger role, resulting in the graduate experiencing great tension between the two aspirational identities. G14 mentions how "it has been full speed ahead and the learning curve has been steep. I would say that I have learnt a lot already and have gotten a lot of responsibility. It has been a nice experience".

However, six months in, it was found that the tension decreased as the two objects started to merge: 'The authentic best self' began to become equal to being 'the ideal graduate'. G21 mentions how "people have a lot of respect when you enter the organisation as a graduate. They know they can encourage me to embark on different projects and succeed" again emphasising the internalised expectations of being the 'ideal graduate'. G13 also mentions: "In the beginning I spent a lot of time on settling in with my team, but after 1,5 months I understood my team and what they wanted from me", here stressing that she has finally figured out what the team wants from her and have additionally internalised it to be the final goal to strive for.

Hence, the socialisation process has increasingly stripped away individuality from the graduates by indoctrinating the newcomer's 'authentic best self' to fit into a predefined mould about the ideal graduate. As G15 expresses: "I don't mind it [working overtime] because I know it is something that will benefit me in the end - really, it is for my own sake. I mean, it is for their sake but in the end, it is also for my own sake". This constitutes a highly structured, institutionalised socialisation process that constrains newcomer self-perception to serve the organisational settings.

4.6. The exclusive focus on competencies

One of the most paramount findings derived from our data set is the exclusive focus on competencies throughout all three interview rounds: The graduates are on a quest for being and becoming someone throughout this graduate programme, and when zooming in on nearly all graduates, it becomes evident that they connect their self-worth to their competencies: Being qua doing.

One graduate states: "I think for me personally, the most important thing is development" (G14, interview 1). G15 also explains how her internalised performative logic has led to a breakdown: "The most recent task I was given has been the most frustrating one, and he [the manager] keeps telling me 'Remember, it is really difficult'. I had a small breakdown where I talked to him and he was like 'remember that it is just work and that I have given you this task to challenge you' (Interview 2). These are examples of a narrative in which they view their competencies as the means through which they can obtain an identity and be valuable. However, since this is their first full time job, they oftentimes end up frustrated that they cannot perform the way they want to: "I had my first breakdown in November, which I talked a lot to my boss about because you have kind of gotten to the point where you are thinking you might be under qualified" (G15, interview 3). Another explains how she is impatient to show her worth but finds it difficult because she is new to the company: "I think it can be frustrating that I want to use my competencies, but I can't really do that until I understand the organisation properly" (G14, round 2). As such, there is an internalised neolioberal ideology in which they see competition as the defining characteristic (Monbiot, 2016).

Consequently, we hypothesise that they have been indoctrinated a certain way in school and university, creating this self-imposed pressure, so that when they are going from student to full time worker, they need to learn to let go of this indoctrination. Some of the graduates also articulate this large shift in scenery: "It's going to be a large shift going from student to full time employee" (G14, interview 2). This indoctrination from university creates a tension within the understanding of identity formation and being the ideal employee, as they have to juggle going from a top-grade student to a full time employee. Throughout the interview process, we saw that the graduates had one perception of the ideal graduate while managers and mentors had another perception: A few graduates mention how either their manager or mentor have told them how it is okay to make mistakes and that you cannot always have the right answer: "I also talked to my mentor about it, and he said that he had heard about people from university who were so used to delivering results that when you get out into the real world you sometimes just need to fail" (G15, interview 3). The graduate also says that she talked to her manager about her concerns about being under qualified: "I thought that everyone I'm working with are so much better than me, and I talked to my manager about it, and he was like: 'look, everyone started in the same place'. So it was really nice to talk to him about it, and afterwards I found out that a lot of new employees feel the same way and that everyone goes through this" (G15, round 3). As such, the managers and mentors are often able to help the graduates let go of this indoctrination if they are aware of it.

However, even though the managers and mentors often help remedy this self-imposed pressure by talking to them about how it's okay to fail and make mistakes, the graduates are still on a temporary one-year contract that contradicts this: "I think that when you are new you really want to shine all of the time and be visible. But it's also because we are on a temporary contract - we are only hired for a year, so you really need to show your worth, which puts the pressure on" (G12, interview 2). As such, this temporary contract puts them under time pressure, which

naturally makes them focus more on their competencies than they might have under other circumstances. This results in a frustration over them feeling like they are not able to bring the value they want to within the timeframe.

5 Discussion

The analysis has revealed some interesting aspects of the organizational socialization of graduates. These be first be discussed in relation to the notion of performativity and how they may shed new led on current practices. Then we will discuss the findings in light of their theoretical contributions.

An important point emerging from the study is aspirational identities are narratives fantasies of achievement that are never achieved. The same is particularly true for the myth of the ideal graduate, which works much like the carrot held in front of the horse. The fact that aspirational selves are not achievable yet pursued as though they were, can be explained by a central tenet in neoliberal ideology, performativity. Performativity is rooted in neoliberal ideology and the marketization of the individual and assumes that individual and his/her are to be judged by their ability to maximise output per unit of input (Grey & Wilmott, 2005). As we showed, graduates tend to internalise this logic to an almost all-encompassing degree. Constantly chasing unattainable goals, is obviously a path to self-destructive unfulfillment. While the nature of professional work as an exchange of service for pay has a performative logic behind it, our analysis shows that it quickly becomes all that graduates orient to – it colonises their being. The fact that the myth of the ideal graduate remained stable throughout the entire six months we followed the graduates, while individual subjectivity gave way, goes some way in showing just how immensely powerful and "real" myths can be.

We have consistently shown the tensions between the two identity projects we labelled The Ideal Graduate and the Authentic Best Self. However, with time they seemed to merge, which seems like a good solution to get rid of tension, but is it really?

As most graduate programmes, the one we investigated comprised two main areas of focus: Professional network and competencies. Structurally, this favours the trajectory towards the Ideal Graduate as both are rooted in a performative logic. However, in a world where a large part of our life takes place at work it can be problematic if the performative logic colonizes our whole identity: If performance is crumbling at work, chances are that your life will end up crumbling. This particularly critical when you are new in the job, as your performance will be sub-optimal. Surely, there has to be some performance parameters to strive towards and a certain degree of performative logic in an organisation, however the myth of the ideal graduate should not be allowed to dominate. Rather, our research shows that it may be favourable to maintain tensions between identities so that the performative does not become all-consuming and we can be more resilient not just as employees but as individuals.

We saw in the analysis, how managers could be cast as either helper or opponent in one quest at the expense of the other. Although this could be seen as frustrating from a manager's point of view, as they can never succeed in both, we argue that it holds a potential. We argue that the role of the manager is to keep the tension alive by attending to both identity projects, ensuring that neither dominates. In practice, given the organizational setting, this will most likely mean helping the Authentic Best Self project along.

Some proof that this can be done can found in one of quotes from the analysis which is worth revisiting. G15 explained that " I had a small breakdown where I talked to him [the manager] and he was like 'remember that it is just work and that I have given you this task to challenge you'". While it is certainly depressing that the graduate in question had breakdown, no matter the size, the quote also shows how they are capable of stepping back from what went on and treat it with an ironical distance. Of course, breakdowns should not be treated ironically, but the process of stepping out of work and talking about as something we pretend, or a game we play, may be conductive to keeping the tension alive. Coincidently, this requires managers to discard or at least bracket the performativity-grounded notion that they should help their graduates reach predefined targets, by explicitly conceiving the attainment of either quest is a failure.

On a more structural level, our findings indicate that it might be helpful to also bring in an existential element as a main focus of graduate programmes to function support the quest towards the Authentic Best Selves as an alternative to the performative narrative of the ideal graduate. This would place more focus on the individual, their identity and the purpose of life - being rather than doing. The resulting tension is not necessarily a bad thing although uncomfortable.

The other key actant in the analysis was the rotation, that is, the fact that employees switch jobs after half a year. As shown, the occasion brought to the fore the tension between the two identity projects, although at this point the tensions seemed to have decreased to the extent that the Ideal Graduate trajectory would predominate. This, of course, is a more comfortable position from which to make the choice, as the main concern is "what would the Ideal Graduate choose?" On the other hand, we see a potential in using the occasion to increase the tension by also drawing on the myth of the Authentic Best Self.

We believe that the study offers a number of valuable contributions to realm of CCO theorising. Scott and Myers (2010) pointed identified 7 media through which membership is negotiated, and later Endacott and Myers (2019) added previous work experience as an additional medium. To this, we believe to have added another medium, namely myths

as these were shown to be distinct and powerful sensemaking devices. This holds potential for future research, especially among newcomers to a given vocation, as they have little to no experience to draw on. As shown in our study, these myths and the identity projects they create can help understand in more nuance the experience of being a newcomer. The origin of the myths remains somewhat unclear. None of graduates knew each other and the majority did not know anyone in the organization either, and yet the two myths surfaced consistently before they even started. While we could track some aspects of them to the employer branding of the company and recruitment process, some aspects seemed to derive from more overarching societal discourses. Tracing the multiple sources at work in constructing such myth would be an interesting academic endeavour.

We also believe that our emphasis on tensions adds an important nuance to the notion of membership negotiation in the context of organizational socialization. The term negotiation may be (mis)understood as process with a predefined end, namely agreement or disagreement. Although, this was not what was meant by McPhee and Zaug (2000), the assumption of an achievable finish point still largely dominates in the organizational socialization literature, at least implicitly. On the basis of our findings we would like to question not only if an end point exists for graduates' organisational socialization, but also if it is desirable. The lack of tension, from a critical point of view, means full indoctrination. Moreover, this ties into our final contribution to CCO theorizing and pertains to a critique often levelled at CCO scholarship in general, namely the uncritical neutralization of communication (Del Fa & Kärreman, 2022). Our study showed how the myth of the Ideal Graduate is rooted in neoliberal performativity, but it also identified an alternative myth, which runs counter to this. By exposing both myths and the tensions between them, we believe to have identified an emancipative potential.

6 Conclusion

This study provides insights into how graduates do not enter into an organisation as a blank canvas: They already have an idea about what it means to be the ideal graduate, and to them competencies are often equal to value, which can be frustrating when it is their first ever full-time job. In particular, it became evident that myths play a large role when students enter into their first full-time job as they do not have any prior experience to rely on and are therefore only able to base their perception of the ideal graduate on myths. This is also why we were able to see a trajectory in which the role of myths played an increasingly smaller role in time, as they gained more experience and became more confident in their work life. Specifically, we show how the performative logic embedded in the myth over time becomes the all-encompassing frame of self-understanding, resulting in a complete albeit somewhat contested immersion into neoliberal ideology - they lose their own subjectivity in order to become what is expected. To counter this process, we argue for the importance of maintaining alternative identity frames, which offers a space for emancipation.

If organisations and managers are aware of this narrative and internalised pressure, they can help remedy this performative logic through an open conversation about how it is okay to not be able to do it all when you first enter into your first full-time job after studies.

It was shown that tensions between the performative and the authentic best self are not necessarily a bad thing, as this ensures that the performative and ideal is not allowed to dominate and become all-consuming, creating a balance.

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