

Bicultural professionals and their careers: Experiences with identity work in the friendship cultures of Dutch consultancies

German Journal of
Human Resource Management
1–33

© The Author(s) 2026

Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/23970022261485346
journals.sagepub.com/home/gjh

Onno Bouwmeester^{1,2} , Ilayda Önder²,
and Irene Skovgaard-Smith³ 

Abstract

Professional service firms tend to foster corporate friendship cultures as a means for realizing normative control while also claiming to encourage egalitarianism and being your ‘authentic self’. Existing research has demonstrated contradictory effects such as reinforcement of hierarchy and homogenization through identity regulation. However, little attention has been devoted to the growing ethnic diversity of the professional workforce. Therefore, we explore how management consultants in the Netherlands with both bicultural minority and Dutch majority backgrounds, experience working in a corporate friendship culture. Based on 37 interviews we find that both minority background as well as class and gender influence how friendship cultures are experienced, which in turn affects identity work and the experience of career support. We also find a tendency toward subgroup formation, triggered by the invitation to be yourself in a friendship culture, simultaneously having exclusionary effects. These findings contribute theoretically to the literature on HRM by showing that corporate friendship cultures work differently in a multicultural work setting. Furthermore, identity work performed with the aim of making yourself visible and stand out among career sponsors is more challenging for bicultural consultants because they first need to blend in. Overall, a friendship culture favors male, upper-middle class majority consultants. These findings put the relevance of ethnic diversity and inclusion on the agenda of literatures on friendship cultures, identity work and careers in professional service firms.

Keywords

normative control, corporate friendship culture, identity work, bicultural consultants, consultant career, diversity and inclusion

¹Durham University, Durham, UK

²Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, The Netherlands

³University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK

Corresponding author:

Onno Bouwmeester, School of Business and Economics, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, De Boelelaan 1105, Amsterdam 1081 HV, The Netherlands.

Email: o.bouwmeester@vu.nl

Introduction

Corporate friendship cultures have received growing interest from management scholars for their potential to increase job satisfaction, organizational productivity and performance (Berman et al., 2002; Rumens, 2017; Song, 2006). The promotion of a friendship culture is popular in professional service firms, such as consultancies, where they play a central role in shaping employee engagement. This involves management seeking to foster informal and seemingly egalitarian friendship relations with, and between employees, through fun social activities, thus promoting a ‘work hard, play hard’ type of organization where boundaries between work and non-work are blurred (Costas, 2012; Hoyer et al., 2025). This way, friendship cultures encourage workers to connect emotionally with their organizations (Fleming and Sturdy, 2011).

Critical management scholars have demonstrated that while friendship cultures celebrate individuality, autonomy, openness and egalitarianism, they produce contradictory effects such as magnifying the role of hierarchy, enhancing management control and generating uncertainty (Costas, 2012; Hoyer et al., 2025). In addition to bureaucratic forms of control, organizations thus use normative control to get their workers to act in line with organizational values (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Kärreman and Alvesson, 2004; Kunda, 1992; Muhr et al., 2012). Furthermore, while friendship cultures promote the idea of being your ‘authentic self’ at work, thereby claiming to value diversity and difference, they instead foster sameness and homogenization through identity regulation (Costas, 2012; Costas and Fleming, 2009; Fleming and Sturdy, 2011).

Employees are, in other words, expected to perform ‘authentic selves’ in specific ways that align with organizational values, thereby making identity work part of the labor process. Identity work refers to the ongoing process through which people form, maintain and revise a sense of who they are in relation to social categories and contexts (Brown, 2015, 2017; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). Rather than viewing people as passive recipients of identity regulation, an identity work perspective invites us to ask how professionals perform identity work in the face of the identity demands of corporate friendship cultures.

This question is particularly relevant in the context of an increasingly diverse workforce. Literature on cultural diversity in the workplace points to divergent experiences of ethnic minorities in various organizational settings, such as exclusion and a lack of feeling at home (Hewlett, 2012; Ortlieb and Weiss, 2020; Phillips et al., 2018; Shore et al., 2011). In addition, studies that focus on highly educated minority professionals show how minorities can feel they have to conceal or hide their ethnic identity at work in order to succeed in their careers (Doldor and Atewologun, 2021; Fernando et al., 2020; Ozturk and Berber, 2022). This indicates that it is often more difficult for minority professional to perform their professional identity in ways that meet expectations embedded in the majority culture.

Building on the extant insights on identity regulation in friendship cultures, identity work and the diversity literature, we aim in this paper to explore *how employees with different cultural backgrounds perform their career related identity work in the context of corporate friendship cultures of Dutch elite consultancies*. To answer this research question, we carried out an interview study among 37 consultants with bicultural and majority backgrounds in the Netherlands. We found that cultural and religious

background influences how friendship cultures are experienced, along with gender and class, which in turn shapes how consultants perform their identity work and how they experience organizational career support.

Based on this, our study contributes first to the critical management literature on normative control in friendship cultures. While this literature has demonstrated that identity regulation can lead to homogenization and disidentification (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Costas and Fleming, 2009; Fleming and Sturdy, 2009, 2011), we show how the dominant focus on friendship relations, fun, drinks and other informal social activities at work produces exclusionary effects for bicultural consultants, for instance due to religious norms regarding alcohol consumption (cf. Alewell and Rastetter, 2020; Essers and Benschop, 2009). However, social class, gender or health orientation can do the same, pointing to the importance of intersectionality. This adds further to the extant insights on the contradictory effects of friendship cultures in professional service firms (cf. Costas, 2012; Fleming and Sturdy, 2011; Grey and Sturdy, 2007; Hoyer et al., 2025).

Second, we contribute to HRM literature on career related identity work by showing how backgrounds of bicultural consultants influence their identity work. Our findings show how corporate friendship cultures marginalize and encourage bonding with minority subgroups, which in turn makes it more difficult for bicultural consultants to build relationship with gatekeepers and career sponsors in the majority group. Thus, career related identity work as demanded by the HR policies at consultancies (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007), comes with more tensions and greater efforts to blend in for bicultural consultants (cf. Opara et al., 2023; Ozturk and Berber, 2022) than for male, upper-middle class majority consultants. This produces advantages for the majority group (cf. Meriläinen et al., 2004; Ortlieb and Sieben, 2019; Taminiau et al., 2022).

Third, we contribute to the literature on diversity and career sponsoring in HRM. While Hewlett (2012, 2019) and Shore et al. (2018) consider career sponsorships a good remedy to solve the uncertainty and insecurity of ethnic minorities, our findings indicate how being dependent on career sponsors creates strong feelings of anxiety and more so for bicultural consultants (cf. Gill, 2015; Mühlhaus and Bouwmeester, 2016). Indeed, sponsor relations are built through engagement in informal social activities, where bicultural consultants feel less at home. This reduces the ease of realizing sponsorships for them, reinforcing exclusionary dynamics as previously shown for careers of female consultants (cf. Kumra and Vinnicombe, 2008; Taminiau et al., 2022).

In the following, we continue with a literature review on identity work of bicultural minority professionals and what it means when identity work is performed in the context of corporate friendship cultures in professional service firms. Next, methods and findings will be presented, followed by a discussion.

Identity work of bicultural professionals in corporate friendship cultures

Appropriating friendship: Normative control and identity regulation

Critical scholarship on organizational culture foregrounds the role of management in promoting a dominant culture as a means of control (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Kunda, 1992), while also highlighting how actors navigate and negotiate these cultural

meanings and thereby take part in constituting organizational cultures over time (Islam, 2025). Building on this theoretical tradition, a growing body of research has investigated how culture management seeks to shape and control employee selves in line with organizational goals. Such normative control has become common practice in professional service firms such as consulting, engineering and banking (Alvesson and Robertson, 2006; Grugulis et al., 2000; Kunda, 1992; Michel, 2011). Normative control is a leadership approach that intends to give workers a feeling of greater autonomy than bureaucratic control, while ensuring that employees are committed to the norms and standards of the organization. Normative control is defined as ‘the attempt to elicit and direct the required efforts of members by controlling the underlying experience, thoughts and feelings that guide their actions’ (Kunda, 1992: 11). The idea is that when workers have internalized a corporate culture, they will act in compliance with the organizational values, norms, objectives and behavioral codes (Fleming and Sturdy, 2011; Kunda, 1992; McLoughlin et al., 2005). Formal rules and traditional bureaucratic control systems are still in place, but they work more in the background. Thus, traditional bureaucratic control systems have been characterized as ‘the structural cage’ which support or reinforce the meanings and ideologies of corporate cultures as ‘the mental cage’ (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2004). This way, both control systems reinforce each other, which has become increasingly common during the last decades.

In consultancies and other professional service firms, culture management usually involves the appropriation of friendship to portray the image of an open, fun, egalitarian and informal workplace, as existing research has demonstrated (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Bouwmeester and Slaats, 2024; Costas, 2012; Hoyer et al., 2025; Kunda, 1992; Muhr et al., 2012). Costas (2012) argues that because consultancy organizations are characterized by volatility and ‘up or out’ career paths they are geared toward drawing on friendship imagery. These are organizational settings where friendship among colleagues is strongly promoted by management with the aim of building personal relationships via fun, socializing and leisure activities such as Friday afternoon drinks, outings, sports events, skiing trips, etc. These activities are used by management to foster relationships between colleagues and across hierarchical boundaries as well as to blur the boundary between work and private life (Tews et al., 2015). Consequently, employees become socially and personally more attached to each other, to the organization, and more committed (Maertz and Griffeth, 2004). This way, organizations stimulate employees to present their authentic selves at work (Costas, 2012; Muhr et al., 2012). Key values appropriated in the fostering of corporate friendship cultures are individuality, authenticity, autonomy and egalitarianism.

Alvesson and Willmott (2002) argue that normative control through culture management, such as fostering a culture of friendship, results in identity regulation. By creating social categories in combination with presenting a company as elite and progressive, belonging to this company defines how employees see themselves: ‘being a team member and/or a member of the wider corporate family may then become a significant source of one’s self-understanding’ (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002: 630). By fostering friendship feelings at work, corporate culture management encourages employees to identify emotionally with the organization, its values and interests (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Costas, 2012; Fleming and Sturdy, 2009, 2011; Kunda, 1992). When such identification

happens, management can give employees greater autonomy in decision-making, as they feel committed to act in alignment with company objectives.

This way, organizational control enters private areas (Grugulis et al., 2000) and the blurring of professional and personal life becomes a job requirement (Muhr et al., 2012). Identity regulation can become so strong, that it leads to homogenization, contradicting the espoused value of expressing your true self at work that the organization claims to uphold (Costas, 2012; De Prins and Segers, 2015). Culture management thus appropriates friendship values, thereby ‘capturing employees’ sociality, energy and their authentic or non-work personalities as emotional labor’ (Fleming and Sturdy, 2011: 177). Furthermore, while friendship cultures stress equality, they reinforce the power of the organizational hierarchy as individuals use hierarchical position as a criterion for deciding with whom to develop friendly relationships (Costas, 2012) and this can in turn result in favoritism (De Prins and Segers, 2015).

As Costas (2012) suggests, corporate friendship cultures reflect the cultural zeitgeist of many Western societies where individualism, anti-authoritarianism and personhood as sociable, friendly and fun are dominant ideals. Millennials, that is, those born between 1980 and 1996, seemed to really like corporate friendship cultures. As young workers they valued a good work-fun balance, personal relationships as well as time spent with friends: ‘younger individuals especially value the development of friendships through work as they establish their adult identities’ (Tews et al., 2015: 253). However, others have been found to distance themselves from the influence of corporate friendship cultures, responding with so-called disidentification or feigned identification indicated by irony, sarcasm and resistance (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Costas and Fleming, 2009; Fleming and Sturdy, 2009). Today corporate friendship cultures are the norm in the bigger elite consultancies and their smaller competitors (Bouwmeester and Slaats, 2024; Hoyer et al., 2025; Muhr et al., 2012), leading to strong professional identification, while at the same time raising the important question of the impact on a diverse workforce (Costas, 2012; De Prins and Segers, 2015; Grey and Sturdy, 2007).

Identity work in professional service firms

Normative control practices in professional service firms can lead to identity regulation as argued by Alvesson and Willmott (2002). ‘People constitute themselves with respect to social categories’ (Brown, 2017: 307) such as class, nationality, ethnicity, gender, profession and organization and this in turn regulates behavior and creates demands and expectations. To belong to the category of successful consultants, high standards need to be met and exclusion would feel as failure. The fear of exclusion can create psychological pressures like status anxieties and stress (Gill, 2015; Mühlhaus and Bouwmeester, 2016). This fear is fueled by the common up-or-out career system at consultancies, where most consultants end up having to leave after some years (Bouwmeester and Slaats, 2024; Malhotra et al., 2010). Therefore, the consulting career is not considered sustainable long term (Chudzikowski et al., 2020). Yet, professional identification remains strong. Hoyer (2022) found that elite consultants who had moved on in new non-consultancy jobs, still presented themselves proudly as former consultants.

While social categories like gender, class or nationality are commonly seen as a stable part of one's identity, this has been criticized for overlooking identity development (Alvesson et al., 2008). Identity development can happen during a career, when moving from junior to senior work roles (Ibarra, 1999; Watson, 2008), or when moving from employment to unemployment or back (Mühlhaus et al., 2021). These changes require identity work: 'People can be seen to engage in identity work, therefore, when the routinized reproduction of a self-identity in a stable setting is discontinued and may be triggered by uncertainty, anxiety, questioning or self-doubt. (. . .) The emphasis for much of the writing on identity work is on becoming, rather than being'. (Alvesson et al., 2008: 15)

Several studies on identity work have been conducted in the context of consultancies, as the work requires shifting between professional role identities and a consultant career requires professional identity development. Robertson and Swan (2003) examined identity work in a European innovation consultancy employing international scientists and technicians where an open and egalitarian culture was promoted. The authors report a form of identity work which they label 'doublethink' (Robertson and Swan, 2003: 848) that enables role switching between the normative identity of a commercial consultant with sales and production targets, and a scientific inventor role, which aligns more with how these consultants saw their professional identity.

Costas and Fleming (2009) studied new recruits at an elite management consultancy in the UK, showing how difficult it became for these consultants to stay connected to their old private selves. Identity regulation demanded them to align with company values, to participate in the socials and to commit to very long work hours. These demands were so strong that old identities related to hobbies, private friendships and own intellectual interests could not be sustained. Over time, several consultants experienced a form of self-alienation: 'a reflexive moment where subjects discover that the "truth of themselves" is an alien corporate self' (Costas and Fleming, 2009: 374). In addition, gender identities have been shown to be under pressure in consultancies as the workforce is predominantly male at the higher ranks (Kumra and Vinnicombe, 2008; Meriläinen et al., 2004; Taminiou et al., 2022). While there are national differences, with more gender equality and work-life balance visible in a Finnish consultancy, and a stronger male breadwinner identity imposed on consultants in the UK, career consequences are negative for female consultants in both countries (Meriläinen et al., 2004).

National culture, institutional context and work setting have been found to constrain or enable identity work (Ibarra, 1999; Meriläinen et al., 2004; Mühlhaus et al., 2021; Skovgaard-Smith et al., 2020; Watson, 2008). In addition, the identity regulating effects of HR practices in elite consultancies show how professional context shapes the available room for identity work (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007). These observations seem relevant for ethnic minorities. Many highly educated second and third generation ethnic minority professionals are currently embarking on careers in consultancies. Often the first in their family with university education, being raised in a European country but with family roots elsewhere. Yet, their experiences with career related identity work in a corporate friendship culture have not received much academic attention.

Identity work of ethnic minority professionals in a variety of contexts

Research on identity work of highly educated ethnic minority professionals is still relatively scarce in European contexts compared to studies in the US. Still, some studies have been conducted in the UK, France, Germany and Belgium. A shared finding is that minority professionals experience identity pressures dependent on the national majority cultures they need to relate to (cf. Gunkel et al., 2013), as well as sector and firm contexts (Omanović and Langley, 2023).

In the UK, minority professionals with BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) backgrounds report how ethnic identity is something they are better off hiding. In consulting, engineering, healthcare and law they experience negative stereotypes that trigger subtle forms of discrimination, also called ‘selective incivility’ (Ozturk and Berber, 2022: 218). They report reduced opportunities to speak up or be listened too, barriers for promotion, and defensive responses or whitewashing when they address discrimination issues. Stigliani (2020) shares a similar hiding approach as an international female scholar at a UK Business School. Likewise, Romanian high status professionals in the UK respond to negative stereotypes by identity work such as ‘dodging’, which is only admitting stereotypes in an abstract sense, while not applying them to oneself, or by ‘doublethink’ which is described as partly admitting a stereotype but then ignoring it as not relevant (Doldor and Atewologun, 2021: 913). Fernando et al. (2020) illustrate identity work such as ‘covering’ including renaming, and ‘accenting’ to avoid being misidentified during studies in New Zealand and later while working at an Australian Business School.

In addition to protective identity work such as hiding, dodging or covering, some studies report how ethnic identity can in some contexts be presented and used as an asset. For instance, ‘ethnic identification’ as a black teacher helped with reaching out and being approachable for black students in London (Kenny and Briner, 2013: 738). In an international call center in Flanders, Belgium, minority professionals were appreciated for their language skills (Janssens and Zanoni, 2014). Opara et al. (2023: 3) find ‘identity flexing’ by African, Asian and Caribbean (AAC) woman in the UK as a way ‘to be understood based on the strengths, knowledge, creativity, adaptiveness and insights that are implicit to one’s identity’. However, identity flexing can feel like inauthentic chameleon behavior, when strategically choosing what parts of their (ethnic) identity to put forward. The respondents worked in contexts such as consulting, education, healthcare and civil service.

Al Ariss et al. (2013) studied the influence of national context on identity work of ethnic minority professionals. They found that Lebanese professionals were able to exercise more agency in France than a group of professionals in Germany with mixed ethnicities. The Lebanese were ‘blending in’ by choosing French names, they ‘resisted’ by starting their own business, or ‘subverted’, by organizing meetings between minority workers and employers to create job opportunities. This way they avoided making use of official institutions that did not support them well (Al Ariss et al., 2013: 1253). In Germany instead, some of the interviewed well-educated Turks felt they would be better off leaving the country. Zanoni and Janssens (2007) report how sector matters for identity work. Minority professional experience the various controls as different in the

healthcare and technology sector: ‘interviewees engage with the constellations of controls exerted over them in different, more or less compliant ways’ (Zanoni and Janssens, 2007: 1392). Later, Janssens and Zanoni (2014) found even more differentiated sector and firm influences across 10 case studies.

Many studies highlight the need for an intersectional approach, that is, looking at ethnicity in combination with other social categories (Essers and Benschop, 2009; Köllen, 2021; Opara et al., 2020; Ozturk and Berber, 2022). The idea is that categories like gender, age, class, sector, etc. can reinforce each other, for instance when a minority ethnicity overlaps with lower class, being female, etc. In consulting, intersectionality needs to be considered, given that the discussed gender issues in consulting may add to the expected ethnicity challenges. Furthermore, various EDI (Equity, Diversity and Inclusion) support measures like gender quota, awareness trainings or career sponsorships are a relevant aspect of the consulting context, although their effectiveness is debated (Devine and Ash, 2022; Hewlett, 2012, 2019; Shore et al., 2018). In consulting career sponsorships, coaching and mentoring are a common part of career policies, as ‘senior people take a lot of responsibility for junior people’ (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007: 718). Career sponsors are then the advocates of the juniors that seek promotion (Hewlett, 2012), while mentors or career coaches do not have gate keeper responsibilities.

Current studies often treat ethnicity as something that pertains to minorities. However, theoretically ethnicity is a relational construct, meaning that a ‘national identity’ is no less ethnic than the ‘ethnic identity’ of minority groups. As Baumann (1999) argues, the nation can be described as ‘super-ethnos’ or a super-ethnic group. Therefore, we cannot study ethnic minorities without also studying the majority culture (Jenkins, 2008). Thus, in contrast to existing research with a focus only on ethnic minority professionals, our study also includes majority professionals. The majority group in a given national context is not ethnically neutral, as Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1992) show. Who is categorized as belonging to an ethnic minority group is based on an understanding of who belongs to a national majority culture or not.

Methods

Research design

To study how the promotion of corporate friendship cultures at consultancies impacts professionals with different cultural backgrounds, the Gioia method was used representing an inductive and explorative approach (Gioia et al., 2013; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This was important for methodological fit in a relatively nascent field of study, where little is known about the career related identity work of minority professionals in the context of friendship cultures in consultancies (Edmondson and McManus, 2007). Furthermore, an exploratory approach is appropriate for focusing in on the lived experience of friendship cultures and their impact on employees’ career related identity work, being able to account for individual differences. The study has been approved by the ethics committee of Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, School of Business and Economics under ref. nr. SBE/21/obr400.

Research setting and sampling

Elite consultancies such as the Big 4 (Deloitte, EY, KPMG, PwC) or Accenture as well as their competitors have been chosen as research context due to their common focus on promoting corporate friendship cultures (Costas, 2012; Hoyer et al., 2025). All respondents talked in various ways about the central elements of these friendship cultures, as will be reported in the findings. The make elite consultancies attractive employers for business school graduates (Rivera, 2012) thus ranking high in employee surveys. As a result, elite consultancies have become, with hundreds of thousands of employees, among the biggest international organizations worldwide, setting the standards for the various smaller sized competitors as well.

Thirty-seven consultants were interviewed, both juniors and seniors, with up to 5 years of consulting experience, and 3 years on average. They are all Millennials, that is, people born between 1980 and 1996, male and female in equal shares and all with university degrees. Nearly half of the participants have an ethnic minority background. To account for ethnicity, we followed the distinction of immigrants with a ‘western’ or ‘non-western’ background used until 2022 by the official Dutch governmental organization for statistics CBS. Those categorized as ‘western’ have backgrounds from Europe, North America or Australia and are not generally considered minority groups in the Netherlands. Immigrants and descendants categorized as ‘non-western’ have backgrounds from Africa, South America, the Middle East or Asia. The most prevalent ‘non-western’ ethnic minorities in the Netherlands have Turkish, Moroccan and Surinamese backgrounds (CBS, 2021). To reach out to interviewees, LinkedIn was used as well as our personal networks. To ensure appropriate representation of the largest ethnic minority groups (Turkish, Moroccan, Surinamese), the sample is based on a stratified sampling method (see Table 1). After doing 37 interviews we stopped further sampling. The types of experiences described by participants became increasingly similar and no new themes came up, which indicates saturation (Bowen, 2008).

Eighteen participants have ethnic minority background, but they have all grown up in the Netherlands. We therefore label them as bicultural (Bc). ‘Bicultural individuals identify with two (or more) distinct cultures because of having internalized more than one set of cultural schemas’. (Brannen and Thomas, 2010: 6). Nineteen participants have Dutch or, in the case of two participants, other western backgrounds with strong links to the majority culture (Mc).

However, the categorization we used for sampling based on Dutch statistics does not necessarily align with how people perform their identity work in different contexts and situations, as we will further explore in the analysis. For instance, a bicultural consultant talked about how she mainly identifies as Dutch because her minority background is connected to only one parent who was rarely at home. A majority consultant identified in some ways with bicultural consultants in the specific context of a friendship culture at work, due to shared working-class background.

Data collection

The data was collected through online semi-structured interviews during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021 and 2022. Such qualitative interviews allow generation of detailed,

Table 1. Sample composition.

Consultant	Specialization	Company size ^a	Gender	Ethnic origin	Bc/Mc
1	IT	Medium	Female	Dutch-Turkish	Bc
2	Finance	Medium	Female	Iranian	Bc
3	Organization Design	Large	Female	Sint Maarten	Bc
4	Innovation	Large	Female	South Korean	Bc
5	Change Management	Medium	Female	Turkish	Bc
6	Organization Design	Large	Female	Turkish	Bc
7	Employee Experience & HR	Medium	Female	Moroccan	Bc
8	Data & Analytics	Large	Female	Surinamese	Bc
9	Employee Experience & HR	Medium	Female	Moroccan	Bc
10	Finance	Large	Male	Ghanaian	Bc
11	Strategy	Large	Male	Surinamese	Bc
12	Strategy	Large	Male	Moroccan	Bc
13	IT	Large	Male	Turkish	Bc
14	Finance	Large	Male	Afghan	Bc
15	Finance	Medium	Male	Moroccan	Bc
16	Finance	Medium	Male	Turkish	Bc
17	Digital Strategy	Medium	Male	Turkish	Bc
18	Digital Integration	Medium	Male	Moroccan	Bc
19	Financial Performance	Large	Female	Dutch	Mc
20	IT	Small	Female	Dutch	Mc
21	Change Management	Medium	Female	Dutch	Mc
22	Cyber Security	Large	Female	Slovenian	Mc
23	Finance	Large	Female	Dutch/Servian	Mc
24	Change Management	Medium	Female	Dutch	Mc
25	Data Management	Medium	Female	Dutch	Mc
26	ICT Implementation	Medium	Female	Dutch	Mc
27	Digital Strategy	Small	Female	Dutch	Mc
28	M&A	Medium	Male	Dutch	Mc
29	Lean Six Sigma	Small	Male	Dutch	Mc
30	Workforce and Organization	Medium	Male	Dutch	Mc
31	Finance	Medium	Male	Dutch	Mc
32	Strategy	Large	Male	Dutch	Mc
33	Org. Dexterity and Innovation	Large	Male	Dutch	Mc
34	Finance	Large	Male	Dutch	Mc
35	Finance	Medium	Male	Dutch	Mc
36	Business Transformation	Large	Male	Dutch	Mc
37	Transitions	Small	Male	Dutch	Mc

Bc: bicultural; Mc: majority culture.

^aSmall < 100, Medium 100–1000, Large > 1000 employees in NL.

information-rich, and extensive data (Maruster, 2013). The interviews lasted for approximately 45 minutes, ranging from 30 to 60 minutes and were recorded and transcribed with the interviewees written informed consent. Most interviews were conducted in Dutch, and quotes were translated into English.

The research question was introduced before the interview. Initially it was about minority and majority perceptions of the high-performance culture at consultancies and fear of failure. However, conversations often turned to the demands of a friendship culture, generating the most energy and controversy. Hence, we decided in the spirit of an exploratory, inductive approach to focus in on this aspect. Interviews began with a short description of the interview objectives and anonymity was discussed. Then basic questions were asked about the interviewee's work role and position to ease into the conversation. Central topics in the interview protocol were about the company culture (characterizations, feelings of (dis)comfort, how it motivates), relationship with colleagues (how/when formal, informal, friendly and with whom) social activities (descriptions, experiences, motivation, engagement) and promotion opportunities (feelings toward the process, opinions on performance evaluation, experienced career support, the role of sponsors, own steps taken over the last months, and motivation to take these steps). To minimize the influences of social desirability and interviewer bias (the interviewer was female, from a large Dutch minority group, born and raised in the Netherlands) central topics were discussed using synonyms. For instance, 'uncertainties' were also discussed as 'doubts' or 'insecurities' to allow 'coming back to a particular theme through different vocabularies' (Alvesson, 2003: 28). As the study relied on interviewees' successful recollection of the past, there could have been retrospection bias (Neusar, 2014). However, the main topics like the social events, friendships at work, ethnic background and making career steps have a repetitive character and are relatively easy to remember.

Data analysis

Our data collection and analysis were intertwined (Glaser, 1978; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990) which allowed for the identification of new concepts during data collection (Suddaby, 2006). The data analysis process was supported by using the qualitative analysis tool Atlas.ti. We kept the first-order codes close to the raw data (see left side Figure 1), by 'using informant-centric terms and codes' (Gioia et al., 2013: 18).

The primary codes in Figure 1 summarize the experienced social activities organized by the consultancies first, while the related secondary codes summarize how consultants either with a Dutch majority or a bicultural background perceived them. Second, the friendship culture practice of sharing private experiences among colleagues is coded. Social activities and sharing private experiences together form the aggregate construct of normative control practices in a friendship culture. The third group of primary codes summarizes reflections on social and cultural background related to the demands of corporate friendship culture. The related aggregate construct shows how cultural background shapes inclusion experiences. The fourth group of primary codes details identity work necessary to create visibility for career progression. The aggregate

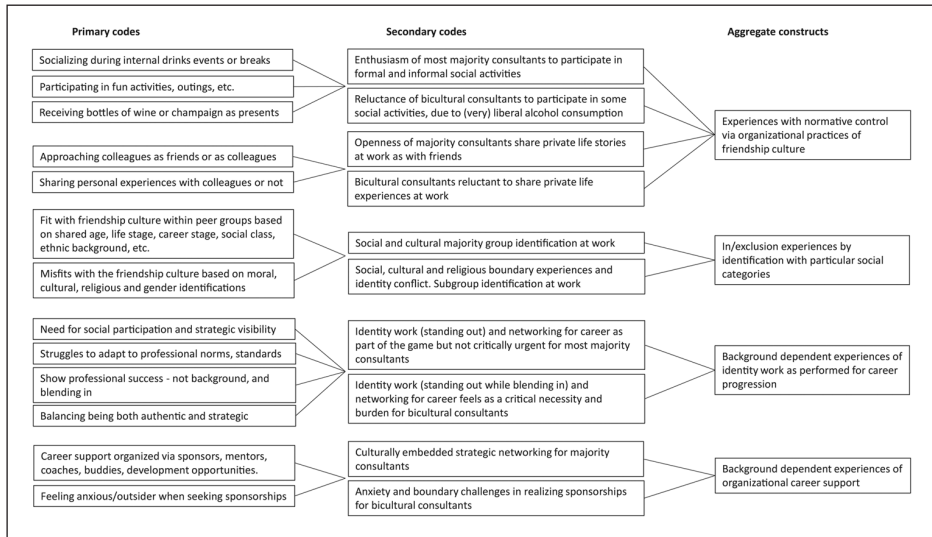


Figure 1. Overview of codes.

construct identifies, again via the secondary codes, how making a career in this context is experienced, linked to background. The last group of primary codes details the forms of career support, with the aggregate construct identifying the experience of career support, again linked to background.

The process of data analysis included many discussions between the first and second author first, while later the third author joined in shaping the theoretical framing of the findings. In this process, friendship culture and normative control theories were used to make sense of the data initially, especially the inclusion and exclusion dynamics. Later, we focused in on the response strategies, using an identity work perspective as the theoretical lens. This coding and interpretation process aimed at theory development in a way that best fitted the research context and the career stories told.

Findings

The findings will follow the aggregate constructs, starting with friendship culture practices, then moving on to the experienced influence of background on feeling included at work, on identity work and on the experience of feeling supported during career progression.

Experiences with normative control via organizational practices of friendship culture

Central in the friendship cultures at Dutch consultancies are various social activities. They aim to distract employees' attention from the high workload and help to create an emotional bond with the company (e.g. Hoyer et al., 2025). While existing literature on normative control has demonstrated a range of contradictory effects of friendship

Table 2. Participation experiences of formal or informal social activities.

Codes	Illustrative quotes
Socializing during drinks, breaks, etc.	Yes that is fun. We have a bar with tap in the office. Yes, that is a nice canteen. So it is just for myself, say, to kick off the weekend with those guys, with those colleagues. Then you speak to people in a different setting. – Consultant 35 (M/Mc) You notice that a lot. For example, a friend of mine who works at a Big Four Firm said that there was a very strong pressure to drink alcohol during drinks events and that a lot of people who come from a culture where that just does not happen or happens less, are really turned off by that. – Consultant 37 (M/Mc) Yes there is, there is just very much pressure, toward excessive drinking. So, for example, I really do not find it. . . . I think a glass of wine or two, I think that is nice and fun. But there is quite a culture here of really heavy drinking, that that is fun. And yes, we do not like that at all. – Consultant 8 (F/Bc)
Participation in fun activities, outings etc.	You have your own project team, you have an account lead, you have account breakfasts, account outings, and you have drinks on Fridays, so well, that is quite a lot. Say ‘work hard’, but also a lot of fun things around it [play hard]. – Consultant 21 (F/Mc) The sports day is really one of the most fun days, because then the teams have to compete against each other. (. . .) So for example you have a kind of spider web with lasers. And the whole team has to go through it without touching a laser beam and you can use one square only once, so that they then start thinking very strategically, not work-related, but really okay, how should we move together as a team? Yeah, so I think those kinds of events are really good. – Consultant 8 (F/Bc)
Receiving bottles of champagne, wine, etc. as presents	For example, the presents that are sent to your home, these are by default a bottle of champagne or bottle of beer and they are useless to us. So that is just company-wide. But there is a D&I task force, more a community, which now organises extra activities. – Consultant 9 (F/Bc)

cultures, as reviewed earlier (Costas, 2012; Fleming and Sturdy, 2009, 2011), our findings focus on the experiences of Dutch majority versus bicultural consultants.

Informal social activities including (very) liberal alcohol consumption. The informal work atmosphere and close personal relationships are two cultural elements that interviewees frequently used to describe the culture at their consultancies, as summarized in Table 2, where M/F stands for Male/Female and Mc/Bc stands for Majority culture/Bicultural.

As Table 2 indicates, when discussing the type of events consultants attended different perceptions were shared. The fun association of drinking and liberal alcohol consumption was more present among consultants with Dutch majority backgrounds:

Well, these informal activities, during corona there were less of course, but I always enjoy them. I like to drink a beer together. – Consultant 36 (M/Mc)

In contrast, consultants with a bicultural background described feeling uncomfortable with the liberal alcohol consumption and even used it as the reason for not attending social activities:

Table 3. Openness or reservations to share private life experiences at work.

Codes	Illustrative quotes
Approaching colleagues as friends, or as colleagues	<i>The culture as I know it is very much one of, yes, we are friends and do things together. We help each other where necessary and if you have questions, you can always go to everyone. I feel I can be myself and I really like that. – Consultant 30 (M/Mc)</i> <i>I do have some more personal contact with two more senior people, one senior partner. But, otherwise no contact at all outside work. [. . .] I am involved with the people I work with. And with a handful of people with whom I maintain contact outside the projects itself. – Consultant 12 (M/Bc)</i>
Sharing personal experiences with colleagues or not	<i>For me, it is more about the click I feel with someone. It does not matter to me whether they are colleagues or not. [. . .] For me that line is very vague. It is more about the person, and if I want to tell that person something. – Consultant 27 (F/Mc)</i> <i>I am not someone who very quickly shares something about his personal or private life with someone. But sometimes there are moments, at the office for instance, when you are troubled by something and you go for a smoke. And I say something to a colleague I know better. Then I feel I can say this more easily to a colleague with a non-Western than with a Western background. – Consultant 16 (M/Bc)</i>

Well, I am an outlier, I guess, because, yes, a lot of the get-togethers are in a way I do not feel comfortable with. Going out, drinking, those things, that does not suit me. So, for me, it is the informal. . . , the informal culture that does not really suit me, so that is why my contacts are limited, because I know that others, they just chill together sometimes, and also visit each other on the weekends. – Consultant 12 (M/Bc)

Some bicultural consultants also mentioned that interaction with colleagues becomes unpleasant, when alcohol is central to the social activity:

Yes, with drinks, there is a certain atmosphere, right? Having a beer, having fun, being crazy or whatever, and basically, I do not like that. I do not drink, I am fairly sober and for me, it does not have to get too cozy. – Consultant 17 (M/Bc)

A female consultant with majority background shared these reservations as well:

I understand the feeling that you do not feel comfortable with the drinks culture. It is weird that these consultancies promote themselves with the drinks events. I come for work, not to ask for 10 beers. Why do they offer that? That is absolutely not my question. – Consultant 25 (F/Mc)

Meanwhile, consultants with a bicultural background highlighted they liked to participate in social activities like grabbing coffees together, lunches, team events or internal projects. Especially more ‘meaningful’ activities such as work-related trainings were appreciated by this group.

Openness to share private life experiences at work. Friendship cultures are based on strong personal relationships and aim at blurring work-life boundaries. This should create space for people to express their true selves at work (Costas, 2012; Fleming and Sturdy, 2009, 2011; Muhr et al., 2012). Table 3 illustrates how bicultural and Dutch majority consultants experience such blurring of work-life boundaries differently.

For most consultants with Dutch majority backgrounds it is fine to approach their colleagues like friends, and in an informal way, regardless of their hierarchical position. It is a characteristic of Dutch egalitarian culture, actively supported at Dutch consultancies:

I reach out to a junior just as easily as I do to my boss, say, the most senior managing partner. At some Friday afternoon you can have a chat with *one* of them. Then we are not talking about work, but about anything and everything. – Consultant 35 (M/Mc)

Apart from the egalitarian aspect, consultants with Dutch majority backgrounds experience the friendship culture as inclusive to them, a place where you can feel welcome:

We really are very friendly with each other. We go for trips together as a whole team, you know. We do trainings, back in the normal days every second week. So, we are very, very close. [. . .] We are very, very hard on making sure that everybody feels included, that our team is diverse enough. We try to make sure that everybody feels welcomed in the team that you have learning opportunities. So, in that sense, I think the culture is very, very healthy. – Consultant 22 (F/Mc)

When asking bicultural consultants if they perceived their co-workers more as colleagues or as friends, they highlighted that they primarily view them as colleagues. They want to keep work and private life separate, and avoid to talk about the more personal life events:

Yesterday it was Valentine's Day. Colleagues started asking each other: What are you going to do on Valentine's Day? To each other, not to me. And then someone describes, really, I am going with. . . , and then they mention the name of their boy or girlfriend, I am going to do this and we are going to eat there and so on. And as soon as I was asked, I really thought. . . , yes, I would rather keep what I do with my girlfriend private. So I said I was going to have a fun day, not telling in detail who my girlfriend was, what she is like, and what we would do, etc. – Consultant 14 (M/Bc)

Still, some of the bicultural consultants are more willing to open up, but not too much:

Look, I do talk about personal things, about my private life with my colleagues, yes. [. . .] If I need to do something with someone for an hour or so, it is always, hey, how are you? How do you feel? Can I help you with something? So, it is really more than just business. Then it is more private, and you are bonding on that level as well. But it is not [. . .] that I say to those guys on Friday evening: let us go out together tonight. – Consultant 17 (M/Bc)

The interviews illustrate how bicultural and majority consultants appreciate the friendship culture and the blurring of work-life boundaries quite differently. While most majority consultants enjoy this, bicultural consultants tend to keep more distance to their colleagues and they are even more unwilling to accept the boundary blurring effects of liberal alcohol consumption at work.

Table 4. Background dependent inclusion experiences and social identification.

Codes	Illustrative quotes
Fit with friendship culture within peer groups based on shared age; life/ career stage; class; ethnicity.	<i>When I am with colleagues of my own age, you can talk about your own experience more easily, like going out and stuff. I live in Amsterdam and oh, you also live in Amsterdam, where exactly do you live? Do you have nice pubs there? What do you do during the weekend? And yes, that is easier to discuss—that kind of informal stuff—with people who are in similar life stage. And if people live in a rural village and have 3 children, the eldest being 12 and the youngest 4, yes, then I do not have that many connections with those experiences. – Consultant 37 (M/Mc)</i> <i>There are some groups here, because the company has been around for some time. So, people who have been here from the beginning do form a group. It is a group that includes many seniors. Yes, I think it is normal to have that. That you have juniors together and seniors, who then form subgroups. – Consultant 35 (M/Mc)</i> <i>It just goes automatically, but I feel most connected with colleagues who have a different background than just Dutch, so to speak, that is just the case. [. . .] My friends are like that too, it just goes automatically. – Consultant 10 (M/Bc)</i>
Misfits with the friendship culture based on moral, cultural and religious identifications	<i>I really think it is important, for big four firms anyway, to really adjust their objectives of who they want to be. That diversity really is an important objective. And indeed, hiring diverse people is not the answer if you cannot retain them, [. . .] because then you do need to have certain important things integrated in the corporate culture, so that more people can actually feel at home. – Consultant 8 (F/Bc)</i> <i>If they are there [the bicultural peers at the Friday afternoon drinks], then I stay a bit longer sometimes. But in general, I can count those people on one hand. And if they are not there, then I do not go to the Friday afternoon drinks. – Consultant 11 (M/Bc)</i> <i>I think it is my background, so religiously speaking, of course, that I cannot, I am not allowed to drink. I mean, alcoholic beverages. And afternoon drinks are usually centered around drinking. – Consultant 7 (F/Bc)</i>

Background dependent inclusion experiences and social identification

Normative control that works via the promotion of a friendship culture encourages workers to be themselves and to express their identities at work (Fleming and Sturdy, 2009, 2011). Our findings show how consultants could best be themselves by identifying with the peer groups they felt most related to in terms of social categories such as age, life stage, career stage, class and cultural background (Watson, 2008). Bicultural consultants reported more boundary experiences.

Table 4 shows how experiencing a shared common ground is important for colleagues to get closer to each other. Age is mentioned as an important bonding element for consultants with a Dutch majority background, but class background is important too. It is not upper-middle class for all majority consultants, as one consultant with a working-class background expressed he felt most connected with bicultural consultants due to class background, pointing to the importance of intersectionality, as class is a very relevant category as well, next to ethnicity:

It is more the kind of feeling you have, that you have a closer connection with certain people than with others. [. . .] For me the connection is more along the line of [lower] social class background and things like that. [. . .] then you see there is some shared cultural background here, and not, ironically, with those who have the same skin color as me, so to speak. – Consultant 34 (M/Mc)

Having a bicultural background, and balancing cultural identities, can also create a bonding ground between different bicultural groups, similar as with class or age groups:

I think it is a kind of trust, or the feeling that they understand me better, because there are more cultural similarities between being an Afghan and someone from a Turkish or Moroccan origin than with someone Dutch. That is because you have those cultural similarities, and then you can dive a little deeper. For me, those are deeper conversations. – Consultant 14 (M/Bc)

While a bicultural background can create common ground, it does not work like this for all. One bicultural consultant identified completely with the Dutch majority culture:

My mother is Dutch, and I do not speak Turkish. My father is Turkish, but he worked a lot and was never home, so I did not learn Turkish. So I am not a traditional Turkish lady in a Dutch company. That is not how I feel. I identify myself as being very Dutch. – Consultant 6 (F/Bc)

Shared social, cultural and religious backgrounds can thus bind people together, but not so clear cut, due to intersectionality. They can also separate them when dominant values are different. In that case, diversity can develop toward segregation, a dynamic which has also been reported:

There is really a bit of segregation in organizations. You do have some people who try very hard to be connectors in that. And they succeed, but it is just very difficult. – Consultant 8 (F/Bc)

Differences in social, cultural and religious background help explain why people share private stories at work, or join the many social events or not. Religious principles can discourage liberal alcohol consumption, while for others corporate friendship culture is in conflict with traditional lower-middle class values of separating work and life. Likewise, corporate friendship cultures, characterized as being very masculine, can also become alienating and exclusionary based on gender or health reasons, or combinations of social categories due to intersectionality.

Performing identity work and being visible for career progression

The importance of networking and visibility for career progression was stressed in the interviews, together with identity work struggles as reported earlier for ethnic minority professionals (Doldor and Atewologun, 2021; Opara et al., 2023). Our findings are illustrated in Table 5.

All consultants emphasized that social participation and engagement in network activities is important for career progression at consultancies, because it adds to visibility:

Table 5. Performing identity work and being visible for career progression.

Codes	Illustrative quotes
Need for social participation, and strategic visibility	<i>Yes, sometimes you approach people, because you think, well, this could be beneficial, so to speak. Or that you think, well maybe it is useful to speak to that person one time. And yes, the more people you know within the company, the more you get asked for projects. It does work that way, in the end. – Consultant 35 (M/Mc)</i> <i>Within consulting you need a bit of visibility, as we call it. A bit of visibility is going to help you in your career. Also when you work with the client, you still need to be visible at your consultancy. Then the faster you can grow in your role. – Consultant 7 (F/Bc)</i>
Struggles to meet professional social norms and standards	<i>I did not have to overcome the struggles that they [ethnic minorities] experience culturally, because in that respect I have a lot of privilege. But in terms of social class, I had that same struggle. You notice it in the word choice, and in the smoke break when you better understand each other, that you do not have to explain. You just understand that things can be difficult sometimes. – Consultant 34 (M/Mc)</i> <i>Consultancy is networking, right? You have to maintain your network, you have to broaden your network. If you are the type doing his work behind his little computer, not showing interest in anyone and not building a social bond, if that is where you are going, I do not think, you can make it in consulting. – Consultant 17 (M/Bc)</i>
Show professional success—not background, and blending in	<i>There is a certain pressure, and it makes you realise that, yes, at a certain moment you have to show you have that higher function, you have to get promoted, because that is part of it, and otherwise it feels like failing. – Consultant 6 (F/Bc)</i> <i>I have colleagues who eat at lunch meetings during Ramadan, because they do not feel comfortable to be different. [. . .] The example is extreme. It is a senior manager who is leading by example this way, which I feel is problematic. At the other hand, I do not know his motives, but in his position you need to think twice. – Consultant 8 (F/Bc)</i>
Find a balance in being authentic and strategic	<i>It is a matter of finding a balance. That is what I was told by a partner. Try to find a balance, otherwise you are an outsider. – Consultant 12 (M/Bc)</i> <i>There is a project that I myself really do not want to deal with because of religious reasons. Certain clients working in certain sectors that from my own, yes, ethical perspective I just do not accept or do not like. And, that was not a problem at all. That really was not pushed or anything. There was actually more of an understanding. – Consultant 7 (F/Bc)</i>

When I am in the office, I will always go and have a chat or show a little interest in basically everybody. I always walk around, and say hello to everybody. But if I can just speak to that person from the management team one-on-one, that is nicer, obviously. So, I will kind of, well, not really look for that, but if that situation happens, I will take advantage of that. [. . .] The management team will always decide on your promotion. That is why I also want to be good at being in the picture so to speak, and to make a good impression. – Consultant 26 (F/Mc)

While networking and visibility are seen as key for making a career as consultant, bicultural consultants feel that consultants with majority backgrounds have a networking advantage here:

For them [with Dutch majority background] it goes more natural, because they participate more in the social activities, the get-togethers. And then, from one thing comes another. So if, for example, you are asked to lead a certain community or something like that, visibility is already increased. And that, in turn, can lead to something else. – Consultant 9 (F/Bc)

Not only bicultural consultants, also a female consultant with majority background experienced this kind of disadvantage, illustrating the importance of gender next to ethnic background:

I noticed that people who were closer to the team leader, for example, and talked to the team leader more, they got extra, or different assignments. And then I really thought, yes, that is just because you are sitting next to him. And yes, they were also often male, so I really thought, yes, they talk so easy with each other, because they are all men, and they sit next to each other, so they get new tasks more quickly. – Consultant 23 (F/Mc)

Networking is not only important for visibility, it also reflects the social norm of the friendship culture to be socially engaged. Many bicultural consultants struggle with this norm:

Whatever social interaction I have with my colleagues, I think it is enough. I mean, I do not need more. So, I go to the Friday afternoon drinks once in a while. I do not go every week, because that is kind of emotionally tiring for me. But if I miss more than four times for example, then I think, okay, I am missing out a little bit. And I fear that people then think I am not really joining much. Then I join, just for the sake of my own reputation. – Consultant 4 (F/Bc)

One Dutch majority consultant shared the experience that certain social and cultural standards need to be met for career progression, and that this can also be difficult due to class background. This again points at intersectionality, as these categories can come together for bicultural consultants:

Well, because if I want to climb the career ladder, which is what everyone wants, then you need to have good relations with the people who are in charge of promotion, that you are allowed to climb that ladder. And then you can feel like oh, it is a bit easier for them [with upper-middle class background], so I [working class background] have to step up to the same level. To keep up, so to speak. To keep pace. – Consultant 34 (M/Mc)

In addition to the general social performance expectations, career related standards need to be met as well. That you meet them has to be foregrounded as part of identity work:

Indeed, you do need to shine. You cannot always perform in the background. You need to voice your views. That also is part of being a consultant. – Consultant 10 (M/Bc)

While career related standards need to be foregrounded, religious or cultural background cannot be emphasized too much. They are accepted, as long as performance or social engagement is good:

Most important is to show you are a nice person, not that you are a Turkish or Moroccan Muslim. [. . .] It is different if it is Ramadan. Colleagues will respect that. Still, it cannot be an excuse for underperformance. [. . .] If you use your culture or religion as excuse for underperformance, and some people are doing this, that would not be accepted here. – Consultant 13 (M/Bc)

Bicultural consultants thus feel a need to blend in, which can be strategic. For instance, a bicultural consultant was presenting himself as being more interested in small talk than he really was:

Look, then they talk about things, and what they talk about are just not my interests. So, then it is about running or cycling or things they do during the weekends, like drinking special beers, and I am generalising now, but it is just more things like that. So yes, then I can come across very interested. But it just does not interest me at all. And especially with the long working weeks, you really have to do your best to pay attention and appear interested, because otherwise you will not make it. – Consultant 11 (M/Bc)

Some consultants chose to remain authentic in their identity work. They want to keep the social aspect ‘pure’ when networking, feeling they can make this choice at acceptable costs:

I always think, yes, somewhat naive, that I should focus on the quality of my network. I know it is very important who you know. But like I said, I like working and I focus on working. And I talk to people because I like it, and I am not going to talk to someone because I think: yes, then I will have my promotion sooner. That is not for me. – Consultant 24 (F/Mc)

Some bicultural consultants also experience they can be themselves within the friendship culture. That is, when the required socializing fits their social needs and perhaps their gender as well:

I just need it, the get-togethers. I am a social person. So especially that, but also more general. A consultant just needs to do the networking. – Consultant 17 (M/Bc)

Taken together, bicultural consultants experience a networking burden, similar to female consultants and those with lower class background. They do not blend in as easily as most male majority consultants, making it more difficult for them to perform the identity work required for career progression. Corporate friendship cultures seem to best support identity work of male, upper-middle class, majority consultants (cf. Meriläinen et al., 2004; Ortlieb and Sieben, 2019).

Background dependent experiences of organizational career support

Networking, social engagement and being visible are necessary role expectations for consultants and part of their identity work. These activities help to get career sponsors interested. Table 6 illustrates how the challenges of creating sponsorships relate to background, thus undermining an inclusion measure that could be quite effective (cf. Hewlett, 2019; Shore et al., 2018).

Table 6. Background dependent experiences of organizational career support.

Codes	Illustrative quotes
Career support organized via sponsors, mentors coaches, training	<i>So, you prepare the promotion case together [with a coach], and in addition you have to take care of sponsorships. So, these are the people, more managers at a higher level that you have worked with, that have to support your promotion. – Consultant 33 (M/Mc)</i> <i>I am still surprised myself at how fast things can move within this world. How many career steps I have made in only a few months, by getting to know one important person in my work environment. So, for me personally, this contact has changed my life, let me put it that way. – Consultant 14 (M/Bc)</i>
Feeling anxious when seeking sponsorships	<i>Look, these types of companies are very often political. If for instance, someone higher up does not sponsor you, as we call it, does not take you by the hand [. . .] then it becomes really hard to grow further. – Consultant 13 (M/Bc)</i> <i>If you look at those get-togethers, managing directors are there, and senior managers, the people who are in charge of promotions. So, you could think, hey, if I just stay in the picture, start talking about my work at the drinks party, then I will have an advantage, and he will remember me. It could be, you know. But I think more like, I hope that it is just fair. That it is about the facts in the performance reviews, and that it is just transparent in this way. [. . .]. And I try not to be concerned about that. – Consultant 11 (M/Bc)</i>

In many interviews consultants emphasize how important it is to engage with influential managers, so that they become career sponsors who support them during performance evaluations:

Yes, it is part of the game in big consultancies. [. . .] You know that next to your normal performances, that promotion is dependent on sponsorships, that you need to arrange that. That is the name of the game. – Consultant 33 (M/Mc)

Coaches and mentors can guide consultants in playing the game. A female bicultural consultant explained how she needed their encouragement:

In January they made a longlist for promotions, and my name was on it. Then you feel: they do not say no. [. . .] But my coach had to push me. You really need to play the game now! You need to let those people know that you want that promotion, tell them! And then, I made those calls and asked, would you support me, what are your tips? – Consultant 6 (F/Bc)

Bicultural consultants experience this promotion game as rather challenging and stressful. Realizing sponsorships then feels even more important than doing your job well:

You might be tense when writing your case, looking for people who are willing to support you. So, you are really looking for sponsors who are willing to say at that meeting that they are behind you for the promotion, should there be a discussion. So, you are much more concerned with sponsorships, rather than “I have to do this project really well”, because in principle that should just be good, you know. That aspect does not matter so much. – Consultant 5 (F/Bc)

Bicultural consultants do report these insecurities and anxieties related to career progression in more detail. They feel vulnerable in the corporate friendship culture, like one manager explains:

You never know if the person you hope for will sponsor you, will give you the good credentials. Will they really do this? You will not know. It is all behind closed doors. [. . .] At the big four it is like [. . .] one partner, two senior managers, four managers, eight senior consultants and 16 consultants, that is the ideal pyramid. [. . .] If you are senior consultant and you want to become a manager and that layer is occupied, [. . .] then it will not happen, even if you deserve it. That uncertainty you always feel. – Consultant 13 (M/Bc)

At the other hand, Consultant 14 (M/Bc, Table 6) reports how effective the sponsorship relation was, when secured. To get there is a struggle though for many consultants in a minority position. Ethnic background, gender and working class background can spark feelings of uncertainty and lack of inclusion in the context of corporate friendship cultures, influencing the ease of connecting with career sponsors. This way, cultural background has a strong influence on how consultants perform identity work, and experience organizational support for career progression.

Discussion

Friendship cultures at consultancies are popular for increasing employee engagement, retention and wellbeing at work (Costas, 2012; Fleming and Sturdy, 2009, 2011; Grugulis et al., 2000; Muhr et al., 2012). Our study confirms that friendship cultures at Dutch consultancies are experienced positively by majority consultants, particularly by men with upper-middle class Dutch background, but less so by bicultural consultants, leading to exclusionary experiences and career anxiety. Especially the need to secure sponsorships through networking is experienced as a hurdle. We have summarized our findings in a conceptual model (Figure 2).

Figure 2 outlines the experiences that consultants have reported when (1) being subject to normative control practices, and how this in turn impacts, (2) their sense of in/exclusion, (3) identity work for career progression and (4) experience of career support. The model describes several interrelated aspects of how consultants *actively respond* to the friendship culture practices they experience, while also *being influenced* by these practices, along with their own cultural backgrounds.

The model differentiates between the experiences of consultants identifying with the majority cultural in the upper path and as bicultural in the lower path. Majority consultants tend to respond by actively engaging in the many social activities and sharing private life experiences at work, whereas bicultural consultants engage much less or reluctantly due to tensions they experience linked to their social, cultural or religious backgrounds. As a result they are more likely to experience the friendship culture at consultancies as exclusionary while majority consultants tend to feel more aligned with the identity regulating process they are subject to. The boxes indicating the background dependent in/exclusion experiences in the model are presented as dotted, because the boundaries between the groups are somewhat fluid, with lower class or female majority consultants sometimes identifying more with the bicultural group, and a female

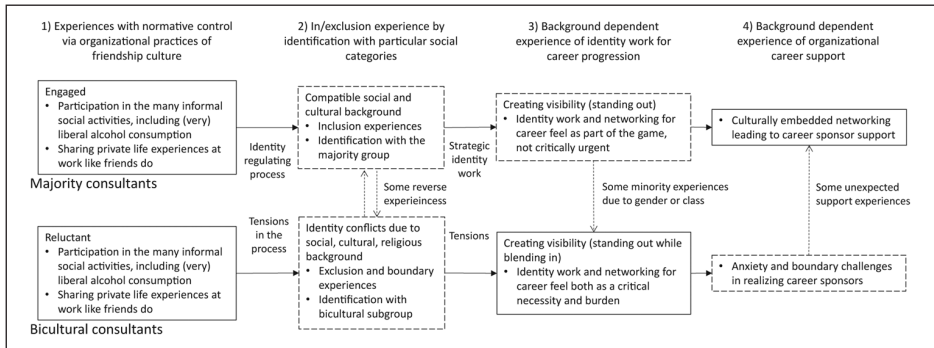


Figure 2. Background dependent experience of career support practices and identity work.

bicultural consultant raised by a Dutch mother identifying more with the Dutch majority. Identity work is situational and context-dependent, meaning that identity is not fixed and different aspects of a person’s identity and social position intersect. This can sometimes influence experiences of in/exclusion in reverse ways as indicated by two dotted arrows between these boxes.

In the social context of consultancies, and influenced by their backgrounds, consultants then respond with identity work aimed at career progression as represented in the model. They want to stand out and make visible that their performance is in accordance with the expectations of moving from junior to more senior roles and win sponsorships from those in gatekeeper positions. However, for bicultural consultants the identity work here is not only aimed at standing out, but also at blending in, which requires additional effort. Thus, they are less likely to be able to perform their identity work in accordance with majority expectations. Furthermore, winning sponsorships is also more challenging for those who experience the friendship culture as exclusionary and who engage less in social activities. The dotted arrow pointing down between the boxes here indicates how some female consultants and a male consultant with lower class background experience similar networking challenges. Like bicultural consultants, they also do not blend in so easily in a predominantly male upper-middle class friendship culture.

As a result, bicultural consultants experience more anxiety related to organizational career support as it is more difficult for them to secure career sponsors. However, when career sponsoring did work out, some bicultural consultants in the early stages of their career talked about how they could hardly believe how fast they progressed, which is indicated by the dotted arrow pointing upward, also making the lower box dotted and less clear cut. Often, strong encouragement from career coaches was needed to reach out to career sponsors. For bicultural consultants the effectiveness of career sponsors thus very much depends on career coaching, which makes this a crucial part of organizational career support.

Theoretical contributions

With the conceptual model our study contributes to the critical management literature on normative control in friendship cultures and to the HRM literature on career

related identity work and on career sponsorships in a diverse work setting. Together, these contributions answer the question *how management consultants with different cultural backgrounds perform their career related identity work in the context of Dutch corporate friendship cultures*.

Social-cultural background shapes the inclusion experience in friendship cultures. First, our findings contribute to the literature on normative control in organization studies by showing how diverse backgrounds shape the experience of identity regulation in friendship cultures, as indicated by the two dotted boxes in Figure 2, part 2. While prior studies observed worker disidentification with friendship cultures in call centers (Fleming and Sturdy, 2009, 2011), we show tensions originating from cultural backgrounds in a context where promotion decisions are frequent and arguably more consequential than in call centers. While the informal social activities are designed to foster camaraderie, relaxation and team cohesion (Costas, 2012; Fleming and Sturdy, 2011; Kunda, 1992; Muhr et al., 2012), for those who do not want to consume alcohol for religious, social or health reasons, the friendship culture creates an atmosphere that is experienced as alienating. It weakens the inclusion agenda at a time that diversity increases (cf. De Prins and Segers, 2015; Essers and Benschop, 2009; Janssens and Zanoni, 2014).

In addition, work-life boundary preferences of bicultural consultants collide with the social demands of corporate friendship cultures (Alvesson and Einola, 2018; Bouwmeester et al., 2021; Costas, 2012; Noury et al., 2017). Previous research by Hewlett (2012) stated that ethnic minorities can feel uncomfortable when expressing themselves at work. Likewise, Phillips et al. (2018) generalized that ethnic minorities experience self-disclosure challenges at work, and struggle to have small talk with their colleagues. In contrast, our findings show how bicultural consultants keep work-life boundaries for cultural or class related reasons. Personal disclosure proves to be much easier when colleagues share their religion or bicultural background, just like similar age, life stage, gender or class help such disclosure. While a friendship culture aims to blur work-life boundaries, it has neglected the influence of social or cultural background differences on individuals' preferences for such disclosure.

Furthermore, whereas previous studies warned that friendship cultures can lead to overall homogeneity (Costas, 2012; De Prins and Segers, 2015), our findings show that friendship cultures confronted with diversity encourage subgroup formation (Grey and Sturdy, 2007; McPherson et al., 2001), fostering a sense of belonging in these subgroups. This finding nuances Costas' idea that individuals positioned outside the homogeneous majority group 'feel more insecure about themselves, to the extent that they question themselves, that is, who they are and how/who they have to be in order to belong to them' (Costas, 2012: 389). She assumes like many others that you either belong to the main ingroup or fall outside, without theorizing the possibility of another group where you can feel included (cf. Costas, 2012; Fleming and Sturdy, 2009, 2011; Grugulis et al., 2000; Muhr et al., 2012). Friendship cultures may thus lead to in- and outgroup dynamics in more complex ways than currently assumed. However, it is important to emphasize that distinctions are not so clear-cut, and intersectionality occurs across several social categories, such as class, age, gender and ethnicity. Different aspects of a person's identity and social categorization interact to influence opportunities and barriers. They can reinforce

disadvantage in the case of a bicultural, female, lower class consultant while creating advantages for a Dutch male, higher-middle class consultant. Likewise, a shared background in terms of class, age or gender can in some situations be a more binding characteristic than ethnicity.

Consultants' identity work for career progression is influenced by background. Our second contribution to the literature on career related identity work in HRM shows how minority and majority backgrounds influence the performance of identity work differently in a friendship culture context (Figure 2, part 3), demonstrating how identity work depends both on one's own social-cultural background and on its relation to national, institutional and sector contexts (cf. Mühlhaus et al., 2021; Skovgaard-Smith et al., 2020; Watson, 2008). The ability and confidence to be visible and engage in networking is dependent on feeling included and at home (Al Ariss et al., 2013; Janssens and Zanoni, 2014; Ortlieb and Weiss, 2020). Bicultural, some female and a lower class consultant reported their struggles with the identity work needed to show that they were able to stand out, and perform as demanded at the next career stage according to the HR policies at their consultancies (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007; Meriläinen et al., 2004).

Performing such identity work is critical for career success at consultancies. Our study shows how this comes easiest for male, upper-middle class, majority consultants whose identity is closely aligned to those corporate friendship cultures, thus creating significant career advantages. Such identity work by contrast is more difficult to perform for bicultural consultants in the context of a majority culture they cannot fully identify with. The observed cultural distance toward the performance expectations of the Dutch corporate friendship cultures limits and disadvantages bicultural consultants. They have a smaller repertoire of acceptable roles they can play, and they need to be more sensitive in deciding what part of their ethnic, Dutch or professional identity to put forward or hide, and when to stand out or blend in (cf. Costas and Fleming, 2009; Fernando et al., 2020; Ozturk and Berber, 2022; Robertson and Swan, 2003). The common social space where these professionals work together shows an unequal power relationship between the national majority and ethnic minorities. Members of the majority group have more access to power and resources, often also being gatekeepers for the careers of minority workers (Baumann, 1996; Eriksen, 2002; Jenkins, 2008; Omanović and Langley, 2023). These unequal power relations condition the identity work of bicultural consultants. Their 'authentic self' needs to be performed in ways that can appear as sufficiently aligned with majority norms and social expectations as part of their career related identity work, and that feels like a significant burden due to the tensions between their values and the dominant norms of corporate friendship cultures.

Social-cultural background matters when seeking career sponsors. Third, our research contributes to diversity literature in HRM by explaining how bicultural consultants can feel more insecure in seeking career sponsors than majority consultants, as summarized toward the right side of Figure 2. While career insecurities are common for consultants, they are exacerbated by bicultural background, gender and class (Gill, 2015; Gunkel et al., 2013; Hewlett, 2012; Kumra and Vinnicombe, 2008). While Hewlett (2012, 2019) argues that sponsorships are a remedy to solve career uncertainties of ethnic minorities, our

findings indicate it is a double-edged sword. The dependency on sponsors creates more insecurities for bicultural consultants, much more so than for majority consultants. While it is just part of the game for majority consultants to seek career sponsors (de Janasz and Forret, 2008), bicultural consultants reported how surprising it was if a sponsorship relation worked out. They also were surprised how effective it was in terms of their career progression (Hewlett, 2012, 2019; Shore et al., 2018).

Consultancies and their corporate friendship cultures therefore do not constitute neutral social spaces. They imply cultural norms, expected identity performances and practices that represent a dominant form of ‘Dutchness’, based on upper-middle class norms, and primarily male-oriented sociality. Furthermore, the required identity performance is more difficult when you do not like the excessive drinking of young business professionals, who extend their student social life into their early professional career with the ‘work hard – play hard’ mantra (Alvesson and Einola, 2018; Costas, 2012; Grey and Sturdy, 2007; Muhr et al., 2012). The illustrated culture clashes explain why friendship cultures can be draining, also for majority consultants who do not like the drinking or feel insecure toward the social demands of upper-middle class social life. Moreover, corporate friendship relations are not secure: individuals must continuously maintain them. Thus, a friendship culture might not be the best way to achieve inclusion on the ethnic dimension. While the workplace is talked about in terms of friendship and a kind of kinship, the expectation that it can create a social space where one can be oneself is a rather idealized one. A lack of ‘fit’ is potentially problematic here, such as standing out too much from the dominant cultural norms by not meeting expectations of what it means to ‘be social’, like the willingness to share details about your private life, having people over and drinking alcohol together.

Limitations

The first limitation of this study relates to the interviewed group of early career consultants. Much of the findings cannot be generalized to later career stages, as the demands of identity work change over a consultant career. How cultural background will affect this, and if we would find a leaking pipeline effect for male minority consultants for instance, is an open question. For female minority consultants as well as for lower class backgrounds combined with other social categories a leaking pipeline effect is quite likely. A second limitation relates to the specifics of the Dutch context, which is relatively gender balanced, with limited class differences and historically a relatively open culture toward immigration. How experiences of bicultural consultants in countries with stronger class differences and less gender balance would work out needs to be explored. The reported tensions and insecurities will likely be stronger there, due to intersectionality. A third limitation stems from the sector context. Friendship cultures are common in many corporate contexts, but often less tied to normative control approaches and high performance standards as in consulting and some other professional services. The same strong professional ambition tied to a commercial drive we might expect in marketing agencies, tech firms and other more informal but professional work settings. However, more formal commercial settings such as accounting

and law results might be different, and likewise in public sector contexts like healthcare, education or government. The limitation due to retrospection bias seems minimal: it is mitigated by the fact that the memories we draw on were quite fresh, and easy to remember for young consultants. Social desirability bias seems a more serious limitation, as many respondents were struggling with blending in. Although many tensions have been shared, there might be more to discover here.

Practical implications for HRM

Based on the findings of our study, HR policies better take steps in reducing emphasis on alcohol consumption during social company events, if they want to foster inclusion. Bicultural consultants did share their enthusiasm for work-related activities such as trainings, workshops or team building where alcohol use was not central to the activity. Reducing excessive alcohol consumption could be a starting point for making the corporate friendship culture more inclusive for bicultural, as well as for some majority consultants who are not so comfortable with that practice.

To improve the experience of career support among bicultural professionals it is recommended to stress in HR policies that career coaching and mentoring is for all employees. Having a mentor or career coach higher up in the company, in addition to one's direct manager, may increase the experience of career support for all, without adding an element of special treatment for bicultural professionals, which might feel stigmatizing. It may help bicultural workers to get the necessary support in building relationships with career sponsors, and creating the right impressions, as illustrated in our study. In our study the encouragement of career coaches to reach out to career sponsors proved to be crucial, in letting the organizational career support system work well for minority consultants, as for them the informal network grows slower. Therefor minority professionals need this extra encouragement.

Conclusion

Based on our study of bicultural professionals working for Dutch consultancies, we can conclude that corporate friendship cultures do not offer an inclusive environment for all, but mainly produce advantages for the male upper-middle class majority. For bicultural consultants and others not fitting in related to the various social categories (some female consultants and those with a lower class background or strong health values), the corporate friendship culture is less inclusive. Based on semi-structured interviews with 37 consultants from majority and minority backgrounds, we can conclude first, that social-cultural background shapes the inclusion experience of the professionals working at consultancies. Second, consultants' identity work aiming at career progression is influenced by social-cultural background. Bicultural consultants need to blend in first, before they can stand out to further progress in their careers. Third, background matters for the confidence consultants feel in seeking career sponsors. This has practical implications for HR policies, as career coaches need to be more aware of these insecurities and the mechanisms that produce disadvantages. As the instrument of career sponsoring appears more

effective than bicultural consultants can imagine, career coaches could support them especially here.

Future research studying normative control should therefore first acknowledge that up till now corporate friendship culture practices were developed and studied in homogeneous western, upper-middle class, male oriented work settings (Meriläinen et al., 2004; Ortlieb and Sieben, 2019). It could focus on differences between bicultural consultants of various ethnic and cultural backgrounds in more detail. For instance, while alcohol consumption is problematic in many Muslim cultures prominent among the Dutch minorities (cf. Alewell and Rastetter, 2020; Essers and Benschop, 2009), this may be less so in other cultures. The experience of work-life boundaries is also dependent on culture, age, class, sector and time, while currently reduced due to technological developments (cf. Meriläinen et al., 2004; Smets et al., 2017; Zanoni and Janssens, 2007).

Second, further research could study in more detail under what conditions real appreciation of diversity and inclusion could occur in friendship cultures. If a more general inclusion experience cannot be supported here due to subgroup dynamics, it might still be possible to create inclusion conditions at a more basic level, aiming for social safety and more common ground for all, for instance, by studying the impact of organizing relevant formal meetings or activities.

Third, future research could study in a more longitudinal way how friendship cultures condition the careers of consultants with majority or bicultural backgrounds differently, beyond the subjective experience of observed tensions and insecurities. It could be studied to what extent ethnic minorities, consultants with working class background, and female or Gen Z consultants are disadvantaged in their careers by what looks like a background mechanism that originates from cultural distance or fit with the dominant culture.

The majority implicitly are the legitimate, those who belong and ‘fit’ and are favored by a corporate friendship culture, also in their identity work. The friendship culture of consultancies, like other workplaces in a particular society, reproduces this relationship of cultural and social dominance. With the growing diversity of the workforce at consultancies, where the inclusion of women lacks behind in the higher ranks for decades already, these further research questions seem rather urgent (cf. Kumra and Vinnicombe, 2008; Meriläinen et al., 2004; Taminiau et al., 2022).

ORCID iDs

Onno Bouwmeester  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8740-2832>

Irene Skovgaard-Smith  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5181-9521>

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

- Al Ariss A, Vassilopoulou J, Özbilgin MF, et al. (2013) Understanding career experiences of skilled minority ethnic workers in France and Germany. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management* 24(6): 1236–1256. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2012.709190>
- Alewel D and Rastetter D (2020) On the (ir)relevance of religion for human resource management and diversity management: A German perspective. *German Journal of Human Resource Management* 34(1): 9–31. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2397002219882399>
- Alvesson M (2003) Beyond neopositivists, romantics, and localists: A reflexive approach to interviews in organizational research. *Academy of Management Review* 28(1): 13–33. <https://doi.org/10.2307/30040687>
- Alvesson M and Einola K (2018) Excessive work regimes and functional stupidity. *German Journal of Human Resource Management* 32(3-4): 283–296. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2397002218791410>
- Alvesson M and Kärreman D (2007) Unraveling HRM: Identity, ceremony, and control in a management consulting firm. *Organization Science* 18(4): 711–723. <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1070.0267>
- Alvesson M, Lee Ashcraft K and Thomas R (2008) Identity matters: Reflections on the construction of identity scholarship in organization studies. *Organization* 15(1): 5–28. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508407084426>
- Alvesson M and Robertson M (2006) The best and the brightest: The construction, significance and effects of elite identities in consulting firms. *Organization* 13(2): 195–224. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508406061674>
- Alvesson M and Willmott H (2002) Identity regulation as organizational control: Producing the appropriate individual. *Journal of Management Studies* 39(5): 619–644. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-6486.00305>
- Anthias F and Yuval-Davis N (1992) *Racialized Boundaries: Race, Nation, Gender, Colour and Class and the Anti-racist Struggle*. London: Routledge.
- Baumann G (1996) *Contesting Culture: Discourses of Identity in Multi-Ethnic London*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Baumann G (1999) *The Multicultural Riddle: Rethinking National, Ethnic and Religious Identities*. London: Routledge.
- Berman EM, West JP and Richter MN Jr (2002) Workplace relations: Friendship patterns and consequences (according to managers). *Public Administration Review* 62(2): 217–230. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0033-3352.00172>
- Bouwmeester O, Atkinson R, Noury L, et al. (2021) Work-life balance policies in high performance organisations: A comparative interview study with millennials in Dutch consultancies. *German Journal of Human Resource Management* 35(1): 6–32. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2397002220952738>
- Bouwmeester O and Slaats M (2024) First up then out: Self-employment as a response to normative control practices in elite consultancies. *Scandinavian Journal of Management* 40(1): 101313. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scaman.2023.101313>
- Bowen GA (2008) Naturalistic inquiry and the saturation concept: A research note. *Qualitative Research* 8(1): 137–152. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794107085301>
- Brannen MY and Thomas DC (2010) *Bicultural Individuals in Organizations: Implications and Opportunity*. International Journal of Cross Cultural Management 10(1): 5–16. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470595809359580>
- Brown AD (2015) Identities and identity work in organizations. *International Journal of Management Reviews* 17(1): 20–40. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijmr.12035>

- Brown AD (2017) Identity work and organizational identification. *International Journal of Management Reviews* 19(3): 296–317. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijmr.12152>
- CBS (2021) *Bevolking naar migratieachtergrond*. Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek. Available at: <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/achtergrond/2016/47/bevolking-naar-migratieachtergrond> (accessed 8 September 2026).
- Chudzikowski K, Gustafsson S and Tams S (2020) Constructing alignment for sustainable careers: Insights from the career narratives of management consultants. *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 117: 103312. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2019.05.009>
- Costas J (2012) “We are all friends here”: Reinforcing paradoxes of normative control in a culture of friendship. *Journal of Management Inquiry* 21(4): 377–395. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1056492612439104>
- Costas J and Fleming P (2009) Beyond dis-identification: A discursive approach to self-alienation in contemporary organizations. *Human Relations* 62(3): 353–378. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726708101041>
- De Janasz SC and Forret ML (2008) Learning the art of networking: A critical skill for enhancing social capital and career success. *Journal of Management Education* 32(5): 629–650. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1052562907307637>
- De Prins P and Segers J (2015) Werken in en managen van een vriendschapscultuur: contradictio in terminis? *Tijdschrift voor HRM* (2015)(1): 1–21.
- Devine PG and Ash TL (2022) Diversity training goals, limitations, and promise: A review of the multidisciplinary literature. *Annual Review of Psychology* 73: 403–429. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-060221-122215>
- Doldor E and Atewologun D (2021) Why work it when you can dodge it? Identity responses to ethnic stigma among professionals. *Human Relations* 74(6): 892–921. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726719895552>
- Edmondson AC and McManus SE (2007) Methodological fit in management field research. *Academy of Management Review* 32(4): 1246–1264. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2007.26586086>
- Eriksen TH (2002) *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives*. London: Pluto Press.
- Essers C and Benschop Y (2009) Muslim businesswomen doing boundary work: The negotiation of Islam, gender and ethnicity within entrepreneurial contexts. *Human Relations* 62(3): 403–423. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726708101042>
- Fernando M, Reveley J and Learmonth M (2020) Identity work by a non-white immigrant business scholar: Autoethnographic vignettes of covering and accenting. *Human Relations* 73(6): 765–788. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726719831070>
- Fleming P and Sturdy A (2009) “Just be yourself!” Towards neo-normative control in organisations? *Employee Relations* 31(6): 569–583. <https://doi.org/10.1108/01425450910991730>
- Fleming P and Sturdy A (2011) ‘Being yourself’ in the electronic sweatshop: New forms of normative control. *Human Relations* 64(2): 177–200. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726710375481>
- Gill MJ (2015) Elite identity and status anxiety: An interpretative phenomenological analysis of management consultants. *Organization* 22(3): 306–325. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508413514287>
- Gioia DA, Corley KG and Hamilton AL (2013) Seeking qualitative rigor in inductive research. *Organizational Research Methods* 16(1): 15–31. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1094428112452151>
- Glaser BG (1978) *Theoretical Sensitivity: Advances in the Methodology of Grounded Theory*. Mill Valley: Sociology Press.
- Glaser BG and Strauss AL (1967) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company.
- Grey C and Sturdy A (2007) Friendship and organizational analysis: Toward a research agenda. *Journal of Management Inquiry* 16(2): 157–172. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1056492606295500>

- Grugulis I, Dundon T and Wilkinson A (2000) Cultural control and the 'culture manager': Employment practices in a consultancy. *Work Employment & Society* 14(1): 97–116. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09500170022118284>
- Gunkel M, Schlägel C, Langella IM, et al. (2013) The influence of national culture on business students' career attitudes – An analysis of eight countries. *German Journal of Human Resource Management* 27(1): 47–68. <https://doi.org/10.1177/239700221302700105>
- Hewlett SA (2012) Too many people of color feel uncomfortable at work. *Harvard Business Review*. Available at: <https://hbr.org/2012/10/too-many-people-of-color-feel> (accessed 8 September 2026).
- Hewlett SA (2019) *The Sponsor Effect: How to Be a Better Leader by Investing in Others*. Boston: Harvard Business Review Press.
- Hoyer P (2022) To be, or not to be elite, that is the question: The unresolved identity struggles of ex-consultants. *Culture and Organization* 28(1): 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14759551.2021.1957889>
- Hoyer P, Leegwater T and Ybema S (2025) When freedom and control walk hand in hand: Friendship in the workplace. *Journal of Organizational Ethnography* 14(3): 400–424. <https://doi.org/10.1108/joe-03-2025-0037>
- Ibarra H (1999) Provisional selves: Experimenting with image and identity in professional adaptation. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 44(4): 764–791. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2667055>
- Islam G (2025) Organizational culture. In: McCann L, Bozkurt Ö, Finn R, et al. (eds) *Elgar Encyclopedia of Critical Management Studies*. Cheltenham: Elgar, pp. 349–354.
- Janssens M and Zanoni P (2014) Alternative diversity management: Organizational practices fostering ethnic equality at work. *Scandinavian Journal of Management* 30(3): 317–331. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scaman.2013.12.006>
- Jenkins R (2008) *Rethinking Ethnicity: Arguments and Explorations*. London: Sage.
- Kärreman D and Alvesson M (2004) Cages in tandem: Management control, social identity, and identification in a knowledge-intensive firm. *Organization* 11(1): 149–175. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508404039662>
- Kenny EJ and Briner RB (2013) Increases in salience of ethnic identity at work: The roles of ethnic assignment and ethnic identification. *Human Relations* 66(5): 725–748. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726712464075>
- Köllén T (2021) Diversity management: A critical review and agenda for the future. *Journal of Management Inquiry* 30(3): 259–272. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1056492619868025>
- Kumra S and Vinnicombe S (2008) A study of the promotion to partner process in a professional services firm: How women are disadvantaged. *British Journal of Management* 19(s1): S65–S74. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8551.2008.00572.x>
- Kunda G (1992) *Engineering Culture: Control and Commitment in a High-Tech Corporation*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- McLoughlin IP, Badham RJ and Palmer G (2005) Cultures of ambiguity: Design, emergence and ambivalence in the introduction of normative control. *Work Employment & Society* 19(1): 67–89. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017005051284>
- McPherson M, Smith-Lovin L and Cook JM (2001) Birds of a feather: Homophily in social networks. *Annual Review of Sociology* 27(1): 415–444. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.27.1.415>
- Maertz CP and Griffeth RW (2004) Eight motivational forces and voluntary turnover: A theoretical synthesis with implications for research. *Journal of Management* 30: 667–683. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jm.2004.04.001>
- Malhotra N, Morris T and Smets M (2010) New career models in UK professional service firms: From up-or-out to up-and-going-nowhere? *The International Journal of Human Resource Management* 21(9): 1396–1413. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2010.488436>

- Maruster L (2013) *Qualitative Research Methods*. London: Sage.
- Meriläinen S, Tienari J, Thomas R, et al. (2004) Management consultant talk: A cross-cultural comparison of normalizing discourse and resistance. *Organization* 11(4): 539–564. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508404044061>
- Michel A (2011) Transcending socialization: A nine-year ethnography of the body's role in organizational control and knowledge workers' transformation. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 56(3): 325–368. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0001839212437519>
- Mühlhaus J and Bouwmeester O (2016) The paradoxical effect of self-categorization on work stress in a high-status occupation: Insights from management consulting. *Human Relations* 69(9): 1823–1852. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726715626255>
- Mühlhaus J, Bouwmeester O and Khapova SN (2021) An exploration of obstacles to identity play during unemployment. *Career Development International* 26(3): 333–347. <https://doi.org/10.1108/cdi-10-2019-0238>
- Muhr SL, Pedersen M and Alvesson M (2012) Workload, aspiration, and fun: Problems of balancing self-exploitation and self-exploration in work life. In: Holmqvist M and Spicer A (eds.) *Managing 'Human Resources' by Exploiting and Exploring People's Potentials*. Bingley: Emerald, pp. 193–220. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/S0733-558X\(2013\)0000037011](http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/S0733-558X(2013)0000037011)
- Neusar A (2014) To trust or not to trust? Interpretations in qualitative research. *Human Affairs* 24(2): 178–188. <https://doi.org/10.2478/s13374-014-0218-9>
- Noury L, Gand S and Sardas J-C (2017) Tackling the work-life balance challenge in professional service firms: The impact of projects, organizing, and service characteristics. *Journal of Professions and Organization* 4(2): 149–178. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jpo/jow010>
- Omanović V and Langley A (2023) Assimilation, integration or inclusion? A dialectical perspective on the organizational socialization of migrants. *Journal of Management Inquiry* 32(1): 76–97. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10564926211063777>
- Opara V, Ryan MK, Sealy R, et al. (2023) “Fitting in whilst standing out”: Identity flexing strategies of professional British women of African, Asian, and Caribbean ethnicities. *Frontiers in Sociology* 8: 820975. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2023.820975>
- Opara V, Sealy R and Ryan MK (2020) The workplace experiences of BAME professional women: Understanding experiences at the intersection. *Gender Work and Organization* 27(6): 1192–1213. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12456>
- Ortlieb R and Sieben B (2019) Balls, barbecues and boxing: Contesting gender regimes at organizational social events. *Organization Studies* 40(1): 115–134. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840617736941>
- Ortlieb R and Weiss S (2020) Job quality of refugees in Austria: Trade-offs between multiple workplace characteristics. *German Journal of Human Resource Management* 34(4): 418–442. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2397002220914224>
- Ozturk MB and Berber A (2022) Racialised professionals' experiences of selective incivility in organisations: A multi-level analysis of subtle racism. *Human Relations* 75(2): 213–239. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726720957727>
- Phillips KW, Dumas TL and Rothbard NP (2018) Diversity and authenticity. *Harvard Business Review* 96(2): 132–136. <https://hbr.org/2018/03/diversity-and-authenticity>
- Rivera LA (2012) Hiring as cultural matching: The case of elite professional service firms. *American Sociological Review* 77(6): 999–1022. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122412463213>
- Robertson M and Swan J (2003) ‘Control – what control?’ Culture and ambiguity within a knowledge intensive firm. *Journal of Management Studies* 40(4): 831–858. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-6486.00362>
- Rumens N (2017) Researching workplace friendships: Drawing insights from the sociology of friendship. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 34(8): 1149–1167. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407516670276>

- Shore LM, Cleveland JN and Sanchez D (2018) Inclusive workplaces: A review and model. *Human Resource Management Review* 28(2): 176–189. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2017.07.003>
- Shore LM, Randel AE, Chung BG, et al. (2011) Inclusion and diversity in work groups: A review and model for future research. *Journal of Management* 37(4): 1262–1289. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206310385943>
- Skovgaard-Smith I, Soekijad M and Down S (2020) The other side of ‘us’: Alterity construction and identification work in the context of planned change. *Human Relations* 73(11): 1583–1606. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726719872525>
- Smets M, Morris T, von Nordenflycht A, et al. (2017) 25 years since ‘P2’: Taking stock and charting the future of professional firms. *Journal of Professions and Organization* 4(2): 91–111. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jpo/jox006>
- Song S-H (2006) Workplace friendship and employees’ productivity: LMX theory and the case of the Seoul City Government. *International Review of Public Administration* 11(1): 47–58. <https://doi.org/10.1080/12294659.2006.10805077>
- Stigliani I (2020) Navigating an academic maze: Experiences of an international female scholar. *Journal of Management Inquiry* 29(3): 360–363. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1056492620906984>
- Strauss A and Corbin JM (1990) *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*. London: Sage.
- Suddaby R (2006) From the editors: What grounded theory is not. *Academy of Management Journal* 49(4): 633–642. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2006.22083020>
- Sveningsson S and Alvesson M (2003) Managing managerial identities: Organizational fragmentation, discourse and identity struggle. *Human Relations* 56(10): 1163–1193. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00187267035610001>
- Taminiau Y, Teelken C, Berkhof N, et al. (2022) In or out of the game? Exploring the perseverance of female managers leaving consultancy and its implications. *Journal of Professions and Organization* 9(2): 216–231. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jpo/joac009>
- Tews MJ, Michel J, Xu S, et al. (2015) Workplace fun matters . . . but what else? *Employee Relations* 37(2): 248–267. <https://doi.org/10.1108/er-10-2013-0152>
- Watson TJ (2008) Managing identity: Identity work, personal predicaments and structural circumstances. *Organization* 15(1): 121–143. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508407084488>
- Zanoni P and Janssens M (2007) Minority employees engaging with (diversity) management: An analysis of control, agency, and micro-emancipation. *Journal of Management Studies* 44(8): 1371–1397. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.2007.00700.x>

Author biographies

Onno Bouwmeester is Professor of Consulting and Business Ethics at Durham University Business School, and director of the VU Knowledge Hub for Consulting and Professional Service Firms at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. He has published on consultants’ work life, their ethics and rhetoric in monographs and journals such as *Human Relations*, *International Journal of Management Reviews* and *German Journal of Human Resource Management*.

Ilayda Önder holds a BSc in International Business and a MSc in Business Administration: Management Consulting (cum laude), and has completed a Pre-PhD program at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. She has pursued a career in the (semi) public sector in policy and project roles with a focus on EDI. She currently works as a policy advisor for education at a Dutch municipality.

Irene Skovgaard-Smith is Associate Professor in Organisational Anthropology at Norwich Business School, University of East Anglia, UK. Her research focuses on identity, stigma, othering and moral disengagement in organisations. She has published in journals such as *Human Relations*, *Global Networks*, *Group & Organization Management* and *Journal of Organizational Ethnography*.