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Talent and identity:

A hermeneutic exploration of employee perspectives

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Candidate declaration

I hereby declare that:

1. I have not been enrolled for another award of the University, or other academic or professional organization, whilst undertaking my research degree.

2. None of the material contained in the thesis has been used in any other submission for an academic award.

3. I am aware of and understand the University's policy on plagiarism and certify that this thesis is my own work. The use of all published or other sources of material consulted have been properly and fully acknowledged.

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5. The word count of the thesis is 69,908.

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Abstract

This research is a reflexive hermeneutic study of the interplay between identity and inclusive talent management in smaller organizations. The in-depth research design uses the diary-interview method to enable reflection and to explore employee perspectives. The work looks at how the respondents make sense of talent management, and what this implies for Human Resource and management practice. What do talent management meanings and identity mechanisms of employees reveal if we listen and take them into account? The research contributes to literature by exploring the under-examined area of talent management and identity.

The research shows that the sense-making of talent and talent management is based on individual and extra-individual factors. On the one hand, personal values and the self inspire how people assign meaning to talent and talent management. The research introduces employees as meaning creators with an active role in talent management and presents implications for theory and practice. The work illustrates that self and social-identities are indeed interwoven with talent management. It introduces the concepts of *talent self-identity* and *talent-identity* which are related to the notion of talent status.

Extra-individual factors on the other hand, which are talent discourses and actions, also shape individual talent meanings and start identity creation processes. Talent management enables individual agency and regulates identity. Through pointing out positive and negative employee reactions, the research adds to theory and practice regarding the "dark side" of talent management and psychological contracts in inclusive talent management. The study further shows how power, responsibility and rewards are interrelated with talent meanings and identity formation. The work contributes to practice by suggesting *agency and structure on demand* for the design of talent programs.

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1   Introduction

This study is a hermeneutic exploration of talent and identity. It seeks to understand the meanings individuals attribute to talent and talent management, and how they perceive their interplay with identity construction. This chapter presents the practical and theoretical foundation for this work, the main drivers and the research approach. It also introduces me as a researcher and as a professional and outlines the structure of the work.

1.1   Rationale for the research

The research has emerged from my own experience with talent management, both, from being at the receiving end as an employee, and from designing and managing the implementation of talent management processes and systems. In my consulting and project leading role, I support organizations on their talent management journey. Human Resource consulting was worth 3.5 billion euros of revenue in Germany in 2019, which corresponds to almost ten percent of total consulting revenue (Eggert, 2021). One of the most prominent reasons for this investment is the similarity of today's world of work to the disruptive events of the industrialization at the end of the nineteenth century (Kowitz, 2021). To today's CEOs, a skilled and adaptable workforce is the most important societal priority. 67 percent of them plan to increase long-term investments into leadership and talent development (PwC, 2021). This is especially important in today's changing labor market, as is exemplified by 42 percent of core competencies to be adapted within the next two years (Kowitz, 2021). Half of all jobs worldwide have the potential to be automated: This could apply to 22 percent of European jobs until 2030 (McKinsey Global Institute, 2020). Because Europe's working-age population decreases due to demographic changes, employment rates will stay stable despite of automation, and organizations face a skills shortage and a demand market for labor (Fuller, Raman, Bailey & Vaduganathan, 2020; McKinsey Global Institute, 2020).   As a consequence, support, also in form of consultancies, is needed for attracting, (re)training and retaining the workforce in the midst of a changing labor landscape (McKinsey Global Institute, 2017).

However, instead of holding on to what worked in the past, the need to rethink talent management and prepare it for the future becomes apparent: novel phenomena like self-management of personal growth (Meyers & Van Woerkom, 2014), broader inclusion of less-privileged employees (Al Ariss, Cascio & Paauwe, 2014), doubts on the relevance of talent management (De Boeck, Meyers & Dries, 2018; Hancock & Schaninger, 2020), the gig

economy (Fuller et al., 2020), boundaryless careers (Crowley-Henry, Benson & Al Ariss, 2019), and a shift of responsibility from employers to employees (Al Ariss et al., 2014) are discussed among academics and practitioners. Research on how employees react to talent management therefore provides insights for Human Resource and management practice, especially in today's disruptive environment.

In my consulting role, employees are seen as important stakeholders and as the main target group of talent management. There is quite some professional talk about concepts like *employee experience* and *candidate journey* (e.g. Maurer, 2021), all of which emphasize the focus on (potential) employees. However, at the same time I perceive employees to be attributed the role of "passive recipients" of talent management, who are addressed and managed by change initiatives. I therefore identify an ambivalence between employee attributions of passivity and the simultaneous focus on employees as a main target group of talent management in my daily work. In this process, I have started to question how employees make sense of talent management, and what this implies for Human Resource and management practice. What do talent management meanings and identity mechanisms of employees reveal if we listen and take them into account?

The research contributes to literature by exploring the under-examined area of talent management and identity. It looks at how employees create talent management meanings, and construct identity in the light of talent management. In particular, the work focuses on inclusive talent management (Al Ariss et al., 2014), which takes into account all or the majority of employees, and regards talents as strengths (Swailes, Downs & Orr, 2014). In doing so, it offers a more independent view of talent status (Bonneton et al., 2020; De Boeck et al., 2018; Swailes & Blackburn, 2016), which describes whether an individual is formally identified as talent or not by an organization (De Boeck et al., 2018).

This is therefore the first study that unpacks the relationship between identity and inclusive talent management. Existing work on high potentials and identity construction in an exclusive talent environment (Kirk, 2016, 2019, 2020; Tansley & Tietze, 2013; Dubouloy, 2004) is currently difficult to place in the prevalent positive paradigm of talent management. This research therefore answers the call from De Boeck et al. (2018) to explore the interplay of talent management and identity to gain a deeper understanding of the "dark side" of talent management. Taking context into account (Tansley, Kirk & Tietze, 2013), the work gives voice to employee views in smaller organizations in the German-speaking area (Festing, Schäfer & Scullion, 2013; Meyers, van Woerkom, Paauwe & Dries, 2020). In doing so, the

thesis answers the call for more research at the employee level in smaller organizations (Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016).

Summarizing the previous paragraphs, the central drivers of this research question *How do employees perceive talent (management) to form identity?* and *How do employees make sense of inclusive talent (management)?*.

1.2 Self-knowledge and my theoretical perspective

This section shows where I am coming from as my background and theoretical perspective influence this hermeneutic study (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018) and explain why I am interested in the research area. I sketch my life history in the context of identity, reflection and talent management, while philosophical considerations and further reflections follow in Chapter 3.

My siblings and I grew up at the border between Germany and Austria – living in Germany, going to school in Austria, having grandparents in both countries. We would quarrel about whether we were half-German and half-Austrian, or whole-German and whole-Austrian, as we had two passports. When the border practically ceased to exist in 1997 due to the Schengen Agreement, towns and people on both sides grew even closer together. Already at an early age, this situation led me to reflect on who I am, what shapes me and how I want others to see me. At the same time, I was struggling to come to terms with who or what I belong to. I have always loved writing stories and when I was younger and spent more time on doing just that, identity would regularly surface as a popular scheme. This possibly explains why I am naturally interested in all kinds of narratives, tales, everyday encounters and in seeing the world through another person's perspective. Reflecting on writings of my teenage years, I believed at that time that belonging to a social group is irrevocably connected to a certain identity template. As a young adult, I would spend many years abroad starting to question the social groups I belonged to and the truths we shared. In this process, my view on identity developed towards being more independent of social groups. Identity construction has become a personal and agentive exercise for me where I negotiate internal and external views of myself (Watson, 2008). By being able to choose from a variety of discourses in this world, I assume a rather positive and optimist view of identity formation (Alvesson, 2010).

Becoming independent, I would spend ten to eleven months a year during university in other countries than home, enjoying the excitement and the speed of diving into new experiences, cultures and languages. Part of the reason to choose consulting after school was the promise to keep travelling, to keep up the excitement and the speed, and to never stop and think about what was happening. At that point, I perceived this consciously chosen ignorance to help me in life: through independence of social groups and little need for disclosing the "real me", I was able to concentrate on positive thoughts and on things that made me happy. If you asked others, both co-workers and friends, they would probably associate the words positive, friendly and helpful, quick and "just goes for it" with me, among other descriptions. However, when I started the DBA program with the intention to continue running at full speed and merely putting something on top, I was suddenly brought to a halt. The acquaintance with the concepts of reflection and reflexivity was "love at first sight". Naturally, this did not fit well with my "fast" life – but I did enjoy this change of perspective. This was the start of a journey, definitely not at full speed, but with many breaks to think and reflect.

While my role in talent management consulting mainly focuses on reaching managerial and organizational objectives, I let the direction of the research project evolve towards an employee-centered piece. The individual level of analysis is in line with existing work that points out the personal nature of talent management perceptions (De Boeck et al., 2018) and identity formation (Watson, 2008). Embarking on the doctoral journey, I take the chance to challenge my own a priori assumptions. This is why the work with the respondents explores individual experiences, feelings and considerations. The research area for the thesis mirrors the development of my mindset from "putting something on top" to investing in meaningful work. The interruption from full speed at work raises a number of questions on the purpose of my job. I feel the urge to understand what is happening to people at the receiving end of talent management; how do they create talent management meanings? And what implications do they perceive? For me as a professional, the driver of this research is therefore to develop an understanding of how employees make sense of talent management and to what extent it actually concerns them.

Reflecting further on my own experiences with talent management, I was surprised by the shared utilitarian understanding (Thunnissen, 2016) when I started my consulting job with rather clear expectations of the world of work. I realized that I may have to adjust and learn the "rules of the game" in order to succeed. But then, what do I want to sacrifice for success? I feel that something in my own understanding does not quite fit to my experiences in the

world of work. According to Goffman (1972), people encounter rules in a variety of situations, which might only start a socialization process for some individuals, while it might be easier for others to adhere to the code of conduct and to ultimately internalize it. I can relate well to this concept and feel that, based on my group experiences as a young adult, I am rather careful when I feel expectations from others. I experience a tension between adherence, adaptation and authenticity. In my daily work and as I advance along a career path, I increasingly become aware of unwritten rules, unvoiced expectations and of informal ways of "how it works". I often face the choice of whether to be authentic or to conform to formal and informal organizational rules. Sometimes, I even feel torn between the desire for authenticity and the pressure to conform and "play the game". I then put my mask on and act (Goffman, 1959). Hochschild (2012) introduces that the longer and the more rewarding the employment, the relationship between the self and the employment gets more complicated: corporate feeling rules then separate the individual from self-awareness and the rules of conduct become more natural and internalized. How do these considerations interplay with talent and talent management? Embarking on a journey to explore the interplay of conformity and agency in talent and talent management, I seek to further develop as a person and as a professional, and I set out to derive recommendations for Human Resource and management practice.

I therefore strive to open-mindedly explore how people construct identity in an organizational environment (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). To understand how individuals make sense of talent and talent management, I seek to grasp their ways of perceiving reality (Kant, 1781). Believing that the world is given meaning through our own notion of self, language, beliefs, values and cognitive processes, I acknowledge that subjectivity exists and recognize it throughout the research process. Therefore, I set out on a hermeneutic journey which leads me to a fluid and reflexive approach to research (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018), with hermeneutics being the study of interpretation (Heidegger, 1927).

I choose this pathway driven by curiosity of the unexpected and by passion to gain insights on talent, talent management and identity issues. Acknowledging that reflection and reflexivity of the researcher are essential in a hermeneutic exploration (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018), I continuously reflect on my own assumptions, experiences and perceptions throughout the work. It is important to transparently recognize at this point that the respondents and I engage in mutual sense-making. The reader is therefore entitled to put him or herself into my shoes to be involved in meaning creation processes, too. Being

fully engaged in collecting, exploring and interpreting the texts, the thesis does not only offer insights into the research area but also mirrors my personal and professional development.

In conclusion, my passion for the research comes from both, my professional background at the receiving and giving end of talent management, and my attraction to reflexive practice. Being fascinated by the research area, I question how the personal sense-making of talent management and the degree of authenticity and conformity are interrelated, and if at all. This leads me to explore the interplay between talent, talent management and identity. I therefore engage with a research topic that goes beyond the surface and adds value to my own development, and to my professional practice. Despite ups and downs, more confusing and clearer moments of the upcoming years, I settle on a research area that is very important to me and personally affects me, and which will continue to do so over the whole course of the journey.

1.3   Research objectives and structure

Having explored the practical, theoretical and personal drivers of this research, and the trains of thought that have led me to embark on this journey, the remainder of this chapter presents the objectives of the study and how the thesis is organized. The research objectives are as follows:

- RO1: To explore self and social-identities with regards to talent (management)
- RO2: To explore talent (management) as a means to encourage individual agency or exercise identity control
- RO3: To explore how employees make sense of organizational discourses of inclusive talent (management)
- RO4: To provide recommendations for Human Resource and management practice.

The hermeneutic circle (Gummesson, 2000) begins with pre understanding and first thoughts that flow into the research set up and an exploration of the phenomenon. The iterative approach of exploration, interpretation and engagement with existing work is mirrored by the research structure, which is detailed as follows.

In the subsequent Chapter 2, *Initial review of literature*, I develop pre understanding from existing work. This chapter explores core concepts of identity construction and identity in the workplace. Next, I introduce talent management and look at tensions and contemporary issues in the field. Then, I outline the importance and nature of employee reactions to talent

management. From my pre understanding, I reflect on the research objectives and create an initial conceptual framework which I use in Chapter 3 to take decisions on the research design and techniques. It is important to note at this point that initial work with the respondents changes the talent definition for this research project: Whilst I set out to explore how individuals make sense of organizational *talent management* (which is also mirrored by discussions in Chapter 2), I change the wording to *talent (management)* to refer to both, talent and talent management, later on. As part of my methodological choice, I let the individuals steer the research direction and adapt the research aims and questions in hindsight to include the personal notion of talent as well.

In the story of *My research journey* in Chapter 3, I describe my approach to the study: I reflect on philosophical, methodological and method-related considerations and how I respond to difficulties that I encounter in the process. I try to bring to life how I experience the field work, how I develop my skillset further, and how I take decisions on the research process upon reflecting on the pilot studies. I then share my approach of exploring, interpreting and discussing the texts engaging in a hermeneutic circle.

Chapter 4 aims at *Exploring the texts* free from other dominant narratives. All data from my research project, be it interviews, diary entries and ad-hoc phone conversations, is called text and translated from German to English, before it is included in this chapter. I go through various circles of reading, considering, reflecting and interpreting (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018) and develop, contrast and revise themes that arise from the texts.

In Chapter 5, I enter into a *Critical discussion*. In doing so, I develop an understanding from the texts, existing literature and from my own reflections on the themes and on my role as a researcher. I introduce the final conceptual framework and compare it with my initial considerations. I then discuss existing talent management concepts as well as the role of the self, agency and discipline in talent (management).

In Chapter 6, *Conclusions and personal reflections,* I paint a broader picture of the implications of my study by linking its findings back to the more general issues in the field. Returning to the initial design of the research project, I address its aims, objectives and key drivers. Then, I consider the strengths and limitations of the study, which leads me to elaborate on potential areas for future research. Theoretical and practical contributions are discussed, of which the latter also includes my own professional practice. I conclude the final chapter with personal reflections.

2 Initial review of literature

This chapter consists of two parts and explores how existing work informs my understanding of the research area. The first part studies previous literature on how individuals form identity in the workplace. The subsequent part explores existing work on talent management. It especially focuses on the importance of context, contemporary issues and tensions in the field. By exploring employee reactions to talent management, it also gives a synopsis of previous research on identity. Based on self-knowledge and initial reflections, Figure 1 illustrates the areas of knowledge to be included in this chapter.
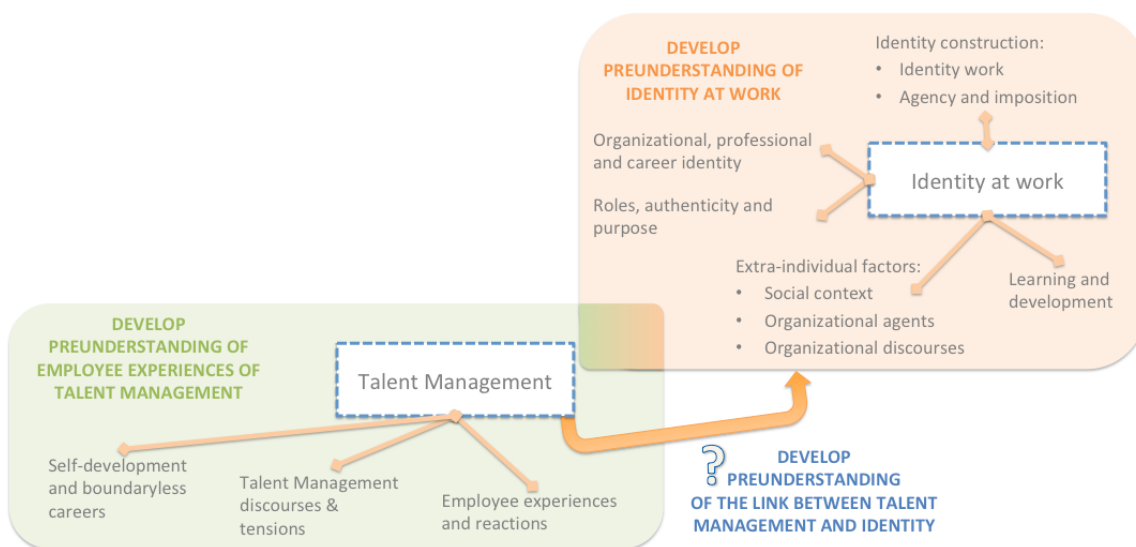
Figure 1: Develop pre understanding from previous work, created by author (2018)

The literature review mirrors how I develop pre understanding of the research area. I search for the keywords presented in Figure 1 in the online university library. I develop themes from previous research, which results in the areas discussed in the literature review. After each part of the chapter, I decide on how to define relevant concepts for the remainder of the research journey. Based on existing work, I discuss thoughts and implications for the study, which is mirrored by the conceptual development of the initial framework. Whilst this is not a search for supporting literature of my self-knowledge, the review of previous work informs my initial research ideas and situates them in the context of research. Through this, I seek to enhance my understanding of the research area.

2.1 Identity and identity formation

This is the first of two parts of the literature review. It seeks to develop an understanding of identity and identity construction. In particular, it looks at the nature of human identity, agentive and regulated identity formation processes, and specific aspects of identity construction in the workplace. At the end of this part of the literature review, I use emerging concepts to develop a conceptual framework for the research.

2.1.1 The nature of human identity

This section explores the components of human identity by engaging with previous research on self-identity and social-identities. On my journey to explore the meaning of identity, existing work indicates that the research area is diverse and has been studied from various philosophical angles (Brown, 2018). Pointing out the complexity of the phenomenon, Kärreman and Alvesson (2001) view identity "as a dynamic, multi-layered set of meaningful elements deployed to orientate and position one's being-in-the- world" (p. 64). Another reason for the multifaceted notion of identity can possibly arise from identities to be rather emergent and in motion than stable (Alvesson, Ashcraft & Thomas, 2008).

As shown in Figure 2, Watson (2008) regards self-identity and social-identities as interrelated parts of human identity. On the one hand, self-identity refers to the internal notion of who or what an individual is (Watson, 2008) and to "unique personal attributes" (Alvesson et al., 2008, p.10). On the other hand, social-identities are external "cultural, discursive or institutional notions of who or what an individual might be" (Watson, 2008, p. 131).
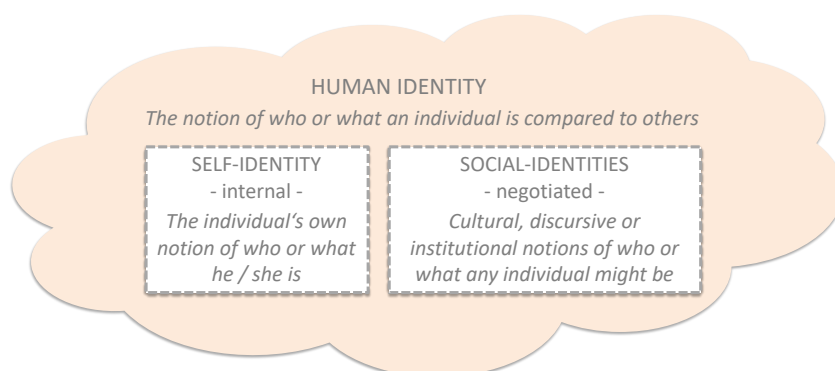
Figure 2: Components of human identity, adapted from Watson (2012)

It is important at this point to differentiate between social identity theory and Watson's (2008) conceptualization of social-identities: On the one hand, social identity theory describes the membership to a group, where individuals are emotionally attached and perceive themselves as group members (Alvesson et al., 2008). On the other hand, Watson (2008) makes sense of social-identities as a link between self-identity and available discourses. Whereas social identity theory regards the self to contain two separate aspects, i.e. personal identity and one or more social identities (Ashford & Mael, 1989), Watson (2008) conceptualizes social-identities as external notions, as a "cultural phenomenon" and as "inputs" into self-identity (p. 131). Watson (2008, p. 131) identifies five types of social-identities, while the content of the categories might overlap:

- Social-category, such as class, gender, nationality or ethnicity
- Formal-role, such as occupation, rank or citizenship
- Local-organizational, such as a Boots pharmacist or an old-style Nottingham professor
- Local-personal, this is how various other people characterize an individual; for example, life and soul of the office party or the office clown
- Cultural-stereotype, such as a devoted mother or a boring tax advisor

For this research, I adopt Watson's (2008) view of the relationship of available discourses and identity formation in the form of a three-step-process (p. 128). He makes sense of discourses to be personified in social-identities of an individual, which "makes them meaningful, accessible, and appealing or unappealing to the individual, and in a way the abstractions of a discourse could not" (p. 129). Because there are so many different and partly opposing discourses available to individuals (Giddens, 1991), Sennett (1998) explores the danger of losing one's sustainable identity in a world full of instability, turbulence and ambiguity. In contrast, Giddens (1991) sees opportunities for shaping the environment because individuals are not only shaped by phenomena in their respective context, but also play an active role and can therefore influence their environment. Based on my experience in the workplace and at university, I feel that people are overwhelmed by the number of discourses they can choose from. I perceive that some face this phenomenon with a positive and optimistic attitude (Alvesson, 2010) possibly in line with Giddens (1991) while others perceive it as burdensome possibly in agreement with Sennett (1998). Therefore, I question whether a positive or negative perception of the number of available discourses is a rather personal notion, predominately depending on the individual.

Based on the discussions of this section, I question how talent management discourses possibly affect self-identity and social-identities. I am particularly interested in whether the extent of the influence tends to be similar among all social-identity categories or whether there might be noticeable variations. Further, do individuals perceive talent management discourses as rather positive or rather burdensome?

2.1.2 Imposition and choice in identity construction

Having discussed the nature of human identity, this section now explores individual agency and identity regulation in identity formation processes. It aims at unpacking how we cope with discourses and construct identity in this world. Watson (2012) shows that social-identities in private and corporate life are likely to differ from each other and can even assume conflicting positions. Exploring the reasons for that, I begin to make sense of identity formation as an interplay of active and passive mechanisms. On the one hand, Giddens' (1979) theory of structuration makes sense of rules and resources as "properties of social systems" (p. 66) which enforce structure. On the other hand, a person might voluntarily choose identity options, which then starts an identity construction process (Watson, 2012). Human agency or action describes continuous practices conducted by an actor and needs to be looked at within the dimension of time and the "incorporation of power as integral to the constitution of social practices" (Giddens, 1979, p. 54). Exploring this notion further, Luckmann (2008) argues that individuals can pose as actors and exercise control over how they work on identities. For example, Brown and Toyoki (2013) look at prisoners who actively construct a version of who they are and who they want to be, which often depends on the context in which they find themselves.

In conclusion, it appears from the literature that identity formation takes place in an interplay of imposition and choice. It is influenced by a person's cultural, discursive and institutional environment (Watson, 2008) and by individual agency. Giddens (1991) analyzes that new mechanisms of identity have emerged wherein individuals "shape and are shaped by institutions of modernity" (p. 2). When reflecting on the role of human agency and structure in identity formation, Giddens (1979) states "notions of action and structure presuppose one another" (p. 53). Boussebaa and Brown (2017) also find that both, individual agency and imposition influence how people construct identity. The first engagement with previous research leads me to question whether individuals perceive talent management to rather impose identities or to encourage voluntary choice and action.

2.1.3 Individual agency in the form of identity work

While later discussions focus on identity control, this section now develops the phenomenon of individual choice further. It looks at rather agentive aspects of identity formation by drawing on the concept of identity work.

Goffman (1959) explores the individual sense-making of the self to be based on two factors. It comes out of an existing understanding of who a person is as well as out of interaction with others. A large and growing body of literature therefore investigates the notion of identity work (e.g. Alvesson et al., 2008; Brown, 2017; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Watson, 2008). Alvesson et al. (2008) suggest that identity work is used as an instrument for individuals to shape identity, and to position themselves in the midst of various available discourses. Watson (2008) also defines identity work in the context of multiple discourses but conceptualizes it in the light of self-identity and social-identities (also see Section 2.1.1). It is therefore "the mutually constitutive process in which people strive to shape a relatively coherent and distinctive notion of personal self-identity and struggle to come to terms with and, within limits, to influence the various social-identities which pertain to them in the various milieux in which they live their lives" (Watson, 2008, p. 129). In the process of identity work, individuals form, reinforce, reject and revise identity (Alvesson et al., 2008; Brown, 2017; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Watson, 2008). Identity work is often described as the agentive aspect of identity formation (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Watson, 2008).

The majority of researchers makes sense of identity to be socially constructed mostly through the use of language in a person's social environment (Brown, 2018). In addition to identity work in the form of talk, dramaturgical performances are also seen as a way to construct and negotiate identity (e.g. Down & Reveley, 2009; Goffman, 1990). In detail, McAuley, Duberley and Johnson (2014) describe the notion of self as a metaphor for acting – as a "dramatic artful creation" (p. 327) – within symbolic interactionism. With regards to time, identity work is seen as a continuous and ongoing process of negotiation (Alvesson et al., 2008). However, previous work introduces a number of situations where individuals are especially encouraged to engage in identity work:

- Stressful events or challenging times in life (Ibarra, 1999)
- Periods of structural change, upheaval and insecurity (Giddens, 1984)
- A perceived discrepancy between a person's understanding of self and the desired state of being which is based on discourses (Alvesson et al., 2008)

- Experiences with other individuals that challenge the understanding of the self (Alvesson, & Willmott, 2002).

Based on previous work, I understand interaction as an essential social process and as a platform for identity formation. Because existing literature informs my pre understanding of the agentive aspects of identity construction, I wonder about the interplay of talent management and individual agency. Will one or more of the aspects that increase the need for identity work reemerge in the findings of the research?

2.1.4 Extra-individual forces of identity formation in the workplace

Having discussed the more agentive perspective on identity construction, this section now looks at the mechanisms of identity regulation. As the focus lies on identity issues in the workplace, I use Alvesson et al.'s (2008) structure of three "extra-individual forces" (p. 18) for this section. In detail, the upcoming discussion focuses on organizational agents, organizational discourses, and cultural concerns.

Organizational agents can refer to both, elite groups like managers and professionals, or associated procedures, such as accounting systems or career paths (Alvesson et al., 2008). The powerful role of managers as organizational agents is pointed out by Deetz (1995). He argues that "the modern business of management is often managing the "insides" – the hopes, fears and aspirations – of workers, rather than their behaviors directly" (p. 87). When organizational agents exercise a sort of "management of meaning", leadership can become an integral aspect of managing identity (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). However, identities of individuals might "only partly or temporarily regulated by management-driven or other group-controlled processes of regulation" (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002, p. 637) because there are many discourses available to them. However, research on identity regulation does not only explore the social domination of identities through organizational agents but also looks at employee reactions to organizational control (Alvesson et al., 2008): While some people perceive identity control as supportive due to reduced ambiguity and anxiety in the workplace, others view regulatory practices as rather restrictive (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). In detail, they experience the organization to have a strong hold over their lives (Deetz, 1992), which leaves limited possibility for reflection (Alvesson & Willmott, 2012).

Organizational discourses are narratives about strategy, leadership, teams, professionalism or entrepreneurship on the organizational level that can provide a foundation for individual identity construction (Alvesson et al., 2008). Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) describe discourse as a way of logic that incorporates a certain language. In doing so, it creates a version of the social world. Multiple discourses can co-exist within an organization and both, encourage and restrain identity work of individuals. Alvesson and Kärreman (2000) explore two different perspectives on discourses. On the one hand, discourses can be seen to have a rather independent relationship with meaning creation. And on the other hand, discourses can work as a "structuring, constituting force, directly implying or tightly framing subjectivity, practice and meaning" (p. 1145).

Societal/cultural discourses or institutionalized cultural patterns offer templates for self-categorization (Alvesson et al., 2008). Existing work suggests that a person's social context has significant effects on identity construction (Alvesson et al., 2008; Sennett, 1998). This leads back to discussions on the number of different and partly opposing discourses in the modern world (Giddens, 1991) and its consequences for individuals (Giddens, 1991; Sennett, 1998).

In conclusion, the extent to which "extra-individual forces" (Alvesson et al., 2008, p. 18) influence identity formation varies considerably. This possibly suggests that identity processes primarily depend on the person who is concerned. From previous work, I get the confidence to proceed further with the individual level of analysis for this study. Because existing literature informs my views on the controlled aspects of identity formation, I seek to develop an understanding of identity regulation and talent management. Which extra-individual forces play a role in talent management and identity issues, if any? And how do employees react to control in talent management? Do they perceive it as supportive or restrictive, or to encourage or restrain identity work?

2.1.5 Identity issues in the workplace

After discussing individual agency and identity regulation, this section now explores further aspects of identity construction in the workplace. In detail, I look at seven different identity issues: role making and role taking; attributing competence; self-awareness; belonging to a group; authenticity; training and development; and purpose.

Role making and role taking

At first, I explore how discourses and rules of conduct influence role making and role taking behavior in an organizational context. Out of a variety of discourses, people choose one or more of them to develop personas. Employees construct identity by choosing discourses on the one hand, and by discourses being imposed on them on the other hand (Watson, 2012). They experience an interplay of action and structure (Giddens, 1979) in the workplace. Previous research introduces the example of the manager role (Watson, 2008). As shown in Figure 3, an individual takes into account available discourses for social-identities. Watson (2008) suggests exploring in how far people then engage in identity work to internalize social-identities into self-identity. The degree of identity formation based on socially available discourses can vary from person to person. At the same time, an individual influences social-identities based on the notion of self (Watson, 2008). To account for these complex relationships, Watson (2008) recommends employing a conceptual apparatus to "appreciate the interplay between public and private identities – the dialectic between the internal and the external aspects of identity work" (p. 129).
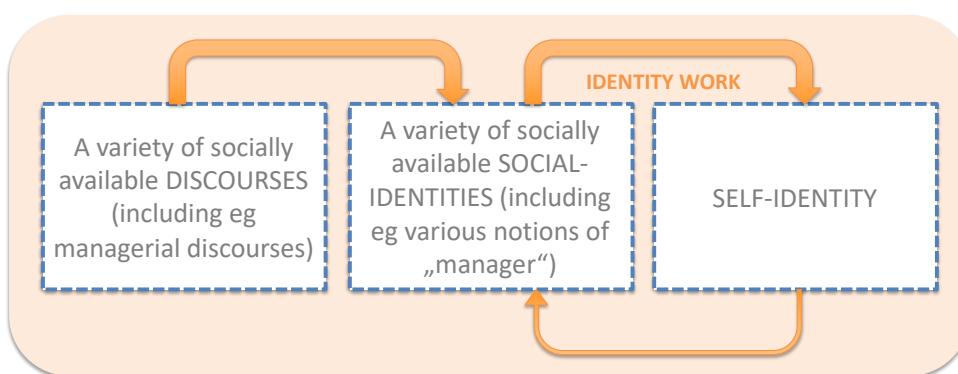
Figure 3: The interplay of self-identity, social-identities and discourses, adapted from Watson (2008)

I perceive the process of stepping into one's role at work to be easier and less time-consuming for some individuals while it seems more difficult and take longer for others. Goffman (1972) describes that some people can effortlessly adhere to the rules of conduct, or structure (Giddens, 1979), that are present in the social environment they encounter. In detail, the rules of conduct then become part of an individual's common sense, which might ultimately lead to internalizing them into the self-image (Goffman, 1972). In comparison, the rules of conduct might merely set off a starting process of socialization for others.

Attributing competence

As a second concept on identity in the workplace, which is directly related to roles, I introduce attributing competence. McAuley (1994) explores that the reward of successfully negotiating one's role at work is being perceived as competent by the organization. In this sense, negotiation can mean both, adhering to role expectations or actively defining one's role. This again takes into account control and agency to shape identity. It is interesting that Watson (2012) argues that identity work especially takes place when individuals feel responsible for being successful in their work life. To be attributed competence by others, individuals use impression management and control perceptions of their audience through that. However, the audience listens and watches, thereby deciding whether to trust an individual's performance and whether it is the real "you" (Goffman, 1959). Regarding future selves, individuals might wish to manage the own image for a specific new role in the future. Seeking to mirror the norms required for this position they might do so by applying "aspirational control" (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007, p. 721). An interesting notion in this context is also the concept of identity play, developed by Ibarra and Petriglieri (2010): complementary to identity work, identity play refers to the process individuals go through when they develop possible future selves. Identity play helps them to try out future possibilities that might be attractive to them (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010).

Self-awareness

The third concept of this section is self-awareness which enables people to analyze feelings and knowledge. It is therefore not only a key skill for reflection (Atkins & Murphy, 1993) but also influences the way individuals form identity when they realize that there is an inconsistency between the ideal self and the self-as-is (Adams & Marshall, 1996). Mead (1934) divides the notion of self between the spontaneous and uncontrolled "I" and the reflective, directing and controlling "me". Cooper and Thatcher (2010) introduce that individuals generally want to strengthen a self-concept that mirrors how they see

themselves. At the same time, Hochschild (2012) raises the danger of separating an individual from self-awareness: in detail, she argues in her work that the longer and the more rewarding the employment, corporate "feeling rules" alienate the individual from self-awareness and the rules of conduct become more natural and internalized.

Belonging to a group

The fourth concept that might or might not influence the notion of personal identity at work in the context of talent management is group belonging. While individuals like to be unique in their identity they still long to belong to others: Adams and Marshall (1996) explore the continuous formation of human identity as a contradiction between agency and communion.

Authenticity

As a fifth concept on identity issues in the workplace, I explore authenticity. Authenticity can be assigned a variety of meanings and it can be explored from multiple perspectives. The most suitable definition for this research context is that something is called authentic because it is true or the essence of something (Leeuwen, 2001). In that sense, the self is one essence which is "construed as a constant and unified character, which at best slowly evolves or matures" (p. 393). Heidegger (1962) argues that authenticity is additionally also connected to being loyal to one's past.

In the context of employee reactions, literature on positive psychology and strengths suggests that positive feelings like high energy, intrinsic motivation and also authenticity arise from being able to use individual strengths in the workplace (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). In the context of talent management, Dubouloy (2004) explores that people tend to develop "false selves" (p. 468) in an insecure environment. He comments on the notion of conformity: "Companies need creative and autonomous managers. Nevertheless, we have seen how frequently those who aspire to these positions are over-adapted, drawn into a behavior pattern that conforms to their immediate environment" (p. 491).

Authenticity and "false selves" in training and development

Because Dubouloy's (2004) study is one out of only a few on identity and talent management, I explore it in detail. The sixth concept of identity in the workplace therefore evolves around authenticity in training and development. Researching identity construction of high potentials, Dubouloy (2004) explores the dynamic interplay between managers, their workplace and training. Some managers tend to develop "false selves" (p. 468) with conformist behavior as a means to protect themselves against their insecure environment. In detail, they use "false selves" as a defense mechanism and as a way to pretend it is still them, even though they feel doubts about their role and themselves (Dubouloy, 2004). In this context of the "false self", training courses that focus on collective coaching help the participants of Dubouloy's (2004) study to rediscover their needs and true selves (i.e. with regards to originality, creativity and the ability to innovate). For that, individuals need transitional space (Dubouloy, 2004) that enables them to experiment, to be open and to confront others, to produce meaning and to understand the self and the world (Ibarra, 2002). The aim of the training course is to teach skills, but the course rather enables the participants to question conformity and their fantasy of the reality (expressed through "false selves") (Dubouloy, 2004). In conclusion, training can create the necessary transitional space when the following conditions are met: the training must provide a secure environment where experiences can be tried out and identity construction is allowed (Dubouloy, 2004). In comparison to the external training program of this study, I wonder whether individuals would experience a training held within the own organization similarly.

Purpose

The seventh concept on identity in the workplace explores the notion of purpose. Gini (1992) argues that Descartes (1637) was wrong: "It isn't Cogito ergo sum, but, rather, Laboro ergo sum. We need work, and as adults we find identity and are identified by the work we do" (p. 714). Gini (1992) explores the nature of work and its influence on identity formation. As a conclusion, many employees cannot see the purpose behind the work they do (Gini, 1992). Reflecting on my own subjective experiences at work, the notion of employer branding has gained importance over the last years. Organizations shape their employer brand in order to attract and recruit candidates and to retain employees.

In conclusion, this section develops seven concepts of identity at work. I wonder whether they will reappear in the context of talent management during the work with the respondents.

2.1.6 Career identity and organizational identification

The previous sections explore the nature and complexity of identities and look at specific concepts of identity construction in the workplace. Acknowledging that multiple identities can be held at the same time (Watson, 2008), I develop this argument further by looking at Ashforth, Joshi, Anand and O'Leary-Kelly's (2013) work. They find that individuals can simultaneously identify with both, a career and an organization. In this section I therefore explore the broader concepts of career identity and organizational identity.

Career identity – a way to position oneself independent of an organization?

Fugate, Kinicki and Ashforth (2004) observe that the stable and traditional concept of careers has been increasingly exchanged for uncertain and blurry career boundaries since the 1990s. During this transition, the responsibility for managing an individual's career has shifted from employer to employee. In contrast to professional or organizational identity, career identity is not tied to a specific role or organization. It therefore derives its meaning from the entirety of an individual's working life and is considered essential in helping individuals to deal with complex and shifting boundaries of careers (Fugate et al., 2004).

Boundaryless careers appear as a strong concept of the "new" career. It is related to multi-employer careers or careers that are not focused on advancement (LaPointe, 2010). With regards to age groups, Maxwell, Ogden and Broadbridge (2010) point out that younger employees in Generation Y have different priorities when it comes to their careers and are therefore more likely to engage in actively planning their own careers. The benefit of boundaryless careers for an individual concerns a variety of factors: it usually involves working for a range of organizations in order to learn and to be independent from traditional career expectations (Lochab & Mor, 2013). Focusing on identity, Richardson (2000) argues that the boundaryless careers concept impacts identity in two ways: First, it conceptualizes career as an outcome of individual talent and second, employment becomes a primary source of identity formation for those individuals concerned. DeFillippi and Arthur (1996) explore that identity in the boundary careers context is independent from the employer. For example, a person would say "I am a software developer" instead of "I work for Microsoft" (p. 124).

Regarding career identity construction, LaPointe (2010) argues that the phenomenon of career identity requires continuous reflexivity (Giddens, 1991) and identity work (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Watson, 2008). Career identity is therefore conceptualized as "co-constructed, socially situated and performed in interaction" (LaPointe, 2010, p. 77). By talking about careers, individuals draw on the career concept to position themselves and construct identity (LaPointe, 2010). Coupland (2004) also explores the relationship between individuals and organizations. In particular, the research looks at how graduate trainees talk about the concept of careers. Career is constructed as a way to describe an individual's working life, constantly being (re)negotiated through talk with others. Coupland (2004) regards career and identity to be interrelated as each of the two contributes to a plausible version of the other. Various experiences can then cause a change in identity during the course of a person's career (Barley, 1989). Examples for such experiences are how people present themselves to others, how they interact with others and how they are treated by others.

Organizational identification – a socialization process?

In contrast to career identity, organizational identity is tied to an organization (Fugate et al., 2004). In organizational research, social identity theory explores how an individual positions the self and others in social group categories, such as in organizations. An example is organizational identification which can be understood as a form of social identity (Fugate et al., 2004). It is interesting that identity studies at the organizational level explore how individuals perceive organizational identification; that is, the level of analysis is also the individual and only in rare cases the organization (Alvesson et al., 2008). Ashcraft and Alvesson (2007) explore that multiple meanings of *organization* co-exist. Individuals construct *organization* differently (Ashcraft & Alvesson, 2007) which implies that *organization* means different things to different people, even if they work at the same company. Further, although organizational identification can play a significant role in individual identity construction, other organizational components like for example a person's department, work group, age cohort, gender or profession can also serve as sources for identification (Alvesson et al., 2008). In detail, organizational identity is a form of social identity, as it answers the question "Who am I?" (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). This being said, studies of organizational identification predominately use social identity theory to explore how individuals understand and position themselves in a group or out of a group (Alvesson et al., 2008).

With regards to employee reactions, social identification with the organization is attributed to create commitment, loyalty and motivation (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). According to Alvesson and Robertson (2006), organizational identity can be constructed through different strategies and impacts employee behavior and sense of self. Further, Ashforth and Mael (1989) explore that the notions of organizational socialization, role conflict and intergroup relations are directly connected to organizational identification. With regards to organizational identity construction, people begin to change when old perspectives cannot be aligned with new situations (McAuley et al., 2014). The self adapts when situations change, and it stays relatively stable when situations are stable (Becker, 1977). Becker (1977) argues that, as all organizations are socializing agencies, an individual is always subject to re-socialization, which happens independent of age. The phenomenon of socialization into an organization or profession can be studied by exploring two elementary questions (Becker, 1977; McAuley et al., 2014):

1. In which overt and covert situations does a socializing institution place an employee? What kinds of responses and expectations do individuals find in these situations, and in how far do they internalize them?
2. What is happening to a person when going through a socialization process? What meaning do individuals give to situations and in how far do situations fit in? How do the socialization situations fit with the own desire for autonomy and conformity?

In conclusion, I reflect on the discussions and on the potential implications for talent management and identity issues in the workplace. First, previous work understands career to be constantly negotiated through language with others. Career identity is therefore constructed through identity work. Existing literature also indicates that "new" career concepts like boundaryless careers play a significant role for the notion of self. Will "new" career concepts and their relationship with identity come up in the work with the respondents? Second, existing work distinguishes between career identity and organizational identity. While career identity is derived from multiple experiences in one's working life, organizational identity is directly connected with the current organization or components of the same. I wonder whether the interplay of talent management and identity can be explored independent from organizational and career identity. Third, research shows that although individuals develop one or more social identities based on organizational identification, there are also other sources of identification within a corporate context. Which aspects of socialization with regards to talent management will arise from the work with the respondents, if any? And fourth, social identity theory tends to view an individual's

identification with an organization as rather static and an individual's perception of an organization as rather stable (Alvesson et al., 2008). Although the theory is flexible enough to be expanded, Alvesson et al. (2008) describe social identity theory to perform "a major stretching exercise" (p. 14) to offer a model for both, static and more fluid processes of organizational identification. I wonder whether the respondents' perception of organizational talent management will stay stable over the whole research process or whether the image will change due to the reflective nature of the study.

2.1.7 Implications for this study: Part I

The first of two parts of the literature review explores different facets of identity formation. This section summarizes my pre understanding that is informed by previous work. It also reaches conclusions for this research and starts to develop the initial conceptual framework. To begin with, I shortly summarize the main theoretical approaches that I adopt for this research in order to then build the conceptual framework for the research area. Throughout the engagement with literature, I primarily look at social identity theory, identity construction, individual agency and identity regulation (Alvesson et al., 2008). I explore these phenomena from various perspectives in the workplace, such as careers, leadership, roles and learning and development.

To define identity, I make sense of it as a fluid and complex construct that is continuously in motion and negotiated (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2001). While the initial review of existing work leads me to discuss the more socio-psychological social identity theory as well, I decide to use Watson's (2008) conceptualization of human identity for this research. For this study, I define identity to consist of the notion of self and externally negotiated social-identities or personas (Watson, 2008).

From the developed pre understanding of identity construction, I regard this field to look at how individuals form identity. The literature suggests that identity work helps people to construct identity in a social context. They internalize certain aspects of social-identities, whereas the degree to which they engage in identity work varies from person to person (Watson, 2008). Internalizing the rules of conduct for a new role or an organization is also a complex and highly individual process that might include the potential for discomfort. More specifically, existing research explores how individuals continuously create narratives to answer questions on "who am I?" and "who are we?" in the workplace (Alvesson et al., 2008). This helps them to form, reinforce, reject and revise their identities (Alvesson et al.,

2008; Brown, 2017; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Watson, 2012). Further, previous work also explores identity formation based on identity regulation. It analyzes how identities are controlled and socially dominated, and how individuals respond to such efforts. They might see corporate regulation of the self as rather helpful or as rather restrictive to shape identity (Alvesson et al., 2008). Identity regulation posits that an individual's identity is controlled (Alvesson et al., 2008). This is in contrast to social identity theory which argues that individuals rather take free decisions on identity mostly with positive outcomes for the organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

The emerging pre understanding has a number of implications for this research. For once, the individual level of analysis that I adopt for this study has been confirmed by previous work (Alvesson et al., 2008) and corresponds to my interest in employee perspectives. Further, I bear the rather agentive concept of identity work in mind and will provide space for the respondents in our conversations. Finally, to analyze how individuals negotiate identity and thereby potentially internalize social-identities into the self in the particular setting of talent management, I use Watson's (2008) social-identity categories. In detail, I focus on three out of five categories because formal-role, local-personal and local-organizational social-identity seem to be most relevant to the research questions. However, I may adapt this conceptualization in case the research findings suggest otherwise.

In conclusion, I am interested in the interplay between talent management and identity and develop first thoughts from the initial review of existing work. Using Watson's (2008) conceptualization of self-identity and social-identity, I set out to develop a deep understanding of the rather agentive or controlling role of talent management in identity formation. The role could be supportive in line with the current positive paradigm on talent management. But it could also be critical or restrictive in line with sporadic voices on the "dark side" of talent management (see the second part of the literature review) and identity regulation.

From the pre understanding of identity literature, I develop the following thoughts for the initial conceptual framework, as shown in Figure 4 below:

- Use of Watson's (2008) social-identities for the field work

- Explore identity work (Alvesson et al., 2008; Brown, 2017; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Watson, 2012) in the context of talent management

- Explore perceived meanings and organizational discourses of talent management

- Explore the role of talent management in forming identity

    o Enforces / does not enforce *identity control*

    o Enables / does not enable *individual agency*

    o Influences / does not influence *role making and role taking*

    o Attributes / does not attribute *competence*

    o Supports / does not support *self-awareness*

    o Creates / does not create *group belonging*

    o Assures / does not assure *authenticity*

    o Provides / does not provide *purpose*
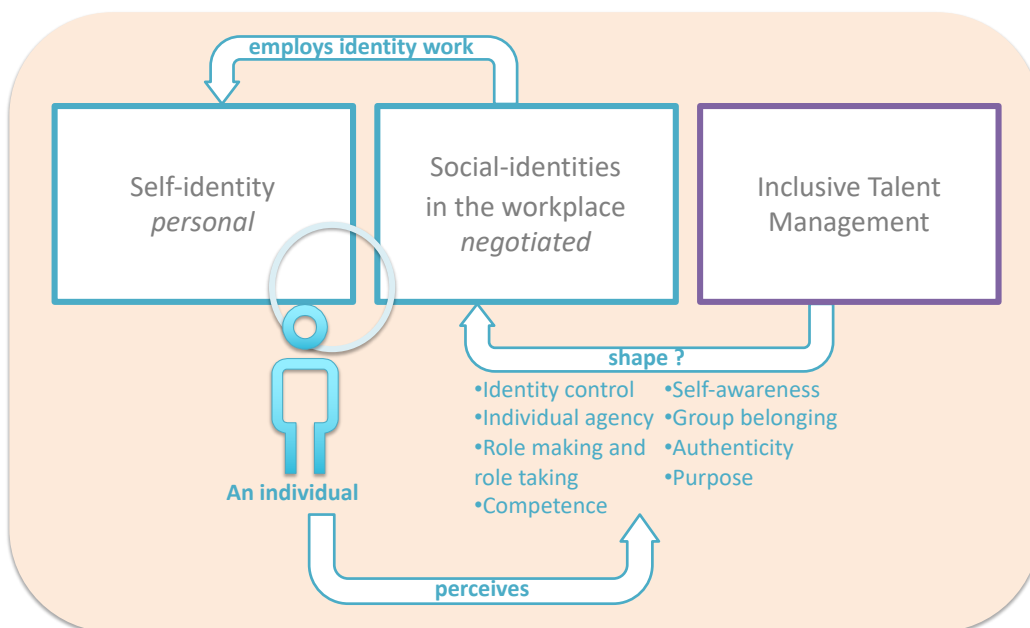
Figure 4: Conceptual framework "talent management and identity" based on Part I of the initial literature review, created by author (2018)

Besides Figure 4, I introduce an additional illustration in order to point out the scope of the research. I use the first research question to display the initial thoughts from identity literature in three different circles, as shown in Figure 5. The green circle adopts Watson's (2008) analysis and explores the interplay of talent management and a person's self-identity and social-identities. In doing so, it corresponds to *RO1: To explore self and social-identities with regards to talent (management)*. Second, the orange circle questions whether identity formation in the context of talent management is perceived as agentive or rather regulated and seeks answers to *RO2: To explore talent (management) as a means to encourage individual agency or exercise identity control*. Third, the blue circle displays further concepts from reviewing existing work on identity, which informs my early research considerations on *RO3: To explore how employees make sense of organizational discourses of inclusive talent (management)*.

RQ1: How do employees perceive talent (management) to form identity?

Group belonging (communion)

Identity control

Purpose

Competence

Self and social-identity
− Formal-role   **RO 1**   **RO 2**   **RO 3**
− Local-organizational
− Local-personal

Self-awareness

Individual agency

Authenticity

Role making and role taking
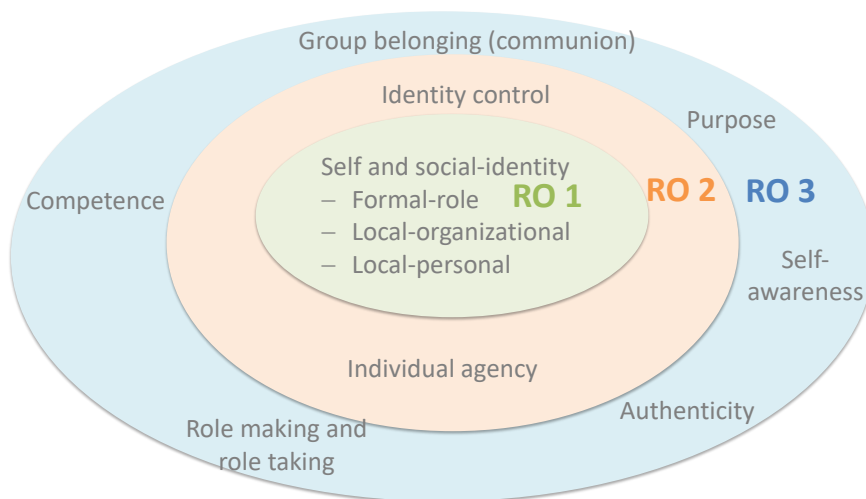
Figure 5: Display of initial concepts from identity literature, created by author (2019)

In summary, I engage with existing work on identity in the first part of the literature review. I explore my early research considerations further and start developing the conceptual framework. In the subsequent part of the literature review, I explore talent management and complete the conceptual framework at the end of the chapter.

2.2   Talent management

This is the second of two parts of the literature review. It seeks to develop pre understanding of talent management. Existing work informs my own position of talent management and the conceptualization I adopt for this research. The following sections reflect on contemporary debates, tensions, considerations of context and employee perspectives of talent management. Subsequently, I explore previous research on talent management and identity issues. At the end of the literature review, I use initial thoughts to further develop the conceptual framework for the research. I also define talent management for this research project in the final section.

2.2.1   Current debates in talent management

This section engages with current debates and thereby introduces talent management. Upon engaging with various organizations through my consulting work, I perceive a general awareness that the nature of work has altered somehow. Here and there, I am alerted by comments about how organizational leaders or Human Resource professionals feel pressured by external forces to introduce some sort of talent management. This subjective observation from my workplace could possibly relate to intense changes in the world, such as demographic changes, the scarcity of talent, a high diversity at work, more remote workers with different attitudes towards work, new methods of working and new collaboration between users and suppliers of talent (Al Ariss et al., 2014; Gallardo-Gallardo, Thunnissen & Scullion, 2020).

Previous research finds that organizations view talented employees as unique resources and believe that an engaged, skilled and motivated workforce is the key for achieving a competitive advantage in the global knowledge economy (Cappelli, 2008; Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016; Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020; Sparrow & Makram, 2015). From the literature, I understand talent management as a means to invest into employees; or to capture, leverage, and protect them (Sparrow & Makram, 2015); or to win, grow and retain them (e.g. Dries, 2013a; Lewis & Heckman, 2006).

Reflecting on this notion, I wonder how people feel when being referred to as human "resource". This could potentially arise from the work with the respondents in the further course of the study. Also, I question whether the "known" talent management is still relevant in the precarious context of today's world of work, in models of new work and in novel career concepts. When I set out to explore existing research, I come across two current issues in

the debate on responsibility in talent management: responsibility for the own career; and talent management in the context of boundaryless careers. I explore these concepts as follows.

Responsibility for the own career

During a period of profound change in my work life in the beginning of 2018, the following sentence left me speechless: "You want to develop? You should have told me!" Reflecting on the situation, I realize that I was expected to voice my needs assuming responsibility for my own development and career aspirations. I acknowledge that the responsibility was passed from my employer to me in this situation. I question whether the transfer of responsibility for the own career and development, and therefore also for (self-)talent management, from the corporate institution to the self is a development in my organization or individual case only. I begin to explore previous work on responsibility in talent management to find out whether it can be observed on a larger dimension. Indeed, Al Ariss et al. (2014) argue that in the future, worker dynamics will shift with employees being more in charge of managing their careers. The talent management function will then provide coaching, customized services, and guidance to enable employees to take on responsibility for their personal development. Further, talent management will also see workers as customers and might therefore apply marketing and supply chain principles (Al Ariss et al., 2014).

Talent management in the context of boundaryless careers

Boundaryless careers are one context where individuals currently already take control over their development and career, which is also discussed in Section 2.1.6 on career identity. Katz and Krueger (2019) show that there has been a "gradual rise in the share of workers in alternative jobs since the early 2000s" (p. 415) with regards to independent contractors and freelancers. 72 per cent of career paths are described as "non-traditional", thereby not following organizational hierarchies (Deloitte, 2018). While the career literature proclaims the traditional career to be outdated, talent management has gained popularity for the last 20 years and still does (Crowley-Henry et al., 2019). Dries, Van Acker and Verbruggen (2012) find in their survey study with 941 respondents that employees in traditional careers are more satisfied with their careers as opposed to people with boundaryless careers. However, Crowley-Henry et al. (2019) argue that talent management must adapt to the changing nature of careers and offer alternatives to employees with both, traditional and boundaryless careers. Talent management must be able to accommodate different career

mindsets. One possible implication of the currently diverging perspectives on talent management and careers is the need for discussing talent management through the lens of "new" work and "new" careers. What can be a sustainable way forward? I return to this discussion in the context of employee reactions to talent management in Section 2.2.7.

From the literature, I conclude that the world is changing, and employer-employee relations are shifting. However, talent management is still relevant for organizations and a rather "hot" topic that attracts academic and practitioner interest (Thunnissen & Gallardo-Gallardo, 2019). In today's context, talent management must consider self-management of personal growth (Meyers & Van Woerkom, 2014), broader inclusion of less-privileged employees (Al Ariss et al., 2014), the relevance of Talent Management (De Boeck et al., 2018; Hancock & Schaninger, 2020), the gig economy (Fuller et al., 2020), boundaryless careers (Crowley-Henry et al., 2019), and a shift of responsibility from employer to employees (Al Ariss et al., 2014).

Despite of that, it is important to note that there are doubts whether empirical talent management research is sufficiently "future proof" (Thunnissen & Gallardo-Gallardo, 2019, p. 178). There is a need to understand more of what happens in practice (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020). I learn that talent management must adapt to the current forces that transform the nature of work, and I wonder if organizational talent management might develop towards self-talent management. Taking in these first concepts, I question whether self-talent management, responsibility and inclusion will arise from the work with the respondents.

2.2.2 Talent management as a multilevel construct

Having explored trends in the field, I now seek to develop an understanding of how to define talent management. It becomes apparent that there is not one specific conceptualization in literature, but rather a variety of sense-making and a lack of clarity in the field (Thunnissen & Gallardo-Gallardo, 2019). Reflecting on encounters at work, I perceive the design of talent management as diverse, be it with regards to overall talent strategy or strategic objectives, be it with regards to target groups or be it with regards to specific talent practices. My subjective observation could possibly be explained by King (2015) who describes talent management as a multilevel phenomenon. To shed light on the complexity and to situate this research on talent management, I use Arthur and Boyles' (2007) construct. Although the conceptualization is initially created for Human Resources, it can also be used for its sub domain (Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016) talent management (De Boeck et al., 2018). Arthur and Boyles (2007, p. 79; p. 84) develop a construct with five different components from a systematic review of literature, as shown in Figure 6 below:

- Talent management principles, such as philosophies (Dries, 2013a), values and norms
- Talent management policies, such as strategies, goals and objectives
- Talent management programs, which are defined formal activities
- Talent management practices, which are how employees and lower-level managers experience and implement talent management programs
- Talent management climate, that is how employees perceive the different components of the talent management construct.
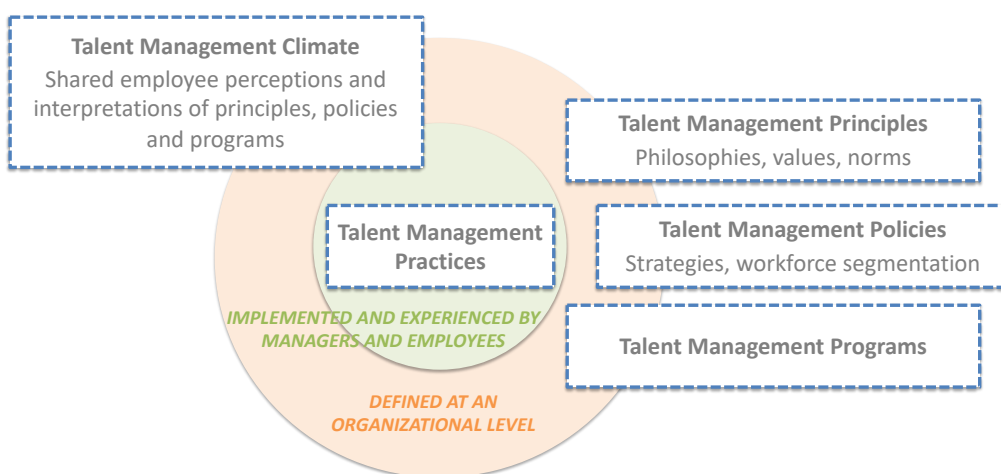
Figure 6: The construct of talent management, adapted from Arthur and Boyles (2007)

In detail, principles, policies and programs are defined by an organization, such as business leaders or Human Resource professionals, whereas practices are carried out and experienced by lower-level managers and employees (Arthur & Boyles, 2007). Arthur and Boyles (2007) find that talent practices have received most attention from literature with regards to employee attitudes until now.

In conclusion, I return to the initial question of this section, that is how to define talent management. The discussion shows that talent management exists in a multilevel construct and takes on a variety of meanings. Arthur and Boyles' (2007) concept informs my pre understanding of talent management and helps me to guide the discussion to follow. To explore the multilevel construct more in depth, I look at talent management philosophy and practices and their interaction in more detail in the upcoming sections.

2.2.3 Talent management philosophy and tensions

Having explored the multilevel and "multi-perspective" nature of talent management, this section looks at talent management philosophy (Dries, 2013a) and talent management principles (Arthur & Boyles, 2007). Figure 7 shows two prevalent tensions in the field of talent management, which are discussed as follows.
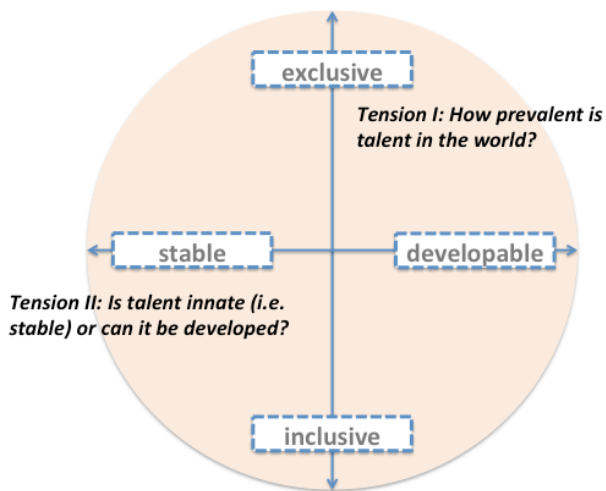
Figure 7: Talent management tensions, adapted from Meyers and van Woerkom (2014) and Dries (2013a)

Tension I: How prevalent is talent in the world?

The differentiation between an inclusive and exclusive understanding of talent is apparent in both, practitioner literature and academia (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014; Meyers et al., 2020). Inclusive talent management scholars argue that all people are talented and possess strengths in different areas while exclusive talent management assumes that some people are more talented than others. Therefore, Thunnissen (2016) compares exclusive talent management with McGregor's theory X reflecting an instrumental and utilitarian perspective. In comparison, the inclusive approach to talent management can be associated with McGregor's theory Y assuming that employees are humans with their own emotions and needs that direct behavior (Thunnissen, 2016). Existing work on inclusive talent management focuses on ethical behavior and justice, thereby criticizing exclusive talent management for its differentiated investment in talents and non-talents (De Boeck et al., 2018).

Exclusive talent management is the dominating paradigm in the research area (Bonneton, Festing, Muratbekova-Touron, 2020) and especially focuses on talent practices of talent identification, talent development and employee retention of one to ten percent of employees (Swailes, Downs, & Orr, 2014). The degree of workforce segmentation describes the extent

to which resources, for example training budget, are distributed unequally among employees. Further, organizations view talented employees as unique resources, central to achieving a sustainable competitive advantage, and use talent management to capture, leverage and protect these resources (Sparrow & Makram, 2015). Exclusive talent management can be described as "an integrated set of processes, programs, and cultural norms in an organization designed and implemented to attract, develop, deploy, and retain talent to achieve strategic objectives and meet future business needs" (Silzer & Dowell, 2010, p.2). By introducing an exclusion-inclusion paradox (p.325), Daubner-Siva, Vinkenburg and Jansen (2017) explore elite talent management and diversity management. They find that organizations experience tension when they establish exclusive talent management and simultaneously embrace inclusive diversity management principles. In comparison to an elite approach to talent management, inclusive talent management focuses on talent practices that advocate a strength-based philosophy, training and development and increased person-job fit for all or the majority of employees (e.g. Bethke-Langenegger, Mahler & Staffelbach, 2011; Meyers & Van Woerkom, 2014; Meyers et al., 2020). To include employees that might not be regarded as talents in an exclusive talent understanding leads to increased chances for first, individuals to progress within the organization and second, for organizations to fill key roles (Al Ariss et al., 2014). However, "inclusive" appears to only refer to white collar employees as opposed to blue collar workers or peripheral staff who are not included in talent management. I critically discuss this phenomenon in Chapter 5. There are similarities of inclusive talent management and Human Resources. However, Swailes et al. (2014) argue that inclusive talent management differs from Human Resources because the latter would not explicitly assess talent and sort employees into positions that show the highest person-job fit. Additionally, it would not proactively support employees with little fit for the current role to use their talent in another job or organization.

Besides a focus on exclusive or inclusive talent management, an organization can also apply a hybrid approach to talent management. In detail, many organizations aim at introducing exclusive talent management for a certain percentage of employees and inclusive talent management for the rest (Stahl, Björkman, Farndale, Morris, Paauwe & Stiles, 2012; Swailes et al., 2014). As a final remark, context matters in talent management when it comes to an inclusive or exclusive orientation of organizations which will be explored in Section 2.2.5.

Tension II: Is talent innate or can it be developed?

The second tension in literature evolves around talent development. The term talent has a very similar meaning in all Western languages: it is assumed that every individual possesses innate gifts that can be linked to excellent performance (Tansley, 2011). While skills can be learned, individuals are born with talent. Additionally, "talent" in the organizational context can also be understood as a talented person in English. In non-Western cultures, a different intention can be observed: in Japan for example, talent is understood as a skillset acquired through hard work and development (Tansley, 2011). While the Western approach advocates innate talent, another discussion in academia and practice takes place around whether talent in an organizational context is also seen as innate gifts or whether it can be developed (Dries, 2013a). Tansley (2011) explains that the meaning of talent depends on the organizational context, values, norms and organizational culture.

In conclusion, this section presents existing tensions in literature on talent philosophy. Arthur and Boyles (2007) argue that philosophy influences specific programs and employee perceptions. The upcoming sections therefore look more closely at talent management practices and the interplay with employee reactions.

2.2.4 Talent philosophies and practices – bridging the construct

Having explored talent management philosophies, this section looks at the interplay of prevalent talent practices and tensions in literature. I explore two main questions: First, I discuss how the elements of talent management interact with underlying talent management ideas. Which potential influence might each talent management philosophy have on the design of talent practices? And second, I explore whether talent management philosophy influences the behavior and sense-making of employees.

The most frequently explored talent management discussion in academia evolves around talent practices, such as attraction, recruiting, talent identification, retention and training and development (Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016). Drawing on previous work on talent management, I develop Figure 8 which shows three dimensions: the construct of talent management (Arthur & Boyles, 2007), prevalent tensions in literature (Dries, 2013a; Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014), and underlying talent philosophies and specific talent practices (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014).
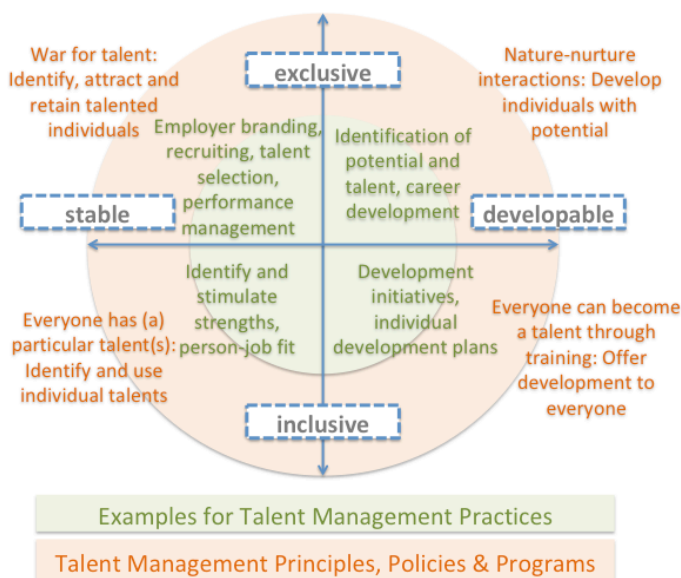
Figure 8: Bddedringing talent management tensions, philosophy and practices together, adapted from Arthur and Boyles (2007), Dries (2013a) and Meyers and van Woerkom (2014)

The illustration serves as a starting point to discuss various types of talent practices based on four different combinations of talent philosophies (exclusive/stable; exclusive/developable; inclusive/stable; inclusive/developable). In a quantitative study amongst Human Resource managers, Meyers et al. (2020) explore how frequently each of the four talent philosophies occurs. They find that all of them are almost equally prevalent among managers, which means that an inclusive talent management understanding is as common as an exclusive understanding in practice. Although Figure 8 enables a structured discussion of available talent practices, I am aware that they might also appear in different ways or hybrid forms, independent of talent philosophy, in practice.

Exclusive / stable talent management

This talent philosophy assumes that talent is stable and corresponds to innate gifts (Tansley, 2011). It sees talent in form of several characteristics, such as past and current performance, intelligence or potential (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014; Nijs, Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries & Sels, 2014). By employing workforce differentiation, an organization separates stars or high potentials or employees "with talent" from a much larger group, who are average and poor performers or B and C players or "without talent" (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014). According to Collings and Mellahi (2009), the objective of the system is to keep high and medium performers and to reduce the number of poor performers employed by an organization. This implies that there are disproportionately higher investments in talents than non-talents (Huselid & Becker, 2011). Distribution systems force managers, who might otherwise be reluctant to rate employees, to rank certain percentages of employees according to pre-defined categories, such as A, B and C. The team ratings of one performance appraisal process should then mirror the distribution introduced by the organization (Grote, 2005). I understand the objective of these measures to be an enhancement of organizational performance based on the sum of individual high performers. However, I wonder whether the potential performance gains of an organization through workforce differentiation is greater than the possibly harmful impact on employees. Meyers et al. (2018) also ask whether the advantages of this approach outweigh the risks involved. Bearing this in mind, I look closer at employee reactions to exclusive talent management in Section 2.2.7.

There are some specific talent practices that are potentially connected to workforce differentiation: besides carefully recruiting and selecting talent, employer branding is also assigned importance for attracting and retaining high potentials (Vaiman, Scullion & Collings, 2012). Further, according to Collings (2014), a key routine of workforce differentiation are talent pools, although talent pools are viable talent practices for other talent philosophies, too. According to Sparrow (2007), the key advantage of talent pools is that demand-led recruiting is transformed to recruitment "ahead of the curve" due to proactively identifying talent for future roles. Tansley and Tietze (2013) make sense of talent pools as a structured approach to talent management at the collective level where individuals pass through different stages. Employees are grouped based on pre-defined criteria (Collings & Melahi, 2009). They are attributed labels such as "entry-level talent" or "executive talent" (Tansley & Tietze, 2013) and a talent status (Collings & Melahi, 2009). Talent status describes whether an individual is formally identified as talent or not by an organization (De Boeck et al., 2018).

Exclusive / developable talent management

This talent philosophy is similar to the ideas of exclusive / stable talent management because both approaches regard talent as rare and exceptional. However, exclusive / developable talent management believes that talent can be developed and questions how to best identify talent or potential (Meyers & Van Woerkom, 2014). How an organization makes sense of (high) potential is usually rather individual. Silzer and Church (2010) give some examples, such as the potential to move into senior management roles, the potential to effectively perform at two levels above the current role, or the capability to take on a broader job scope. If multiple categories of potential exist within an organization, talent pools are often used for describing the "potential for what?" (Dowell, 2010). Silzer and Church (2009) develop a three-level integrated framework that illustrates predictors of high-potential talent:

- Foundation dimensions are stable over time, difficult to change and include the following predictors: cognitive abilities (e.g. cognitive agility, conceptual thinking, navigating ambiguity, cognitive complexity, breadth of perspective, intellect, judgment, strategic reasoning, tactical problem solving, insightfulness, decision making, strategic thinking and managing ambiguity), personal variables and interpersonal skills (e.g. interpersonal skills and sociability, dominance and maturity, stability and resilience).
- Growth dimensions are useful indicators of whether an individual will further develop and learn additional skills; examples are learning skills (e.g. interest, adaptability and openness to feedback) and motivation skills (e.g. energy, career ambition and achievement orientation).
- After identifying employees with potential in the first two dimensions, training and development can be used to enhance the career dimensions: these highly depend on the career path of the individual and on the question "potential for what?"; leadership and / or functional or technical capabilities can be learned and developed in the work environment or with the right training.

Inclusive / developable talent management

Talent practices in this philosophy usually put a strong focus on the development of all employees while employees should also self-manage their personal growth (Meyers & Van Woerkom, 2014). To create a growth mindset and a culture for development, these ideas must be clearly communicated to all employees and managers (Day & O'Connor, 2017). Talent pools work as categories to group individuals and help decision-makers customize development investments for each pool (Day & O'Connor, 2017). Development initiatives can be grouped into three categories (Day, 2010):

- Experiential learning, such as stretch assignments, action learning, cross-functional or global job rotations, reflection
- Education, such as formal programs like Master of Business Administration
- Coaching, such as mentoring and feedback, development plans

Existing work suggests that state-of-the-art talent development aims at connecting various development initiatives in a systematic way: One example would be to give an individual a stretch assignment (challenge) that can be linked to 360-degree feedback and which is accompanied by coaching (support) (Day & O'Connor, 2017).

Inclusive / stable talent management

This philosophy is based on positive psychology (Meyers et al., 2020) which assumes that talent is universal, and everyone possesses strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Meyers and van Woerkom (2014) describe this approach to focus on "identifying individual talents, stimulating the use and refinement of talents and matching employee talents with positions or tasks" (p. 197). With regards to talent practices, questionnaires can help to identify strengths of individual employees (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) while training or partnering employees with complementary strength profiles can mitigate weaknesses (Buckingham, 2005).

In conclusion, this section presents different talent practices and how they interact with underlying ideas on the nature of talent management (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014; Meyers et al., 2020). Because previous work tends to leave the one-size-fits-all theorem and shifts towards a "best fit" approach to talent management (e.g. Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2015; Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020; Stahl et al., 2012), I question whether talent philosophy could play an increasingly important role in the future. The "best fit" approach can potentially be based on talent philosophy, where organizations reflect on underlying ideas, define their

understanding and use that as a foundation for designing the other parts of the talent management construct (compare Figure 8). Norms, values and talent philosophies of the organization create a vision and influence the shape of talent management (Meyers & Van Woerkom, 2014). This is confirmed by current work on how managers understand the nature of talent and how this translates to talent practices in their workplace (Meyers et al., 2020; Wiblen & McDonnell, 2020). Therefore, talent philosophies can influence the way talent programs are designed and applied in an organizational context. Consequently, an organization can potentially benefit from developing a program that fits best to the organizational characteristics and mindset (Bethke-Langenegger et al., 2011). Further, King (2015) shows that the conceptualization of talent management by organizational leaders and Human Resources must be aligned with talent practices that are implemented by direct supervisors.

The literature informs my pre understanding in that sense that I see a necessity to explore reactions of employees to talent management based on talent management principles, policies and programs of an organization. That being said, I am curious as to how employees perceive the different components, and in how far it impacts their sense-making of talent management. How do employees make sense of talent practices they experience and of the ones they do not experience? How do they perceive organizational talent management philosophy, and does it mirror what they experience in everyday life? Meyers et al. (2020) show a link between personal talent philosophy and organizational talent philosophy: they illustrate that Human Resource managers who make sense of talent as exclusive also tend to understand their organization to apply an exclusive definition of talent and to use workforce differentiation. Although this interplay is cited in other rather non-empirical studies, it has only been explored to a limited extent in empirical research because a multilevel construct is often challenging in practice (De Boeck et al., 2018).

As a final remark, this section presents a wide variety of talent management approaches. Therefore, I define talent management for this study at the end of the chapter. Keeping underlying ideas, conceptualizations and talent practices in mind, the following sections increasingly focus on context and employee reactions to talent management.

2.2.5 Context matters

Having explored current debates, tensions and practices in the field, this section unpacks the importance of context in talent management. Following the indication of existing research that context is highly relevant in talent management (Tansley, Kirk & Tietze, 2013; Thunnissen, Boselie & Fruytier, 2013), I include contextual considerations in developing pre understanding. More specifically, I decide to explore the context of talent management because it potentially influences the conceptualization, implementation and effectiveness of the same (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020). This is the reason why *The International Journal of Human Resource Management* introduces a special issue on the context of talent management in 2020. In detail, the scholars find that organizational context is underrepresented in existing work and that information on the same is often missing in previous literature (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020; Thunnissen & Gallardo-Gallardo, 2019).

Discussions on the context of talent management refer to aspects such as the size or industry of the organization, organizational characteristics, the country or region and national culture. After presenting some current examples I then discuss the context of smaller organizations in the German-speaking region in more detail. Regarding the context of industry, Asplund (2020) shows that talent management in the public education sector is different from predominant academic sense-making on talent management. In contrast to existing literature, older and female employees are designated as talent in this specific context (Asplund, 2020). This could be connected to the notion of inclusion and equality that is more prevalent in public than private sector organizations (Asplund, 2020). Other context-related discussions refer to organizational characteristics, such as strategic ambiguity (Sumelius, Smale & Yamao, 2020) or talent management on a meso-level (Wiblen & McDonnell, 2020).

With regards to the national context of existing work, Meyers et al. (2020) look at how talent philosophies are adopted in different regions. They find that Human Resource managers from the Germanic GLOBE dimension share a rather inclusive understanding of talent management. The Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness, in short GLOBE, project explores the relationship between culture, organizational culture and leadership (GLOBE, 2020). The three studies from 2004, 2007 and 2014 complement each other. The GLOBE 2004 study shows data from 62 countries worldwide and clusters similar cultures into culture groups. One of these groups is Germanic Europe which comprises Germany, Austria, Switzerland and the Netherlands. Compared to other culture groups, this cluster scores especially high in the following cultural practices: Performance orientation,

assertiveness, future orientation, and uncertainty avoidance. The high level of future orientation shows that people in this culture group like to plan and invest for the future. Regarding leadership behavior, individuals prefer participative leadership over self-protective leadership (GLOBE, 2020).

Meyers et al. (2020) relate the finding of a tendency towards inclusive talent management in the Germanic GLOBE culture group to previous work from Festing, Schäfer and Scullion (2013): According to their research, smaller organizations in Germany predominately employ an inclusive approach to talent management which strongly links to the long-term oriented German business culture (Hofstede Insights, 2018) and the notion of cooperation between management and employees (Festing et. al, 2013; Harsch & Festing, 2019). Further, smaller German enterprises typically also focus on training and development, which is again in line with Germany's cultural long-term orientation towards learning and development (Festing et. al, 2013).

With regards to size of an organization, most talent management research to date is carried out in large and globally operating organizations (Collings, Mellahi & Cascio, 2019). In contrast, studies in public sector organizations and smaller enterprises are rather underrepresented (Thunnissen & Gallardo-Gallardo, 2019). This raises the question on whether the current concepts of talent management can also help to understand talent issues in organizations other than multinationals (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020). Previous research on smaller organizations (Ates, Garengo, Cocca & Bititci, 2013; Festing et al., 2013; Valverde et al., 2013) reaches the conclusion that the context of organization size indeed matters because talent management considerably differs. In detail, previous research finds discrepancies between smaller and larger organizations with regards to talent philosophies, talent management design and employee behavior.

First, concerning talent philosophy and organization size, Meyers et al. (2020) find that Human Resource managers of smaller organizations are generally more inclined towards an inclusive talent understanding, while Human Resource managers from larger organizations are more likely to share an exclusive talent philosophy. The authors explain this by the tendency of both, smaller organizations towards inclusive talent management (Festing et al., 2013), and larger organizations towards exclusive talent management (Krishnan & Scullion, 2017). In contrast to larger organizations, smaller companies tend to develop own concepts that fit their specific context (Krishnan & Scullion, 2017).

Second, Savov, Lančarič and Kozáková (2020) find in a comparative study of large and smaller organizations in Slovakia that the size of an organization influences talent practices. In detail, they observe the strongest differences in case of talent identification and talent development processes (Savov et al., 2020). Because smaller organizations face certain disadvantages when it comes to the labor market (Krishnan & Scullion, 2017), Festing et al. (2013) show how these organizations adopt innovative collaborative mechanisms of talent attraction. They also tend to use more informal talent practices with decisions centrally taken by top managers (Krishnan & Scullion, 2017). Further, Martin (2012) shows that a variety of employment practices exist in smaller organizations. The owner's orientation to work is a major factor for shaping management philosophy, business strategy and employment strategy.

Third, with regards to employee behavior and organization size, talents in smaller enterprises tend to be more loyal and stay longer than in larger organizations (Savov et al., 2020). Also, employees in smaller organizations often have to fulfill multiple roles in their daily work with unclear boundaries and responsibilities. Leaders tend to value employees that show innovative behavior and creativity and that are willing to take risks and to cooperate with other employees (Cardon & Stevens, 2004). Harsch and Festing (2019) also explore talent management in the specific context of family businesses in German speaking countries. Their research shows that employees mainly strive for recognition and appreciation by the family. The owners of the business and the employees base their relationship on trust and a high level of commitment. This often implies for employees that they are responsible for their own development. I wonder whether the notion of self-responsibility will emerge from the work with the respondents.

In conclusion, I acknowledge that context is absolutely crucial in talent management. I also see that there is the possibility to contribute to research on smaller organizations in the Germanic GLOBE dimension. I use these considerations to develop my conceptual framework further at the end of this chapter. Additionally, the notions of self-talent management and responsibility for the own career reemerge in this section's discussions. Will they come up again in the work with the respondents?

2.2.6 Talent management from an employee perspective

This section explores prevalent perspectives in talent management literature. It especially focuses on the shift towards individual talent and points out the importance of employee perspectives. In the workplace, I primarily adopt managerial views on talent management. There, talent management is designed in order to reach organizational objectives. When I set out to engage with existing work on talent management in 2016, I felt quite natural about the dominant organizational paradigm in the field (e.g. Thunnissen & Gallardo-Gallardo, 2019). However, the more I personally question the "truths" of the world, the more my pre understanding develops towards an employee-centered perspective. Collings, Scullion and Vaiman (2015) report a general shift from organizational and managerial orientations to talent management of the earlier work towards a perspective of individual talent in recent years. In fact, since 2013, there has been a growing interest in integrating employee views with regards to reactions to and perceptions of talent management (Thunnissen & Gallardo-Gallardo, 2019). However, the majority of research is still based on an organizational level (e.g. King, 2015; Nijs et al., 2014; Swailes & Blackburn, 2016). Therefore, scholars name employee perspectives of talent management as a promising avenue for future research (e.g. Al Ariss et al., 2014; De Boeck et al., 2018; Collings, 2014; Dries, 2013a; Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016; Thunnissen et al., 2013). Reflecting on existing work, I find that the employee perspective of talent management is important for a variety of reasons, such as:

- Organizations view talents as a key for achieving a competitive advantage in the global knowledge economy (e.g. Cappelli, 2008; Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016; Sparrow & Makram, 2015), which makes employees the main target group of talent management.
- Thunnissen (2016) reports that talents at university departments are more committed to their careers than to their organization while Rosseau already describes in 2001 that the ties between employers and employees are weakening. Especially individuals that have highly professionalized jobs with standardized training usually identify strongly with their profession (Ibarra, 1999).
- Employees who feel connected to their job, colleagues and the organization (Shen & Hall, 2009) and whose expectations and objectives are met (Farndale et al., 2014) are more likely to stay with an organization.

- The employee perspective on talent management can give insights into employee perceptions, attitudes and behaviors that can be used for the design of talent programs (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; King, 2015). In order to perform well, individuals need to be engaged, developed and retained (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Hughes & Rog, 2008; King, 2015; Thunnissen et al., 2013).
- The human capital perspective on talent employs workforce differentiation and describes employees to add value to an organization (Dries, 2013a). However, De Vos and Dries (2013) warn of disregarding individual attitudes, behaviors and perceptions. To capture psychological dimensions and to understand what is happening, talent management shall not solely be explored from a distant resource-based view (Nijs et al., 2014).

In conclusion, this section shows that employee perspectives of talent management are indeed relevant. The upcoming discussion looks at what has been researched in this area.

2.2.7 Employee reactions to talent management

Having pointed out the importance of employee orientations to talent management, this section explores previous research on employee reactions. This informs my pre understanding, the conceptual framework and how I situate my research on talent management and identity. This section is structured as follows: at first, I discuss how to interpret the prevalence of positive and negative employee reactions to talent management. Then, I explore the notion of talent status. Subsequently, I discuss what has been researched on positive and negative reactions in both, exclusive talent management and inclusive talent management.

The prevalence of positive and negative employee reactions to talent management

Existing work on employee reactions primarily suggests positive outcomes for employees (e.g. Malik & Singh, 2019). However, De Boeck et al. (2018) advise caution to jump to conclusions: in a systematic review of talent management literature on employee reactions, they find that empirical evidence is mixed but rather tends towards a positive effect of talent management. However, the advice for caution and the findings on negative employee attitudes are interesting and question the predominant positive paradigm in the field. This is explored more in detail in this section. Also, it is important to note that positive and negative reactions are not mutually exclusive and can be experienced by one individual at the same time (De Boeck et al., 2018).

This is for example demonstrated by Daubner-Siva et al.'s (2018) work, in which they introduce the notion of a talent paradox. As a final remark, De Boeck et al. (2018) conclude that people react differently depending on the talent practice involved. Employees tend to respond more strongly to employee centered talent practices, such as talent development or performance management processes, than to strategic talent practices like talent acquisition, retention and workforce planning.

Talent status in employee reactions to talent management

I explore when reactions to talent management are actually observed in existing research: Scholars find attitudes towards talent management in both cases, when a person perceives to be seen as talent (e.g. Asplund, 2020; Björkman, Ehrnrooth, Mäkelä, Smale & Sumelius, 2013), or when an individual is certain to be formally designated as talent (Gelens, Hofmans, Dries & Pepermans, 2014). Only few studies (e.g. Björkman et al., 2013; Malik & Singh, 2019) compare employees with a talent status to those who do not perceive to be seen as talent or who do not know. Further, there is limited research on reactions of non-talents to talent management (e.g. O'Connor & Crowley-Henry, 2019; Van Zelderen et al., 2019). Therefore, it is important to note that the predominant paradigm in both, the field of talent management (Swailes et al., 2014) and the research area of employee reactions to talent management (De Boeck et al., 2018) is the notion of exclusive talent management. Bearing this in mind, I draw on two journal articles (De Boeck et al., 2018; Ehrnrooth et al., 2018) as starting points to discuss employee reactions to talent management. Figure 9 gives an overview about what has been researched on employee reactions.
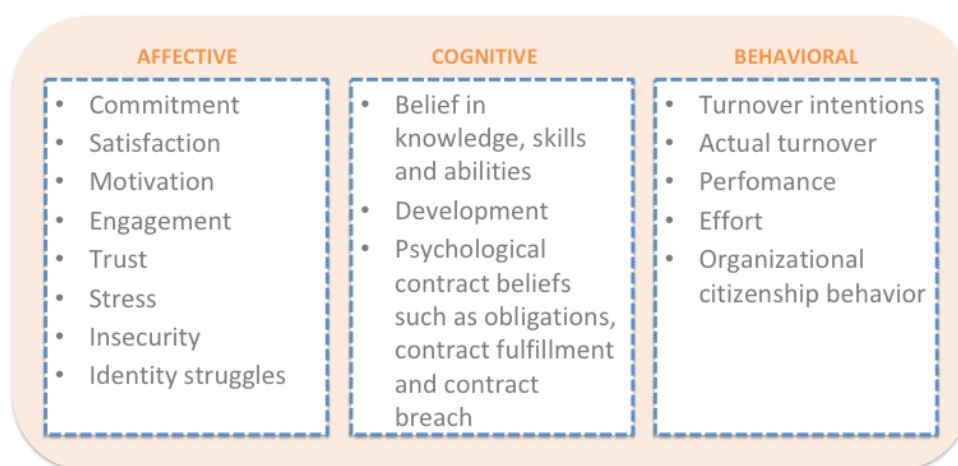
Figure 9: Reactions of talents to talent management, adapted from De Boeck et al. (2018)

Positive employee reactions to exclusive talent management

Positive employee reactions to exclusive talent management primarily concern employees with a perceived or official talent status. De Boeck et al. (2018) assign employee attitudes to be affective, cognitive or behavioral, which also mirrors the structure of the following paragraphs. With regards to positive affective employee reactions, existing research finds that talent management has positive effects on overall talent morale (De Boeck et al., 2018), talent commitment and satisfaction (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006; Bethke-Langenegger et al., 2011; Bonneton et al., 2020). Being flagged as special, unique or outstanding talent positively appeals to the emotions of individuals (Collings & Melahi, 2009) and provides external recognition (Bonneton et al., 2020). In other words, it makes an employee feel different from the not so talented individuals (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006; Dries, 2013a). Through using specific company language, talents feel a sense of belonging and incorporate elitist values (Bonneton et al., 2020).

Further, De Boeck et al. (2018) find that previous research focuses on distinctly positive behavioral reactions to being identified as talent, for example increased effort for the organization (Asplund, 2020), higher performance (Luna-Arocas & Morley, 2015) and lower turnover intentions (Bonneton, Schworm, Festing & Muratbekova-Touron, 2019; Bonneton et al., 2020; Chami-Malaeb & Garavan, 2013; Du Plessis, Barkhuizen, Stanz & Schutte, 2015). In detail, Bonneton et al. (2020) find that talents are less likely to quit because they feel they would lose the elite status they currently have within the organization.

In comparison to affective and behavioral consequences, the effect of positive cognitive employee reactions – such as psychological contract fulfillment and the own belief in one's knowledge, skills and abilities – is rather small (De Boeck et al., 2018). Social exchange theory in talent management argues that employees reimburse the organization for talent practices such as talent development by putting effort in achieving organizational objectives (Asplund, 2020; Dries, Forrier, de Vos & Pepermans, 2014). Talent management therefore influences a talent's perception of rules of the relationship between employer and employee. Talents are likely to develop expectations of what they are to give to the organization and what they are to receive from the same (Dries et al., 2014).

This brings forth the complex issue of deciding whether to communicate talent status or not. If talent status is communicated, the affective reactions previously mentioned are likely to occur. In detail, talents who are aware of their talent status are likely to become more self-assured and self-satisfied (Ehrnrooth et al., 2018). Ehrnrooth et al. (2018) explore that

employees with a formal talent status respond more strongly to organizational inducements and psychological contract fulfillment. They seem more sensitive than employees who are unaware of their status. This implies that talent attitudes might not only be affected by the talent label itself but also by organizational inducements (Ehrnrooth et al., 2018; Gelens et al., 2014). The expectations towards the organization as a whole and towards organizational inducements in particular may therefore increase, for example with regards to psychological contract fulfillment and development opportunities (Ehrnrooth et al., 2018).

However, Asplund (2020) suggests that this only applies to employees who do not strongly identify with their profession. In other words, talent designation does not lead to the desired positive consequences if a person identifies strongly with the own profession. Sumelius et al. (2020) also introduce a more differentiated view by considering how employees are told about their talent status. Regarding strategic ambiguity as a part of organizational context, they find differences in how talents and "B" talents react to this. However, the long-term effects of strategic ambiguity are rather negative for both groups.

Negative employee reactions to exclusive talent management

There are also negative consequences, which are also referred to as the "dark side" of talent management (e.g. Kirk, 2016). There is a variety of negative reactions of talents, who are those employees that have a perceived or official talent status. Negative consequences are insecurity and anxiety regarding expectations (Dries & De Gieter, 2014), mixed feelings about talent management (Daubner-Siva, Ybema, Vikenburg & Beech, 2018), high stress levels (Dries & Pepermans, 2008; Tansley & Tietze, 2013), personal sacrifices and identity struggles (Tansley & Tietze, 2013), and developing a "false self" (Dubouloy, 2004) or an anti-identity (Kirk, 2016). As the "dark side" of talent management is difficult to place in the current stream of research that conceptualizes talent management to solely benefit organizations (De Boeck et al., 2018), I look at some of these concepts in more detail.

First, frustration, dissatisfaction and turnover can be caused by unclear communication about talent management and about the individual talent status (Dries & De Gieter, 2014). Further, Collings (2017) presents increased demotivation and cultural challenges with regards to teamwork and learning to arise from forced distribution models in the context of workforce differentiation. Interestingly, Van Zelderen, Dries and Marescaux (2019) find that the larger the talent pool the more a talent program is likely to create negative feelings with regards to frustration, envy, self-esteem and the feeling of exclusion (Swailes & Blackburn, 2016) for non-talents. This is an argument against transparency of talent status. It also raises

doubts on demands for more inclusive talent management, and the discussions on justice and potential effects on non-talents (Björkman et al., 2013; Swailes & Blackburn, 2016). O'Connor and Crowley-Henry (2019) make a further distinction of non-talents in exclusive talent management: in their work on employee engagement and organizational justice, they particularly look at reactions of employees that are not identified as talent but assume that they should be included in an organization's talent pool. This group of employees is likely to experience lower levels of distributive justice and engagement.

Second, Dries and De Gieter (2014) explore that employees with a formal talent status tend to feel uncertain regarding expectations they perceive from the organization. This induces a negative perception of procedural fairness (Jooss, McDonnell, Burbach & Vaiman, 2019). Other scholars (Dries & Pepermans, 2008; Tansley & Tietze, 2013) find that high stress levels in talents arise from perceiving expectations such as to continuously improve, to be flexible, or to be globally mobile (Kirk, 2019). Tansley and Tietze (2013) argue that talents respond by making personal sacrifices with regards to time and relationships.

Third, talent status also impacts the self-image. Existing work (Dubouloy, 2004; Tansley & Tietze, 2013) finds that talents experience identity struggles because they are torn between conformity and authenticity. Employees with a talent status want to stay true to themselves while conforming to organizational expectations. Dubouloy (2004) even points out that talents develop a "false self" to fulfill the expectations of the organization or their role. Kirk (2016) introduces negative reactions of global talents in case they fail to form an identity that is associated with being highly mobile and induced by the organization. This leads them to create an anti-identity and they sometimes refuse to be further included in the talent pool. Especially women experience identity conflicts between being identified as globally mobile talent and role expectations from their families (Kirk, 2019). Further, Kirk (2020) also focuses on tensions of global talent that are based on naming. In detail, the research shows that naming of global talent can influence a person's behavior, identity work and emotions of anger and shame in the workplace and partly also in private life. Once individuals know about their global talent status, a process of forming a suitable identity is started, which might "trigger intense identity struggles and emotional fallout" (Kirk, 2020, p. 13). This can be connected to the work of Tansley and Tietze (2013) where individuals especially work on identity in times of change or during transition to different talent pool stages. In their study on talent management and identity work along the anthropological notion of rites of passage, they also find that talents continually negotiate identity in the light of talent management.

Employee reactions to inclusive talent management

Until now, this section explores employee reactions to exclusive talent management. In comparison to exclusive talent management, I acknowledge that there is only little previous work on employee reactions to inclusive talent management or a strength-based approach. As a side note, the notion of strengths is based on positive psychology (Swailes et al., 2014) and refers to what is commonly understood as individual talents. Employee reactions to inclusive or strength-based talent management are as follows:

- Meyers, van Woerkom, de Reuver, Bakk and Oberski (2015) find that participating in learning activities on strengths leads to greater engagement with personal development.
- Using individual strengths is positively related to wellbeing (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2017; Quinlan, Swain & Vella-Brodrick, 2012) and might be connected to in-role and extra-role performance (van Woerkom & Meyers, 2015).
- Bethke-Langenegger et al. (2011) argue that higher job satisfaction, performance motivation, commitment and higher trust in leaders arise from career and development perspectives that are in line with employee competences.
- In another study, van Woerkom, Bakker and Nishii (2016) find that organizational support in using strengths prevents stress and illness of employees.

In conclusion, previous research suggests contradictory findings regarding employee reactions to talent management: Both, positive and negative attitudes are prevalent, of which the latter is difficult to place in the current positive talent management paradigm. Further, there is only little existing work on employee reactions to inclusive talent management. The current section informs my pre understanding and gives me the confidence to go on. My work aims at contributing to the discussion of employee reactions to talent management with a focus on inclusion and justice. These and other considerations from the second part of the literature review are discussed in detail in the subsequent section.

2.2.8 Implications for this study: Part II

This section reaches conclusions from the second part of the literature review. It has informed my pre understanding of talent management in general, and employee reactions to talent management in particular. To begin with, I summarize the main theoretical approach that I adopt for this research. That is, I reflect on previous literature to define talent management for this empirical study. Then, I take into account further implications regarding context and the level of analysis. As a final step, I consider concepts from existing work, and how they shape the conceptual framework for the research area.

Informed by the developed pre understanding, I make sense of talent management as the entirety of talent principles, policies, programs, practices and culture (Arthur & Boyles, 2007). Further, I understand talent practices to mirror the mindset of an organization regarding the appreciation of the individual, inclusion and diversity.

Previous work indicates that employee reactions to talent management are personal. How employees respond is influenced by individual attributions (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014) as well as employee perceptions of justice (Gelens et al., 2014) and transparency of talent practices (Dries & De Gieter, 2014). Further, Malik and Singh (2019) find that the same Human Resource program can be perceived quite differently by employees. After engaging with both, identity and talent management literature, I reconfirm my choice of adopting an individual level of analysis for this study. This is particularly interesting because Swailes and Blackburn (2016) find that experiences of talent management from a personal level are under-examined. I believe that this level of analysis enables me to gain an understanding of how employees make sense of talent management and identity issues.

The predominant paradigm in academia is exclusive talent management that focuses on one to ten per cent of employees designated as talents (Bonneton et al., 2020; Swailes et al., 2014). It also employs workforce segmentation and preferential treatment, as talent management is defined by Collings and Mellahi (2009) as "activities and processes that involve the systematic identification of key positions which differentially contribute to the organization's sustainable competitive advantage, the development of a talent pool of high potential and high performing incumbents to fill these roles, and the development of a differentiated human resource architecture to facilitate filling these positions with competent incumbents and to ensure their continued commitment to the organization" (p. 304). Upon reflection, I perceive exclusive talent management to present a different reality from my values of justice, inclusion and diversity, and also from how I make sense of talent

management at work. I therefore define talent management as inclusive for this research. Inclusive talent management "recognizes the full range of talent in the organization and deploys talent according to job fit which may mean assisting some people to benefit from alternative vocations" (Swailes et al., 2014, p. 534). Inclusive talent management therefore includes all or the majority of employees (Swailes et al., 2014). With regards to concrete talent practices, inclusive talent management means identifying individual talents, stimulating the use of talents and matching people with positions that correspond to their strengths. A developable inclusive talent management approach implies a high amount of self-management of personal growth (Meyers & Van Woerkom, 2014), which leads back to discussions on boundaryless careers, and a shift of responsibility from employer to employees (Al Ariss et al., 2014; Crowley-Henry et al., 2019). This means for employees that they can develop the competences they need at work (Meyers & Van Woerkom, 2014). I therefore define talent management for this research as the entirety of development measures, such as training, mentoring, networking or individual development plans (Meyers & Van Woerkom, 2014).

The notion of inclusion leads me to consider the context of the research. Having established an inclusive talent management definition for this study, I decide to look at employee reactions in the context of the Germanic GLOBE dimension. Meyers et al. (2020) find that an inclusive talent philosophy is predominately adopted in the national context of Germany, Austria, Switzerland and the Netherlands, and in the context of smaller organizations. Because of language barriers, I only include German speaking regions in the study (also compare Harsch & Festing, 2019). However, specific choices and reflections on the design of this research are discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

Existing work on talent management and identity explores identity formation of employees. In detail, research to date looks at influences of external training (Dubouloy, 2004), talent pool progression (Tansley & Tietze, 2013) and global mobility (Kirk, 2016, 2019, 2020). It specifically focuses on employees designated as talents. Further research explores how an organization constructs an elite identity among employees designated as talent (Bonneton et al., 2020). However, there is no previous work on how employees form identity in the context of inclusive talent management.

The systematic review of employee reactions by De Boeck et al. (2018) primarily reports on consequences for talents in the context of exclusive talent management. In detail, there is only little empirical research that focuses on non-talents alongside talents (De Boeck et al., 2018; e.g. Björkman et al., 2013; Malik & Singh, 2019) or on reactions of non-talents to talent management (e.g. O'Connor & Crowley-Henry, 2019; Van Zelderen et al., 2019). A potential reason for that is that exclusive talent management is the predominant paradigm in the field, and employees designated as talent therefore the main target group. Al Ariss et al. (2014) point out potential negative effects of an elitist approach to talent management and argue for broader inclusion of less-privileged employees who also rightfully and importantly belong to the workforce. Because scholars call for more work on reactions of talents and non-talents (e.g. Bonneton et al., 2020; Swailes & Blackburn, 2016), I think that employee reactions independent of talent status in inclusive talent management provide an interesting research avenue to follow.

Summarizing, recent work suggests mixed and sometimes contradictory findings of employee reactions to talent management. This is referred to as the "dark side" of talent management in the dominant positive paradigm (De Boeck et al., 2018). De Boeck et al. (2018, p. 210) therefore identify the need for a deeper discussion of talent management and identity in order to understand the occurrence of identity struggles in the talent management literature (Dubouloy, 2004; Kirk, 2016, 2019, 2020; Tansley & Tietze, 2013).

From the pre understanding of existing work and my self-knowledge, I develop my initial conceptual framework (see Figure 10 below). In doing so, I seek answers to *RO3: To explore how employees make sense of organizational discourses of inclusive talent (management)*:

- Explore the individual sense-making of inclusive talent management

    o *Inclusion & diversity*

    o *Self-management of personal growth*

- Context of smaller organizations in Germany, Austria and the German-speaking part of Switzerland
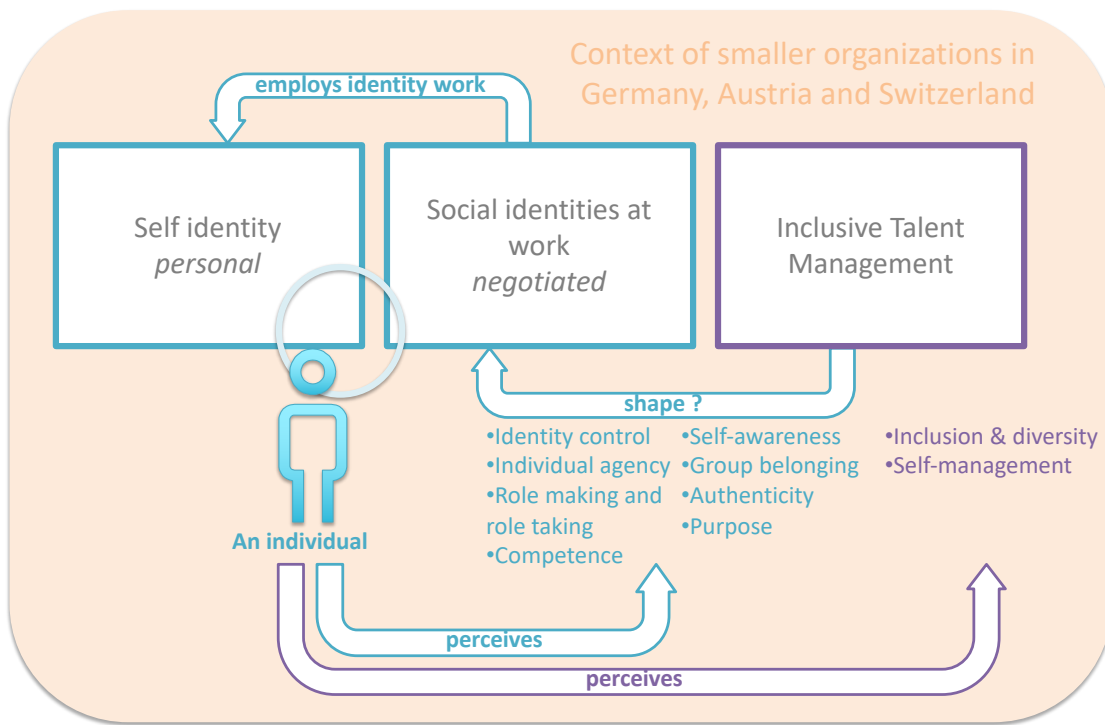
Figure 10: Conceptual framework "talent management and identity" based on Part II of the initial literature review, created by author (2018)

In summary, I engage with existing work in Chapter 2, *Initial review of literature,* and develop my early research considerations on identity and talent management further. Previous studies inform the conceptual framework of the thesis. It is the foundation for future decisions on the study design and for the work with the respondents in the next stages of my journey.

3 My research journey

This chapter crafts my research journey by shedding light on research considerations and decisions taken as well as the strengths and weaknesses of the research strategy, design and methods. In other words, this chapter documents the rationale behind the design and the data analysis of my research (Silverman, 2020). At the beginning of the chapter, I make sense of ontological and epistemological considerations and reflect on my understanding of reality. Subsequently, the reader is taken to the methodological choice of conducting the study in form of a hermeneutic exploration. My chosen theoretical approach influences the way I study talent (management) and identity issues and gives space to the participants to guide the research and the methods; the generated texts and the approach shape the thesis and also myself. As a next step, I then outline the design and techniques of the study and explore the reasons why the research takes the path it does. In particular, I discuss the research method and reflect on transcribing, exploring and translating the texts. The final section shows how the participants are selected and how ethical questions are addressed. I then conclude with a short summary on the choices of the research design.

3.1 Philosophical considerations

Engaging with philosophy has become a crucial part of my personal development over the last years and consequently impacts the shape of this study. This section explores my philosophical standpoints and its implications on the research. Crotty (1998) explains that the research outline is built based on the researcher's understanding of ontology and epistemology. While this logic is naturally reflected in the further course of the discussion, it is important to note that my thoughts have been circling around philosophy for a long time and have not been as straight-forward as they might seem now. A fellow student and I compare our doctoral experience to travelling: We both love visiting other countries and experiencing foreign cultures where each encounter adds value and widens horizons. My previous management education taught plenty of models that aim at explaining how the world works – why people buy, how organizations develop innovations and how they make sure their goods arrive at the right time at the right place. While initially, my intention is to continue my studies, I quite quickly come to increasingly engage with the notions of reflection, reflexivity and learning through group discussion – a development that enriches my life as a whole. I remember when we left university after the first four days of philosophy "deep dive", I was elated while at the same time, I questioned the paradigms of my previous, I would prefix it with "models", education.

In hindsight, I observe that I experienced a turning point in my life at the beginning of the doctoral journey: I embrace reflection and reflexivity and engage more with what is going on around me. I feel an urge to look behind the surface because it is not enough for me to observe from outside. I experience what Boyd and Fales (1983) describe as reflective learning, which is an individual process and internal exploration that results in changing one's conceptual perspective. According to Bolton (2010), reflective practice is a "state of mind" (p.3) and also an awareness of how others perceive one (Bolton, 2010). This way of living can imply a coexistence of the two different concepts of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action (Schön, 1983; 1992). Reflection–in-action occurs in a rather subconscious way where an individual reacts to, evaluates and adapts behavior in an unexpected situation. In comparison, reflection-on-action takes place after the experience and is a more conscious process that replays an event from various perspectives (Bolton, 2010). I question which method of reflection is more sustainable and has a higher impact on future behavior; and I am curious to see whether the two methods of reflection are interconnected or independent from each other. These discussions are vital for my research which explores in the methodology and methods section how to facilitate reflection of the participants and myself and how to find a way to accompany them in the process. Chapters 4 and 5 then show how the respondents and I engage in reflection and reflexivity to make sense of talent (management) and identity issues.

Four years ago, I started as analytical as I pride myself to be to identify a perspective on how the world "works" for me. After outlining the two main questions of ontology and epistemology I would reflect on my own philosophical position. I do the same now, four years later, and share thoughts on how my thinking has developed and how I have arrived at where I am right now. Ontology questions whether the world as we see it constitutes a social reality. Is the world there in hard fact? After making sense of subjectivist and realist ontological perspectives, I reflect on my own position. A subjectivist ontological view assumes that individual perceptions and knowledge of the world create a social reality. In this perspective, reality is therefore a projection and not a "universal truth" (McAuley et al., 2014). Berkeley (1713) denies the existence of phenomena outside of one's reality and independent of any observer. Phenomena are only there if somebody perceives their presence. Subsequently, to exist means to be perceived and to perceive others (Berkeley, 1713). Austin, Strawson and Cousin (1950) argue that for any truth there is an entity whose presence guarantees truth and that it takes two to make a truth. That means on the other hand that truth cannot exist on its own. In comparison, a realist ontological perspective asserts that the world exists, and phenomena are "out there" waiting to be discovered (McAuley et al., 2014).

Reflecting on my own ontological perspective, I acknowledge that parallel truths and personal realities co-exist. In knowing the social world, we create it (Blaikie, 2007). We all see the world, which co-exists with our realities, in different ways, depending on perceptions, prior experience and our own set of values and beliefs (Johnson & Duberley, 2000). As I craft the research approach, this position leads me to explore the inner realities of people instead of "universal truths", which I believe do not exist. Taking into consideration the ontological starting point for this research, I still continuously reflect on philosophy throughout the activities of my research journey. While I refrain from selecting a label for my ontological position in the beginning, I am now – arriving in the final stage of "write up" – more tempted to do so. This possibly stems from my personal learning of reflection during the research which encourages self-awareness. I learn from reflecting on myself and from engaging with work on philosophy that I lean towards the more general ideas of postmodernism, and towards some aspects of critical theory.

Postmodernism critically explores language, issues of power and the diversity of interests in the sense-making of organizational issues and the social world (McAuley et al., 2014). I can relate well to the wish to give voice to underrepresented groups (Giroux, 1992) in prevalent talent management discussions. In doing so, researchers can try to challenge dominant understandings (Gephart, Thatchenkery & Boje, 1996). The research approach I adopt also mirrors the yearning to understand processes of meaning creation, which is one of the drivers of postmodernist research (McAuley et al., 2014). However, I experience challenges when it comes to the notion of relativity, which is that meaning cannot exist and that there is no desire to come to a final end point (McAuley et al., 2014). Looking at processes of talent (management) meaning and identity creation, I indeed seek to give recommendations for Human Resource and management practice, which I however do not consider as "universal truths". In that respect, I understand critical theory as a more "hands-on" and practical theory than postmodernism; critical theory's main theme is to seek understanding which then leads to conclusions for organizations (McAuley et al., 2014). But then, the postmodernist view that focuses on the "dark side" (McAuley et al., 2014) of phenomena appears throughout my work. In comparison to an exploration of the "dark side", critical theorists rather admire the "spirit of Enlightenment" (McAuley et al., 2014, p. 293). For example, Habermas takes on an optimistic perspective by exploring how people can be "released from oppression" (McAuley et al., 2014, p. 368). To improve a person's life and release someone from oppression are important considerations for my research. Upon reflection, I am therefore inclined to relate critical theory to my rather positive and optimist view of the world as a whole. I consequently experience difficulty in assigning a philosophical label to my own perspective. In this regard,

it is interesting that Alvesson and Deetz (2006) present a certain level of agreement between postmodernism and critical theory. Both ontological positions critically explore power, language, the complexity of an individual and conflict in today's world. However, the approaches to these themes are quite different. Critical theory's rather realist ontological view of the world does not correlate with my own understanding of the absence of an external independent reality. Focusing on inner realities and the co-existence of various truths again affirm my more general inclination towards postmodernism, and an adoption of certain aspects of critical theory.

Having explored ontological considerations, epistemology raises questions on how we can discover truth(s) and distinguish truth from fiction (Hacking, 1983; McAuley et al., 2014). I perceive epistemology to consider whether a phenomenon can be assessed independently of opinions, perceptions, feelings and context. During a volunteering program in Israel and Palestine in 2010, I was baffled by how much two narratives of the same incident can differ from each other. Be it a major historical event or a small encounter, be it in newspapers or an anecdote of everyday life – I had the impression that how the story was told very much depended on the reality of each individual. Each group of people would create their own truth which shows that multiple truths co-existed. I can retrospectively conclude that this was potentially my first conscious encounter with epistemology. When I then learned about epistemological considerations at university I felt as if I was given a toolset to develop a broad understanding of different philosophical starting points to then explore my own. Prior to writing about my own standpoint, the next three paragraphs contain a summary of my understanding of the epistemological paradigms of positivism, pragmatism and interpretivism (Fuchs, 1993).

First, I perceive positivism to believe that truthful conclusions – a single reality – can be drawn from a neutral observation of the world, that truth can be found by applying our human sensory organs to smell, touch, hear, see and taste (McAuley et al., 2014). A key idea of positivism is that the observer and the object that is studied can be separated. Positivists therefore advocate empirical methods that mitigate the risk of interpreting data in more than one way. Positivism promises to be able to objectively define methods to solve challenges and to increase productivity (Thomas, 1998). Although extensively used also in social science, I know that I need an alternative to positivism for my research because I believe that to understand an individual's perspective, I would have to understand personal meaning creation processes (Kant, 1781). Further, I believe that there is not one universal truth, but that truth is in the eyes of the beholder.

Second, I understand the paradigm pragmatism as an epistemological position to explore the world "in a way that works". Depending on the research question, pragmatists combine positivist and interpretivist positions within a research paper to achieve relevant results. Advocates of the pragmatic theory of truth believe that truth should serve people and not vice versa; therefore, pragmatists employ a mixture of methods to arrive at a truthful statement, regardless of whether the epistemological view corresponds to one's paradigm and philosophical perspective (Powell, 2001). I can identify quite well with the commonly accepted meaning of pragmatism in my work life because I often solve problems in a way that works, independent of the method employed and independent of the belief underneath. However, when it comes to the notion of truth, I feel that because of own values and beliefs, we can never look at knowledge neutrally.

And third, I perceive interpretivism as an approach to show one or more perspectives without believing in the concept of universal truths. I believe that an individual's perception influences the phenomenon that is being observed (Crotty, 1998). I use hermeneutics in my research project because it is the science of interpretation and aims at understanding the situational context as well as an individual person, an individual group or an individual organization (McAuley et al., 2014). Interpretivists believe that research is most likely to have a positive impact on both practice and theory if researchers are inclined to question the taken-for-granted truths and address the "blind spots" that are embedded in language, culture and the research society (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). During my intense and sometimes painful debate with philosophy I come to understand that my epistemological perspective is interpretivist. I perceive the storytelling I experienced in Israel and Palestine as a way for (groups of) people to make sense of what is happening in their own reality. Engaging with the theoretical base of interpretivism the pieces of the puzzle fall into place: I understand this epistemological standpoint to be a means to explore how people make sense of the world through their individual understanding of being, a priori assumptions, language, beliefs, values and through cognitive processes (McAuley et al., 2014). Kant argues in the Critique of Pure Reason in 1781 that we gain knowledge by first, perceiving the world around us through our senses and second, by making sense of our perceptions through notions of causality and existence. We always contribute our conceptual principles to structure the elements we perceive and experience (Kant, 1781).

While my philosophical standpoints are rather clear to me now, I have been on a reflexive personal journey on my life, my perceptions and experiences ever since I started the DBA program. The following paragraphs show my development over the years with regards to epistemology and some vital learnings during the doctoral journey. In my late teens, I found myself abroad in novel and challenging situations and I was intrigued by foreign styles of living. Based on that, I questioned taken-for-granted beliefs in my former environment and in the world as a whole, not the existence of the world itself though. In order to hold on to something stable, I would come to only believe in absolute facts and numbers; although I feel challenged to select a label for my thoughts, I think that a positivist standpoint comforted me during that time of my life.

When I was 23, a tragedy shook our family and started a process for us to question and redefine our thoughts about life as individuals, but also as a family. This leads me to making sense of phenomena in a broader context and without claiming universal truths. Further, in hindsight, I realize that I feel personal offence when others voice some sort of judgment or plea for truth, even when it has nothing to do with me. Reflecting on this, I realize how much strength I used to get out of holding on to what I thought was true and I question how much power the thought of truth has over individuals. This train of thought then leads me to re-evaluate epistemological considerations and I understand why the question of how to distinguish truth from untruth must be at the very beginning of the research outline (Crotty, 1998).

Another example for my reflexive personal development is how I selected the research area and approach for this thesis. I identified a gap in the literature prior to the start of the DBA program and was proud to be able to proceed as planned. At the same time, I had ambivalent feelings about the idea because it implied a rather positivist research setup which I did not want to, and also simply could not, harmonize with my first reflections on epistemology. I felt very strongly about it in the moment we started to talk about philosophy as the foundation for research. Also, I remembered my teenage years when I would joyfully write several short stories and a novel. In the middle of establishing the first draft for a model, I was suddenly craving for storytelling. Following this impulse, I listened to myself, analyzed my needs and emotions and took myself and my preferences seriously. I also discussed these considerations with some of my study colleagues, which is one of many examples where I experience group support, encouragement and inspiration. I changed the area of research because I became aware of my interpretivist epistemology as well as my feelings

towards claiming universal truths and because there is greater interest for me in exploring individual realities as opposed to a positivist paradigm.

In my personal journey, triggered and accompanied by the DBA experience, I embrace reflection and reflexivity. I think it is beneficial that the discussions on ontology and epistemology quickly become rather personal in this section because the reader and I must know where I come from, as a participant in mutual sense-making in the research process, and how my epistemological understanding has developed over the years. With that in mind, I now engage with methodological considerations.

3.2 The methodological choice: Hermeneutics

This section introduces my choice to carry out the research through a hermeneutic exploration. I consider that hermeneutics corresponds to my philosophical stance of interpretivism that enables me to put myself into the shoes of somebody else and to view the world out of another person's perspective. I would call the encounter with hermeneutics "love at first sight" out of various reasons. In more detail, the key learning of reflection in my personal journey leads me to reflexive research with its two main characteristics of careful interpretation and reflection (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2018). I discover that individual self-awareness (Atkins & Murphy, 1993) and honesty with myself (Stevens, 1989) are prerequisites for reflective practice and expressing the experiences.

The experience with my study colleagues described in the previous section also influences the methodology of this research project: whenever I share feelings or an experience, somebody else would also share something similar and we together make sense of what is happening in our discussions. I feel like in a protected space which gives me a sense of belonging and happiness. As Adams and Marshall (1996) put it, I experience that while I like to be unique in my identity, I still long to belong to others; in hindsight, this is an experience which I tried to limit out of various reasons before. Interestingly, some of the participants of my study share similar feelings about the research process, in particular that they highly appreciate the possibility to reflect,

"I had the feeling that I benefitted more from it than you did ! (*Laughter*) Because you never reflect on a situation in which you find yourself and on how you actually experience it. Only when you're forced at some point, you reflect on it." (Mr. Mio, follow-up interview)

"Well, it was really beneficial for me, because I reflected on myself, because I looked, because I- it was also really good for me, it was a good refresher, it was a new motivation for me, to well, to refresh the topic more- even more." (Mr. Excellence, follow-up interview)

"And I could take a step forward, because I actually dug up my other talents again. It was then (-) well, interesting, because it actually then showed some aspects to me, because some things have been explained to me, through that, for myself." (Ms. Arrangeur, follow-up interview)

Another crucial reason for choosing the methodology of hermeneutics is that it fits well to the research drivers, which are to explore how individuals make sense of talent (management) and to look at the interplay between talent (management) and identity. Regarding hermeneutics, the constant interaction with the texts, my own pre understanding and existing theory appeals to me and I believe that it is beneficial to the research as a whole in order to develop a deep understanding of the phenomena studied. In conclusion, the reflexive personal journey, my epistemological position, the fit to the research objectives and the hermeneutic circle are the main reasons for my choice of methodology.

What is hermeneutics?

Heidegger (1927) calls hermeneutics the study of interpretation of certain phenomena, in this research it is identity and talent (management). Hermeneutic research can focus on a narrow aspect but is at the same time holistic (Gummesson, 2000). The hermeneutic circle (Gummesson, 2000) begins with pre understanding and first ideas that flow into the research set up and an exploration of the phenomenon.

Alvesson and Sköldberg (2018) differentiate between alethic and objectivist hermeneutics: regarding the latter, *objectivist hermeneutics*, neoidealists in Germany at the end of the nineteenth century argued their case against positivism and proclaimed the notion of understanding (in German "verstehen") the research subject's (re) construction of meaning and past experience as essential for cultural science. Hermeneuticians such as Weber, Dilthey and Simmel draw a clear line between "a studying subject and a studied object" (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018, p. 120) with the intention of reaching the same level of scientific acceptance for cultural science as for natural science (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018).

As the second concept, *alethic hermeneutics* (e.g. Palmer, 1969) employs a more fluid approach to the relationship between researcher and respondent and tries to uncover hidden meanings and narratives. Researchers are always part of a particular world that shares history and is culturally conditioned. Alvesson and Sköldberg (2018) choose the naming "alethic hermeneutics" based on the Greek word aletheia that means uncoveredness. Alethic hermeneutics focuses on the revelation of something hidden. Palmer (1969) and Alvesson and Sköldberg (2018) regard the two approaches to hermeneutics as complementary and not directly opposing. I understand hermeneutics as an approach that allows me as the researcher to participate in the study, to draw interpretations and meanings from the participants' texts while at the same time staying true

to their language. This implies that I also engage in debate and reflection on the individuals' texts and my own participation in the research.

Due to its inductive nature, the study is set up in an emergent format. This means that the use of the texts and emerging patterns of the same shape my approach as the research process proceeds (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). The participants also have a significant influence on the design and the outcome of the research. Hermeneutics does not offer a clear set of rules for interpreting texts or validating the results. However, I embrace some rather practical comments from Alvesson and Sköldberg (2018) on how hermeneutics gives meaning to research. All data from the field research, be it interviews, be it diaries or be it ad-hoc phone calls, is called *text*. Findings emerge from interpreting and discussing the texts and from regarding parts of the texts as meaningful signs. A second principle of the hermeneutic process is contextuality. This means to account for the historic and social context of the research (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). I experience this when I look at the notion of talent management and I find that this phenomenon is dependent on the context, on past experiences, on values and many more aspects while it does not exist independent of the environment. A third principle of hermeneutic research is the dialogue with the research where I as the researcher actively engage with the text instead of passively receiving and analyzing data (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018).

Further methodological considerations

Although I decide for hermeneutics as a best fit to my philosophical stance of interpretivism and my research objectives, some aspects of symbolic interactionism are pointed out as follows because they also shape my pre understanding and initial considerations for this research. Exploring previous work, I come across symbolic interactionism that looks at how actors purposefully and knowledgeably shape social life (Giddens, 1979). Symbolic interactionism focuses on the "theory of the subject", that is on micro-sociology and interpersonal relations (Giddens, 1979). It "explores how members place themselves within their organization" (McAuley et al., 2014, p. 310). McAuley et al. (2014) also describe the notion of self as a metaphor for acting – as a "dramatic artful creation" (p. 327) within symbolic interactionism. I feel drawn to the ideas and the individual (subject) level of analysis of symbolic interactionism and although I do not use symbolic interactionism as a methodology, it inspires my understanding of the research area.

Methodologies of existing work on talent management and identity

Previous studies base their exploration of talent management and identity on grounded theory, case study and clinical psychoanalytical approaches. In detail, Tansley and Tietze (2013) and Kirk (2016) use a grounded theory approach for building theory on talent management and identity. A case study of an accounting organization that employs the "brightest and the best accountants" (Tansley & Tietze, 2013, p. 1803) serves to explore the notion of rites of passage in a talent program and the role of identity work for successfully advancing along passages. Dubouloy (2004) employs a clinical psychoanalytical approach based on theories of the false self and transitional space. In my literature review, I do not come across hermeneutic explorations of the notion of either talent management or identity in organizational studies, although interpretivist and qualitative research is very common in both fields (Alvesson et al., 2008; Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2015). Having discussed the choice of hermeneutics as a suitable methodology to base the research on, the subsequent section explores the use of research methods.

3.3 Research methods

Having discussed philosophical and methodological considerations, this section presents my choices with regards to research methods. Before I eventually decide on the diary-interview method, I work out some aspects that must be mirrored by the research method. In doing so, I take two decisions with the previously explored philosophical and methodological perspectives in mind. On the one hand, aiming at reflexive research, I want to employ a method that facilitates reflection and that enables me to understand the realities of the participants. On the other hand, because I am interested in individual interpretations of experiences and feelings, I decide that the initial collection and interpretation of data should come directly from the participants.

Based on these decisions, I consider the diary-interview method as a suitable and beneficial choice for this research. However, I acknowledge at the same time that naturally, there are also other qualitative methods that could be employed. Nevertheless, I decide for the diary-interview method out of a variety of reasons. First, the combination of diaries and semi-structured interviews encourages reflexivity of the participants and the researcher (Spowart & Nairn, 2014). I am aware that this asks a lot of each participant and also increases the risk that an individual does not proceed with the research project. Therefore, I must clearly outline the necessary time investment at the very beginning. The second reason for the suitability of the method is that the texts are primary accounts from the respondents as opposed to for example observations. And third, I am personally excited about employing a method which allows the respondents to also be creative if they want to, for example when it comes to the format and content of the diary entries. However, I discuss methods to prevent the risk of me guiding some form of creativity in detail later on.

Exploring methods, transcriptions, analysis, translations, the participants and ethics in detail, the sections to follow answer the questions of *what, how, when* and *whom* and continuously reflect on *why*. In these discussions, I include learnings from the pilot research with two participants and on the field research as a whole.

3.3.1 Diary-interview method

The diary-interview method contains three components (Toms & Duff, 2002; Spowart & Nairn, 2014) that I enrich by specifics of my research and develop further after the pilot process: the initial interview, the diary and the follow-up interview. The interviews take place at a variety of locations in a setting chosen by each participant. Each respondent goes through the diary-interview process over a period of six weeks, as shown in Figure 11. A schedule of all interviews can be found in Appendix A. The next paragraphs explain the components of the diary-interview method in detail.
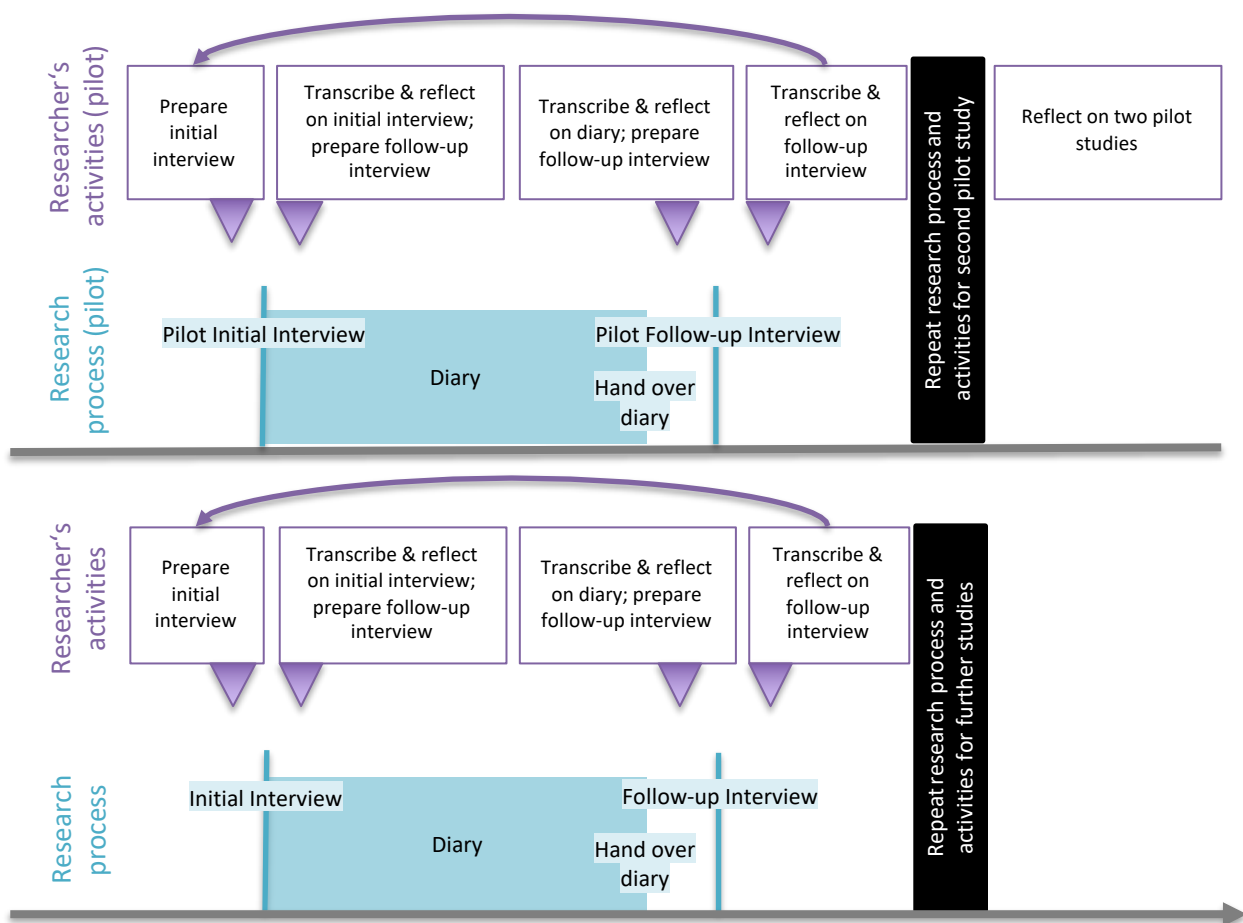
Figure 11: Research process and activities, created by author (2021)

Initial interview

The initial interview of approximately one hour sets the scene for the research. Respondents are asked about their understanding of talent (management) and which meaning they assign to it. Their construction of talent (management) is the foundation for the research to follow. At the same time, this prevents me from directing the participants' thinking. Further, I ask the individuals how they see themselves in talent (management) and carefully pay attention to how they perceive their own talent attribution within their organizations.

Further, I consider the role of organizational components, such as talent (management) in this research, on an individual's identity in identity work. In doing so, I ask open questions on work/life histories (Watson, 2009, p. 62) taking Watson's (2008) social-identities into account. This helps to explore how individuals "interpret, understand and define the world around them" (Faraday & Plummer, 1979, p. 776). Although life history interviews include a reflection on the whole life, I choose to reduce the scope to focus on the respondent's transition from student or school life to work life and the respondent's development at work. This is important for my research because it provides interesting insights into how talent (management) shapes self-identity and social-identities.

Before the interview starts, I introduce the respondent to the main topics of "role at work", "perception of talent management" and "personal experience" and explain the focus on smaller organizations. I express my appreciation and gratitude and reassure the participant that his or her participation is very valuable for the research.

I also tell the individual the following information and ask afterwards if there are any questions left; I explain

- that in case a question or concept is unclear, the participant is very welcome to ask for details
- the role of the co-researcher and the character of the conversation that lies ahead (for example, that the participant is welcome to steer the conversation)
- what story telling means
- that the interview is recorded with a digital voice recorder
- that in case the respondent feels uncomfortable with a question, the recording of the interview can be interrupted to speak in private or the respondent does not have to answer the question
- that the whole study and also the first interview are confidential; I explain in detail what this means (compare Section 3.3.6).

In the pilot research and later field research, the level of perceived difficulty varies from respondent to respondent. I learn that I have to alter the depth of explanation or the exact phrasing of the question depending on the individual. As follows, I present how I formulate the same question on careers and responsibility quite differently, depending on how I perceive each interviewee,

"Now, there's an interesting question regarding the topic of careers. To what extent do you or your employer or your manager steer your career or which aspects of your career? How would you consider this?" (Ms. Appreciative, initial interview)

"I have another question regarding the topic of careers. Well, we have just talked about your role in the workplace. Regarding career, it can happen that either an employee, well you or me, take on a certain responsibility for the own career or it can also happen, that the employer is quite involved and steers this as well. That can be different from person to person and from company to company. How would you see this in your very personal situation?" (Ms. Passion, initial interview)

Sometimes, it is also necessary to inform a participant about the academic perspective on talent management during the interview. Topics that emerge are self-management or the connection to Human Resources. I use an interview guideline with interview questions based on the initial conceptual framework which is developed from existing research (compare Appendix D). Each question has a purpose and potential concepts that might or might not appear. For me, this is a way to make sure to limit the questions to only the relevant ones. After the pilot research I also specifically look at each question in order to see whether it adds value. For example, the answers to which animal to compare talent management with prove to be very rich. Both pilot participants immediately have images in their mind and discuss their options with me, for example,

"**If you could choose an animal to compare it to talent management, which one would that be? -** With which ANIMAL? (*Laughter*) That's an exciting question. (---) It really is, there are so many animal images that are going through my head." (Ms. Passion, initial interview)

On the contrary, evaluating whether to insert a question on the respondent's role in talent management, I have the impression that this question is answered in the course of other questions during the interviews. I also use different question types for the pilot interviews to see what works best for the participants. Although some closed questions are now included in the interview guideline, I learn that the respondents give examples on their own. If this is not the case, I can still ask for examples or situations that apply to a specific context. Further,

in order to see what works best, I also use two different sequential approaches with the pilot participants: I undertake one interview with talent management topics followed by identity topics and then the other way around. Reflecting on the pilot, I see that starting with talent management questions makes the whole interview more focused. More learnings from the pilot can be observed in Appendix E.

Diary

At the end of the first interview, I thank the participant for sharing thoughts with me and I physically introduce the diary. During the pilot work and later on, I have the impression and get the feedback that the idea of the diary is rather clear. Both pilot respondents appreciate the small colorful light-weight notebook (see Figure 12). I introduce the diary as a device to carry with them for four weeks and to document situations, thoughts or feelings that have to do with talent management. They can of course choose the format. Although I also mention the option to the participants to draw pictures as an alternative to note-taking, all of the respondents prefer the written word. One of the benefits of diary keeping is that the respondents reflect on the questions and concepts of the initial interview. They use diaries as a way to capture their experiences and learnings.
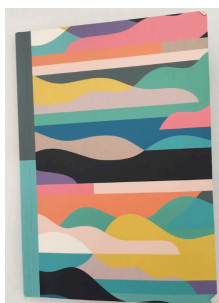
Figure 12: Photo of diary

I tell the respondents that the diary is valuable to me and that we will discuss the contents in the follow-up interview. I also explain that the term *diary* might be misleading because I ask them to please write around one entry a week over four weeks – or more if they feel like it. As for using a time-based approach, I encourage the participants to write down situations at work in hindsight about anything that they personally relate to talent management. This approach therefore encourages reflection-on-action (Schön, 1983; 1992) The participants tell me that it is challenging to write about talent management situations as they have to think about what it really means to them and which situations to include,

"It was difficult for me to define boundaries, what should actually be in it and what shouldn't be there. And (-) I often wasn't quite sure, what actually fits to the topic and what might actually go way too far." (Ms. Appreciative, follow-up interview)

With this in mind, I ask about the reasons why specific incidents are written in the diary and we have in-depth discussions in the follow-up interview. I decide to provide the introduction to the diary in a handwritten format, as shown in Figure 13, additionally to the verbal instruction after the first interview. This should show how much I appreciate that the respondents participate in my research and that I also invest in it. The translated version of the introductory text in English can be found in Appendix F.
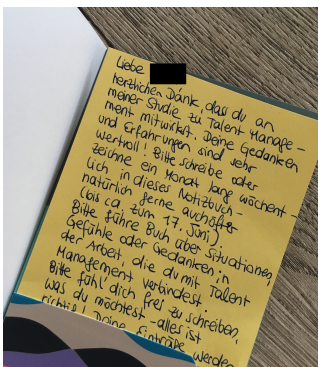
Figure 13: Photo of introductory text in diary

I call or email the participants to catch up during the four weeks reflection time to ask whether any questions have occurred and to make sure they feel good about the task. One respondent answers,

"I'm getting along fine with writing the diary, and I always carry your small notebook with me. Currently, it is with me in [name of city] and discovers the world." (Ms. Appreciative, Whatsapp conversation during diary writing)

When I ask the pilot participants in the follow-up interview about their experience with the diaries, they assure me that the amount of guidance and catching up between the interviews is just right. Other reflections on the diary during the pilot research can be found in Appendix G. All of the respondents write into the diary and most of them regard it as an enriching experience, only a few as a rather tiresome task. Nevertheless, all of them finish the diary entries and hand the diary over either face-to-face or by email.

Because diary keeping is time-consuming, I transparently communicate the likely efforts involved to the participants. I already give information in the participant information sheet that I send by email beforehand as shown in Appendix B. I try to encourage the respondents by being transparent and honest, by my own high level of motivation and "going the extra mile" in the form of the nice physical notebook and the personal introduction. I know all of the participants, which might also increase their commitment to the study. I do not contact them very often during diarying because I do not want to put them under pressure or create inconvenience. I just trust them to finish and sometimes check in to ask if there are any questions.

Follow-up interview

The follow-up interview of approximately one hour is primarily driven by the participants. Besides the interview guideline that shows only a few topics to be covered (compare Appendix H), I create follow-up questions from the diary content or the initial interview reflections for each respondent. In the follow-up interview, I discuss the diary entries with each participant. The respondents use diary keeping as a way to reflect on their sense-making and to question hidden assumptions and concepts. Together, the respondents and I engage in mutual sense-making during our discussions, where the diary content provides a starting point for reflection. As the author, I get access to the realities of the participants, and can therefore explore what is happening in talent management.

Due to the iterative nature of the hermeneutic process, the interview guide can be adapted during the research in order to allow for space to discuss concepts that come up in the interviews. This means that from the second participant onwards I can add concepts that emerge in the texts of previous participants. One example is the reward-related question derived from the first pilot study. This process implies that I go multiple times through all available material from each respondent before creating the additional interview questions for the follow-up interview.

Before the interview and the recording starts, I give the participant the following information and ask afterwards if there are any questions left; I explain that

- in case a question or concept is unclear, the participant is very welcome to ask for details
- the conversation is again recorded with a digital voice recorder
- in case the respondent feels uncomfortable with a question, the recording of the interview can be interrupted to speak in private or the respondent does not have to answer the question
- the whole study and also the second interview are confidential; I explain in detail what this means (compare Section 3.3.6).

In the interview itself, the participant and I return to the events of the diary which enables discussion and reflection of the written content. Further, we also discuss whether the experience of diary writing has changed the idea of talent (management) of the participants. The pilot follow-up interviews show that it is more valuable to ask about events and feelings related to the diary than having a standardized set of questions. Both pilot interviews show no additional insights from two questions of the guideline and I therefore decide to remove them, as shown in Appendix H. Instead, I focus more on in-depth conversation on diary events.

While the initial interview takes place face-to-face, the follow-up interview mainly takes place by phone, as shown in the interview schedule in Appendix A. On the one hand, it is challenging because an interpretation of the body language is missing. But on the other hand, some respondents say that they feel comfortable and it seems more like an informal than an official talk to them. I decide for this mix of face-to-face contact and phone conversations in the different interviews because of positive feedback from the pilot respondents. Other reflections on the pilot follow-up interviews can be viewed in Appendix I. After each interview we discuss the next steps and how the participant will receive updates about the research. I ask all respondents for feedback on the experience of participating in the research. Later, when I explore the texts of the respondents, I sometimes need a short clarification on specific questions. I then use the opportunity to call them.

Reflections on field research and decisions taken

This section reflects on the pilot research with two participants and on the field research as a whole. While the implications of the pilot research are also mentioned throughout the methods section of the thesis, I additionally reflect on certain aspects in this section now. This especially concerns how I contact the participants and how I perceive their reactions to the research process. I also summarize key learnings from the pilot research and how they change or affirm the approach to my work and the further course of the research.

For me, the pilot research is significant because I could experience the process, try out different approaches and reflect on the outcome before starting with the larger sample. The very first hurdle I have to overcome is to approach my potential pilot participants: I rarely ask for favors and essentially, I learn this is all it is about when it comes to recruiting participants. I am aware that I ask a lot from the participants – a huge investment regarding time and openness for reflection. For the pilot, I ask two people that fit my sampling criteria and that I know quite well in order to receive honest feedback on the approach. Both are also interested in research in general and are happy to participate.

During the pilot discussions, I doubt whether the texts answer the research questions. But then, I particularly enjoy listening to the recordings and reading the transcripts. Each time I engage with the texts something different catches my eye and by looking more closely at the texts, line by line, I find the participants to indeed respond to the research questions. This gives me feelings of confidence and enjoyment. I already conclude from the pilot experience that I utterly enjoy qualitative research as it stimulates my thinking and provides open space for me. The next paragraphs show specific learnings from the pilot research and also some aspects from further field work.

Learning I: Conceptual framework

The pilot process encourages me to challenge each individual interview question and ask about its helpfulness for answering the research questions and for meeting the research objectives. I find that some questions stir something in the pilot participants while only a few are – simply put – unnecessary. In doing so, I do not only refine the interview guidelines (see previous sections) but also clarify the focus of my research. As a result, I sharpen the conceptual framework to make it more coherent.

Learning II: Language concerns

I try to transcribe each of the interviews and diary entries in German within a week after it has taken place. This proves to be valuable because I can write up my notes on the encounter, noting both pre- and post-tape talk if applicable, the initial thoughts and reflections on the participant and myself while they are still present in my memory. However, for the pilot study, I try English and German for documenting my thoughts while listening to audio files and reading transcripts multiple times. Whereas I initially thought it might make sense to use German language for the whole piece because all interviews also take place in German, I quickly find out that English notes and reflections are much easier for me, and that I can articulate myself better. Be it the familiarity with terminology or be it simply my preference, I try both languages and settle for English for this research project.

Learning III: Sequential approach, a spiral of reflection

My field work evidences the form of a spiral as shown in Figure 14. Instead of a linear approach, I adopt a sequential approach for the field work. Because one study follows the next one, all studies start at different times. In the ten months of in-depth work with the respondents, I continuously take notes of my own reflections on the research process, the research area, the participants and myself in a research diary. Therefore, the research process I go through with one participant reflects on and influences the work I do with the next respondent. In other words, reflecting on one study adapts and changes the next study.
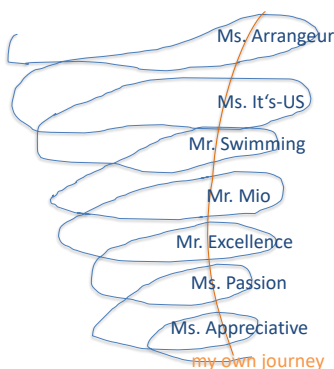
Figure 14: The non-linear nature of the research process, created by author (2021)

The more I get involved in the research, the more reflective I also become in other parts of life. I carefully listen in order to understand what people are telling me. I also observe that I become more self-confident over the course of the field research. The illustration shows how I develop alongside the participants, and how each encounter encourages reflection on my own hidden assumptions and behavior. From the beginning of the field work in May 2019, I

get into a reflective routine during nature walks. In hindsight, I perceive my own journey to be interwoven with the sense-making of the participants. Together, we make sense of what is happening in talent (management) and identity issues.

Learning IV: Interview technique and courage

During the process, I am amazed by the openness of the participants and I highly appreciate that they share their feelings and identity-related experiences with me. I think that I am a good listener and I enjoy this activity very much. I learn that active listening is a key skill, so I affirm the interviewees by nodding and other body language. I also share own experiences and realize that the interview is then transformed into a conversation. One of the key learnings during the pilot interviews is that the participants really want to talk and that I can be more courageous when asking questions. That means that I can ask in more detail or pose the question again, if I feel that there is more to it than the given answer. During the pilot research, I try different notetaking techniques alongside the interviews. I learn that the fewer notes I take, the more focused I am and the better I can grasp the reality of the respondent. Therefore, I decide that I refrain from notetaking during a conversation at all and instead, I take voice notes directly after the interview. I speak notes on the voice recorder and put them down when I transcribe the interview. The original transcript is then in the left column of the document and the notes are in the right column.

Learning V: Timing, timing, timing

The field work is done over a period of ten months. It starts with the pilot research in May 2019 and I finish the last follow-up interview of my sample in March 2020. I write into my research diary,

"One last interview to go! Good timing. The corona crisis is about to begin. I couldn't have done field work now (no everyday corporate life anymore), I feel thankful, very thankful." (Research diary, March 16, 2020)

In the middle of my field research, in August 2019, I have a baby which is an emotional, happy and challenging moment for me. Still, I am also eager to continue with the field work. Although one of my major strengths is my drive, energy and self-motivation and I still feel very strongly about the DBA and the work with the respondents, it now takes me more effort than ever to free up the time to invest in the research. I now regard time for the DBA which equals time for reflection and for "myself" as a luxury. Also, I feel quite tired,

"This is a very interesting situation which brings about new emotions: I'm challenged to prioritize even more, to openly ask for help and to learn to be patient. This was highly unsatisfactory for me at the beginning but now I learn more and more to cope with this and to accept that time has taken on a different meaning for me, mainly through having baby [name of baby]." (Research diary, November 01, 2019)

3.3.2 Transcription of texts

This section presents how I transcribe the texts after the field work. The focus on smaller organizations in Germany, Austria and the German-speaking part of Switzerland leads to interviews in German, which is the native language of all respondents. This further implies that I transcribe the conversations in German. During the pilot study, some aspects emerge that require careful consideration. Because meanings shall be preserved in the course of transcription and at the same time it shall be as smooth as possible to read the transcripts, I take the following decisions after much contemplation on this topic:

- Transcribing the interviews in German, I take the accent of the respondent into account. However, I write in formal German as much as possible so that others will also be able to understand. I do not, however, change words or sentences.
- I put punctuation marks according to the flow of the respondent's talk and not according to grammar rules. This is also reflected later in English translations.
- When I ask the same question in all interviews, I do not write the whole question into the transcript but just put a note in the transcription for the question, such as "Question regarding comparison of talent management with an animal". If I formulate it differently or give more information on a topic, I do transcribe the question.
- I only transcribe small talk in between in case I consider it relevant for the research.
- I use the following transcription symbols for my study, as I experience them as useful during the pilot studies.

Capital letters, e.g. AND	Indicate loud voice
Small font size, e.g. and the other reason	Indicates quiet voice
Italic letters, e.g. I thought *he wanted to change*	Indicate change in voice
Brackets and italic letters, e.g. (*Laughter*)	Add more details
A hyphen, e.g. in his Muni-, Frankfurt flat	Shows interruption
Hyphen(s) in brackets, e.g. (-)	Show pauses (also: filling words like "ahm"), one hyphen corresponds to approximately one second
Bold font, e.g. **talent**	Shows questions and comments from the researcher

A sample transcript which I have translated into English can be found in Appendix J. I use the folder structure illustrated by Figure 15 where each participant has one folder with his or her pseudonym that contains all data. The letter "A" stands for audio and "T" for transcription:
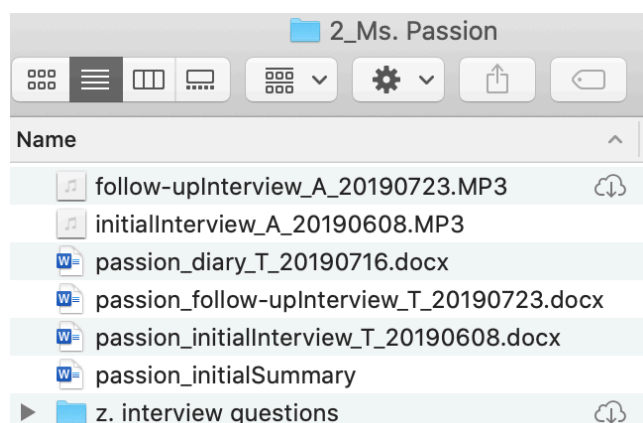
Figure 15: Photo of a participant's folder structure

In conclusion, I find that transcribing the interviews is a major challenge for me because of the time needed for each exact transcription of the recording. Nevertheless, I feel that I can relive each interview and note my thoughts on it along with the voice notes taken directly after the interview.

3.3.3 Exploration of texts

This section details how I explore the texts in form of initial summaries, mind maps and the hermeneutic circle. My starting point of exploration is an initial reflection and consideration of the texts from the interviews and the diaries. I print out hard copies of all available transcripts and use them for the explorative process. The interview transcripts are written in form of a table, separated into small chunks, mostly containing one question and one answer each, sometimes more and sometimes less. I use a similar approach for the diary content: however, because the diary content is not structured by questions, I divide the content into parts that I believe belong together. The diary documents also adopt a table format where usually one page is put into one row, sometimes more and sometimes less. The reasoning behind this presentation is to mirror the interpretative approach and to divide one long set of texts into smaller portions. Each document already includes a column on the right side with various notes taken during the transcription process and directly after the interview (transcribed from the voice recorder).

I look at each question and answer individually line by line and highlight words or sentences with a text marker that are connected to my research questions. I believe that each phrase has something important to say and needs to be looked at individually. I take notes of my initial reflections and interpretations of the texts as well as my own considerations in the right column of each document, too. I can clearly differentiate between original texts and my interpretations through the table format. Later, I reflect on each interview and also on all documents of one participant as a whole in order to get a perspective different from the line-by-line approach. I also take notes of the more holistic picture and write them at the beginning of the summary for each participant. This is discussed in the next section in detail. Although it is time-consuming to combine both approaches, the line-by-line and holistic interpretation (Gadamer, 1976), I gain a rich understanding of each participant's reality through that.

Exploration of texts: Initial summaries

This section reflects on how I explore the texts with the help of initial summaries. During the pilot research, I look at the participants' texts and wonder how to structure them to then discuss the research questions. It might sound peculiar to the reader that I write about structure when engaging in hermeneutics. However, referring to earlier reflections, I acknowledge the co-existence of multiple truths while I am fond of structure and clarity at the same time. While I enjoy qualitative research, I am also an analytical thinker which is no contradiction for me. Eco (1999) introduces that both analyzed feelings and reason guide the researcher in hermeneutic work. Upon reflection, the pilot research shows that I can immerse myself in the texts, be in the shoes of the participants and – at the same time – structure the texts in order to discuss the respondents' realities and meanings.

For the pilot research, I work out key messages in a separate document for each participant and summarize the texts according to the following approach: At first, I look at the respondent's perception of talent (management). Then, I explore the social-identities the individual attributes to his or herself. And subsequently, I look at the participant's perception of the role of talent (management) in identity construction related to social-identities.

The following key aspects are important to note on reflection:

- Exploring the first two parts of the three-step process, I already get many hints and put keywords in for the last part. This also reflects the hermeneutic circle as I take many rounds and go back and forth to connect the different parts of the structure.
- The summaries illustrate the fit of the research method to the aims of the research. I use a color code for each insight to show whether it originates from the initial interview, the diary or the follow-up interview. It becomes apparent that the in-depth nature of the research approach is also mirrored in the rich findings of the three-step research method.
- I primarily use summaries in order to structure my thoughts; later in the exploration of texts I do not use the summaries at all but immerse myself in the original texts.
- The findings of the field work in Chapter 4 partly differ from the content of the initial summaries, especially with regards to social-identities or the interplay of identity and talent (management). This shows that my thinking evolves when engaged in the hermeneutic circle of reflection.

- As the summaries are beneficial for me during the pilot work, I also write summaries for all other participants after having finished each transcript. While all summaries are included in the respective folder of each participant, they are not attached in the Appendix of the thesis due to data privacy considerations.

- While the order of the topics (1 – Meaning of talent (management) for the individual; 2 – Social-identities of the individual; 3 – The individual's perception of the role of talent (management) in identity construction) works fine for the initial summaries, I find out in the exploration phase that the order has to be changed. Interestingly, the notion of self and social-identities of the individuals plays an integral part in the sense-making of talent (management). Therefore, this needs to be discussed before the meanings of talent (management) are explored.

In conclusion, the initial summaries prove to be a good starting point to organize thoughts and get a feeling for the research area, but I soon realize that they have limitations. Consequently, I turn towards mind mapping in the next section.

Exploration of texts: Mind mapping

This section reflects on how I explore the texts with the help of mind mapping. After notetaking I cluster the ideas and concepts according to the three-step process discussed in the previous section and group incidents and phenomena into themes. I create a mind map on the wall of our flat's study (compare Figure 16) by first collecting and grouping thoughts that emerge from the texts on blue post-its. Then, I add sub-thoughts on green post-its to the headings where appropriate. As a next step, I categorize the thoughts according to the framework of Arthur and Boyles (2007) on yellow post-its because I find it quite easy to handle. Finally, I attribute the topics to internal versus external attributions of talent (management) because I feel this is significant for the further course of the exploration.

Figure 16: Photo of mind map "Attributing meaning to talent (management)"

The following key aspects are important to note on reflection:

▪ The reasoning behind mind mapping is a straight-forward way to organize my thoughts around what talent (management) means to the individuals. However, this does not limit the exploration of the themes. Actually, I find that my thoughts organize themselves in the process of writing and (re) reading and the mind map is not more than a first help of orientation to me, similar to the initial summaries.

- Exploring the individuals' talent (management) conceptualizations, I realize that solely defining talent (management) does not provide the full picture because the participants always put it in relation to stories, experiences, feelings and hidden meanings.
- I started with a mind map of "Attributing meaning to talent (management)" (see figure above) and planned to enlarge it by the third topic of "Identity and talent". However, when I proceed to the next exploration cluster of the interplay of identity and talent (management), I find that mind mapping has its limits, as shown in Figure 17.
- This indicates that the complexity of how identity works and what attributions are made to talent (management), are rather personal processes and cannot be demonstrated on the wall of our flat's study in a mind map. This can also be seen more clearly in the subsequent Chapter 4.
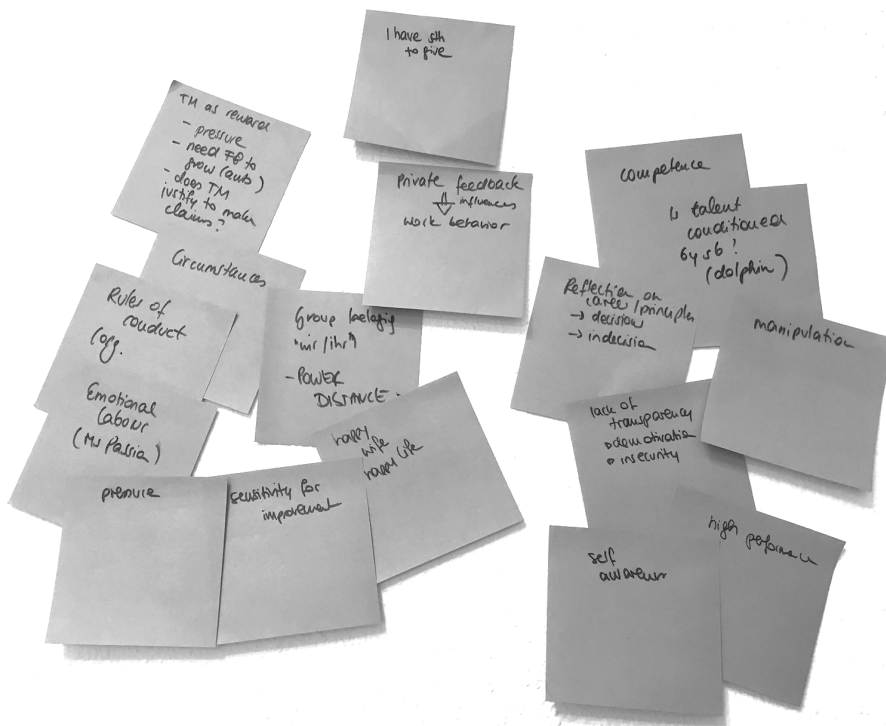
Figure 17: Photo of mind map "Identity & talent"

In conclusion, mind mapping proves to be a good starting point to organize thoughts and get a feeling for the research area, but I soon realize that it has its limitations. Consequently, I need another strategy to explore the themes which is shown in the next step of exploration.

Exploration of texts: The hermeneutic circle

This section reflects on how I engage in the hermeneutic circle of interpretation. Parallel to the summaries and the mind map, I also explore my pre understanding and the initial conceptual framework that I developed before the field research. In detail, I reflect on inclusion & diversity and self-talent management with regards to talent (management). I also reflect on identity control, individual agency, role making & role taking, self-awareness, competence, group belonging, authenticity and purpose with regards to the role of talent in identity construction. I reflect on my initial conceptual framework to see whether these thoughts reoccur from the texts of the participants and from my interpretations. Alvesson and Sköldberg (2018) call this process primary interpretation. Partially, the concepts appear again within the texts and I am very curious to look at everything in more detail, again. The evidence for some concepts is rather clear while this cannot be said for others. I also find that while some initial ideas do not appear at all, other concepts, for example values, surprisingly surface among almost all participants. Throughout the exploration of the texts, I stay curious, do not jump to conclusions and explore the texts without any expectations regarding the results. I continuously draw pictures on (scrap) paper, as shown in Figure 18, and I very much enjoy the activities of interpretation, exploration and reflection.
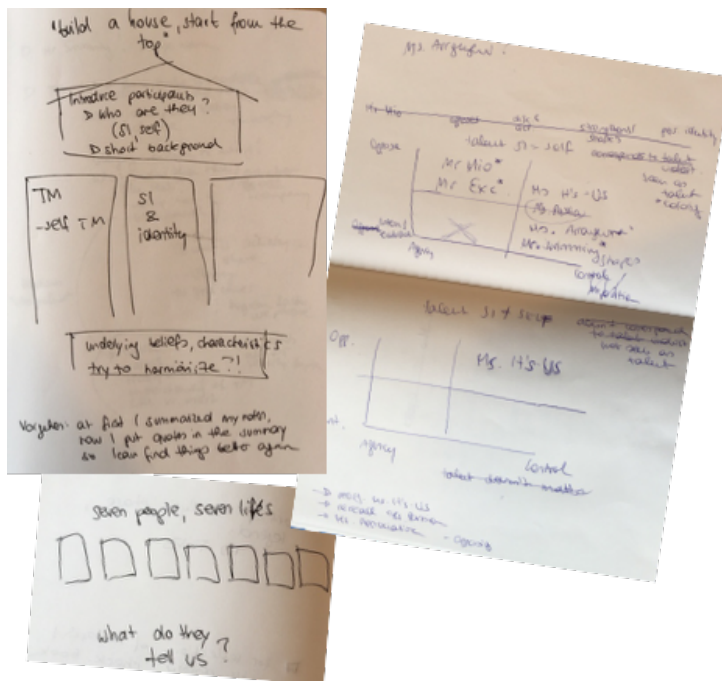
Figure 18: Photo of note-taking examples

At the same time, I start to draw themes from the interviews and the diaries together and compare and contrast the different aspects. I make sense of how the participants see talent (management) and of how they regard its role in identity construction. I group information where participants share a similar understanding and I contrast how different individuals cope with identity topics in the light of talent (management). Because the texts are explored more and more thoroughly, themes emerge from the data. I review the texts again in a secondary interpretation and enter into a reflexive dialogue on how my own opinions and pre understanding might or might not influence the interpretations. I as the researcher also engage in self-reflection to better understand my own role (Smythe, Ironside, Sims, Swenson & Spence, 2008). Within the secondary interpretation I also reflect on my own stance on the issues raised in the interviews and diaries (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). I switch between the text as a whole and its individual parts, which is part of the hermeneutic circle (Gadamer, 1976).

During this time, I keep thinking and reflecting and interpreting, and at some point, I realize that I must start writing. I learn about myself that I work best when letting my thoughts evolve. I come up with new ideas when I am immersed in the process of talking or writing, letting my words expand, speak, evolve. That being said, I just get started although I am aware – and in hindsight the experience also affirms this – that I would rewrite and reorganize the exploration of the texts many, many times. Having previously talked about time constraints, also in this phase of the research I only have short periods of time at my disposal. Investing roughly one hour a day I make steady progress in the exploration of the texts. I can feel my mind working and my thoughts evolving, and every day when I return to the analysis, I have something new to add.

After the initial interpretation of the texts, I revisit the literature and engage in a discussion of previous research, the texts of the participants and my own sense-making. I repeat the interpretative approach and develop my considerations further. My understanding evolves through this and the final conceptual framework increasingly takes shape. Although the process sounds straightforward, my feeling about it is never stable. Sometimes I see everything in clear patterns but then the more I reflect on a theme the more complex and multi-faceted it becomes. The process I go along with is to explore, to interpret and reflect, to contrast with existing literature and to go back to reflection. I repeat this process until I feel that I have reflected enough on the texts and that my understanding has uncovered different layers of the phenomena.

At the end of this section, I present a final remark on the nature of exploration. At work, I mostly work on digital devices and I enable organizations to digitalize their talent management processes. I am proud because I quickly adopt new technology, be it in private or professional life, and enthusiastically explore use cases for it by, at the same time, constantly increasing its effectiveness. I am aware that I could also exploit qualitative data analysis software to my advantage with only little effort. However, for this research, my preference is to use my own mind, to listen and to uncover hidden meanings of the respondents to reach a deeper understanding without the aid of computer software. I feel the aspired level of reflection is more likely to be achieved by using pen and paper, post-its, markers – basically, non-digital tools – for exploring the texts. I deliberately take this decision during the pilot research and in hindsight, I am sure it is suitable for me and my development as well as for the research area and approach.

3.3.4 Translation from German to English

This section presents considerations on translations. All quotes used in the thesis are translated from the original German transcript to English. Already when I decide to focus on the German-speaking region, I am aware that this most probably leads to interviews with native German speakers and therefore much translation effort for the English thesis. Still, there is no alternative to having the interviews in German because all other options, such as interviews with native German speakers in English, would risk a loss of meaning. Further, the setting of the interview should be comfortable for all participants, and they should feel at ease when talking about their experiences. Reflecting on this situation, I also do not include French, Italian or Romansh speaking Swiss respondents because this, again, would make it necessary to have the interviews in English (because I do not speak French, Italian or Romansh). Although my initial idea of translating the quotes from German to English is quite straight-forward at the beginning, the following considerations show how I cope with challenges that arise from this situation.

Translation work is painstaking, time-consuming and detail oriented. I only go through translations when I feel awake and physically well. Although I have tried different ways of translating the texts, I describe the method chosen in detail to provide inspiration for other researchers facing similar challenges. During the exploration phase, I initially include quotes from interviews and diaries in the original language (German) in Chapter 4. This means that I cope with a mixture of languages when exploring the texts and developing the final conceptual framework.

As one of my supervisors is not a German speaker, I however quite quickly translate the quotes to English, and leave both, the German original and the English translation in my work for more than half a year until finishing the chapter. Through this, I can revisit the translations multiple times to make sure that they are as close as possible to the original German meaning. The input from my supervisors in the form of challenging questions and comments helps me to continuously improve the translations. This is necessary because the major challenge in translating is preserving the original meaning. I find that the longer I am occupied with translations, the more accurate I can capture meanings. This implies, that once I feel comfortable enough, I go through all translations once again. My advice to other researchers in similar situations is to plan and take enough time for the learning processes of translation work.

Another challenge I come across is the use of commas which is quite different in German and English. Although I put punctuation marks according to the flow of the respondent's talk and not according to grammar rules, I still use many more commas in German due to the nature of the language than I would do in the same sentence in English. I decide that my English translation mirrors the commas in German because the translation should be as exact as possible. Nevertheless, I am aware that the punctuation marks of the quotes might bewilder the native English reader.

Further, I come across some words that do not exist in English as such. For example, the German word Fachidiot consists of two words, "subject" and "idiot". Fachidiot is an expert in a certain field who is not able to see beyond its limits. I even ask friends who are native English speakers, and they regard the English word "nerd" to come closest to this definition. Because this does not transfer the whole meaning of the word, I decide to leave original German words in the text, where applicable, and add the definition.

3.3.5 The participants

This section explores considerations on the number of participants and sampling criteria. At the beginning of the research, I plan to recruit between ten and twelve participants additionally to the pilot participants. At the same time, I bear in mind that changes might occur due to learnings from the pilot studies.

I take the following decisions based on the pilot research: First, I decide to include the pilot participants in my sample because the research approach and method are affirmed and because the interview guidelines are only slightly adapted after the pilot studies. The very personal and in-depth discussions are valuable for my research. Second, I decide to undertake a total number of seven in-depth studies due to the richness of the data, the capacity I have and the high level of reflection of the participants. The three-stage reflective process is in-depth work, generates texts of approximately 300 pages and mirrors a change in the participants' perceptions. Because the research area is personal and no theoretical saturation will be achieved, my main arguments for a small sample are the high amount of reflection and capacity limitations. Further, the research mirrors auto-ethnographic aspects: along the research journey, I also embark on my own very personal journey where I develop my thinking further and increasingly embrace reflection and reflexivity. In an ongoing process, I reflect on each study, each participant, my own assumptions and experiences, and on the research as a whole. Therefore, I argue that I indeed take part in this hermeneutic research where the participants and I engage in sense-making (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2018).

I make a convenient sample and approach suitable respondents through contacts from work, private life and university. The respondents come from different organizations to limit the influence of extra-individual forces like for example organizational culture, organizational agents or organizational discourses (Alvesson et al., 2008). Potential participants are informed about the content, purpose and nature of the research face-to-face or by phone; they are also sent all details beforehand by email, as shown in the subsequent section. They are asked whether they would like to participate in the research. Naturally, they are only included if they actively reach out to me and give their consent to the research. The respondents' ages range from the late 20s to the late 50s. I include four women and three men, who are in different life stages with or without children. They also have varying educational and professional backgrounds and different roles at work.

Based on existing work, context is absolutely crucial in talent management (e.g. Collings et al., 2019; Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020; Krishnan & Scullion, 2017; Tansley et al., 2013; Thunnissen et al., 2013). The research therefore focuses on individuals in the Germanic GLOBE dimension (Meyers et al., 2020). The reason for this is that Human Resource managers from the Germanic GLOBE dimension share a rather inclusive understanding of talent management (Meyers et al., 2020). This culture group's score on future orientation is particularly high, which shapes talent management policies, design and perceptions (Festing et al., 2013). In particular, the participants are employed in Germany, Austria and the German-speaking part of Switzerland (Harsch & Festing, 2019). I do not recruit participants from non-German-speaking regions because this could lead to language barriers with me being a native German speaker. The participants have different years of employment and are all office employees because this is the main target group of talent management. However, a critical discussion on who to include in inclusive talent management follows in Chapter 5 of the thesis. With regards to organization size, I decide to include people from smaller organizations with up to 2 000 employees (Festing et al., 2013). Although the EU size limit for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises is 250 employees (European commission, 2021) I decide to adopt the definition used by Festing et al. (2013). The respondents' organizations have different size ranges with up to 1 000 employees. The organizations are active in different sectors and the respondents have varying lengths of work experience.

Existing work on employee reactions to exclusive talent management often regard the talent status as a criterion for sampling (e.g. Björkman et al., 2013). Thereby, studies predominately focus on star performers (De Boeck et al., 2018). Although an official talent status usually does not exist in inclusive talent management, this research explores perceived talent attributions of the individuals. After the initial interview, it becomes apparent that the range of participants covers both, employees who perceive to be seen as talent and employees who perceive not to correspond to the talent understanding of their organization. As a final remark, participants are offered to choose a pseudonym for themselves, but only Mr. Mio does so. For the other participants, I choose an alias that demonstrates a main characteristic or thought that I attribute to them. The pseudonyms can be viewed in the interview schedule in Appendix A.

3.3.6 Ethical considerations

In reflexive research, transparent answers to ethical considerations are particularly important. My key motivation for this research area is to listen to employees, as opposed to view talent (management) and identity issues from managerial or organizational perspectives. This section addresses a number of ethical questions which arise from the research focus and the in-depth nature of the study design. When I experiment with different interview techniques and question types, I find that the participants are more willing to share thoughts with me when I also share my own experiences and thoughts with them. However, I am aware of the danger that the participants adopt my thinking and use similar experiences to make sense of phenomena. A situation where participants are limited in using their own independent mind poses an ethical dilemma. I therefore try to limit my own influence on the participants and to ask the questions in a way to allow for enough space for the own thinking. The reader can observe this in the transcript in Appendix J.

Further, when I transcribe and interpret the texts, I fear that I would see the realities of the participants in a different way from how they actually regard them. In case of uncertainty, I therefore call the participants again to make sure I understand correctly. At the same time, I accept and embrace that subjectivity of the researcher exists and that the interpretation is of course based on my own experience and pre understanding. I handle this situation by seeking to clearly differentiate between my interpretation and the exact accounts of the participants. For example, I note my interpretations in the interview transcripts on the right side of each document. Also, I distinguish between Chapter 4 that presents the participants' narratives free from other influence factors and Chapter 5 that engages with literature and my own experiences and thoughts on talent (management) and identity issues.

Regarding the question of informed consent, all potential respondents are informed about the content, purpose and nature of the research by direct contact – either face-to-face or in the form of a phone conversation. They are additionally sent the Participant Information Sheet by email, which is presented in Appendix B. I ask each person whether she or he would like to participate in the research and include them only if they actively reach out to me and give their consent to the research. I send the information sheet and consent form (see Appendix C) before the first interview by email and let each participant sign at the end of the first interview. In that way, it would not disrupt the interview before it starts. I am aware that this bears the risk of people to be unwilling to sign the consent form after going through the interview. However, I believe this risk is smaller than the risk of disruption upon signing at the beginning. I make sure that all information is given to the participant in the introduction

session, right before the first interview starts. According to feedback received from the pilot participants, the information is complete and clearly structured. It provides an idea of what is to come, and they have the feeling that they can ask questions.

Regarding confidentiality and anonymity, I let the participants speak under assured confidentiality and transparently discuss ethical considerations before each conversation. I hide the respondents' names and organizations in all documents so that the answers cannot be connected to an individual or an organization. To make sure the interview takes place in a comfortable setting for the participant, the first interview is carried out face-to-face in a private space which is chosen by the respondent. The check-ins and also the follow-up interviews are mostly carried out by phone. In case a participant feels uncomfortable, the recording of the interview can be interrupted to speak in private or the respondent does not have to answer a specific question.

3.4   Conclusion of my research journey

The conclusion of this chapter summarizes the reflections on philosophical, methodological, practical and ethical considerations of my research journey. All of them build the foundation for Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, an exploration and critical discussion of the texts.

My own view of the world positions this research project in a subjectivist ontological and interpretivist epistemological standpoint. The notion that various truths exist also fits the research aims and purpose. The methodological choice of hermeneutics, which is the study of interpretation, enables reflexive research and regards the participants and me to participate in mutual sense-making. The emergent format of the research project allows the participants to steer the process and the outcome. Regarding research methods, I understand and also experience the diary-interview method to facilitate reflection, to focus on the primary accounts of the individuals and to be a rather creative research method, which I enjoy. I undertake the field research with participants who work at smaller organizations in Germany, Austria and the German-speaking part of Switzerland. Throughout the chapter, I reflect on considerations regarding transcribing, translating and exploring the texts. The questions *what, how, when*, *whom* and *why* in the final part address the rather practical issues of the research. After designing the research approach, I put it into practice during the work with the respondents. I embark on a journey with the participants, of which the following chapters give an account of.

4 Exploring the texts

This chapter presents the texts of the respondents as transcribed during the three-step diary-interview process. Because the participants' thinking evolves over the time of the research process, I also note for each quote whether it occurs in the initial interview (initial), the follow-up interview (follow-up) or in the diary (diary). This chapter provides space for the participants to share their experiences and thoughts while a critical discussion follows in the subsequent Chapter 5.

The exploration of the texts is divided into three parts: Social-identities at work, What is talent (management)?, and Negotiating talent (management). The first part presents the participants together with their social-identities. While their introduction was initially included in the methodology chapter, it is more meaningful to present the respondents' backgrounds together with everything that I learn about their identities during the research process. Therefore, the participant introduction is an important part of the hermeneutic exploration and not a section in Chapter 3. The second part explores What is talent (management)?. It includes a discussion on talent meanings and talent meaning creation processes. It also presents further concepts the participants individually connect to their sense-making of talent (management). Finally, the third part explores how individuals make sense of talent (management) in their identity formation. This includes a discussion of opposing or embracing social-identities from work and internalizing them into the self. Because the first two parts build the foundation for the final exploration, some aspects re-emerge in more detail towards the end. I then wrap up this chapter and transition to the subsequent critical discussion.

4.1 An introduction of the participants and their social-identities

This is the first of three parts to present the texts of the respondents. After introducing each respondent by using social-identity categories (Watson, 2008), individual talent attributions are explored. Initially, I focus on three out of five social-identity categories because formal-role, local-personal and local-organizational social-identity seem to be most relevant to the research area. However, additional categories arise from the work with the respondents which are naturally included in the exploration to follow.

While talent status is rather not used in inclusive talent management, as previously explored in Section 2.2.4, the individuals seem to negotiate the personal notion of talent. This part of the exploration therefore also looks at attributions of the respondents, that is whether they perceive to be seen as talent by their organization, or not, and how they see themselves. The negotiation process between the own and the organization's talent attributions is called talent-identity in the exploration to follow. The concept and its relationship with talent status are then critically discussed in the subsequent chapter in Section 5.2.2.

While part two and three of the exploration chapter are organized according to phenomena and not according to individuals, this part introduces each person separately and presents the countries of the participants, organization-level and individual level characteristics. Each introduction is concluded with a summary graph about the respective social-identities. In this respect, talent-identity emerges as a part of local-organizational social-identities which is also discussed in the following chapter. All participants are offered to choose a pseudonym for themselves, but only Mr. Mio does so. For the other respondents, I choose an alias that demonstrates a main characteristic or thought that I attribute to them. Table 1 presents the pseudonyms as well as an overview of the participants including personal and organizational information. To classify industries and sectors, I use the structure provided by the United States Department of Labor (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021).

Participant information		Personal information							Organizational information	
Participant Nr.	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Marital status and children	Educational level	Country	Current role	Length of work experience	Industry and sector of organization	Number of employees
1 (pilot)	Ms. Appreciative	Early 30s	female	single without children	Tertiary education (university)	Germany	Consultant	3-5 years in the same organization	Service-providing industry Professional and business services sector	300-350
2 (pilot)	Ms. Passion	Late 20s	female	partnered without children	Tertiary education (university)	Austria	Marketing Manager	3-5 years in the same organization	Service-providing industry Leisure and hospitality sector	50-100
3	Mr. Excellence	Late 50s	male	married with three children, aged between 20 and 30	Lower secondary education, apprenticeship, diploma	Germany	Manager	almost 40 years, mostly in the same organization	Service-providing industry Financial activities sector	700-750
4	Mr. Mio	Early 40s	male	married with two children around 10 years old	Lower secondary education, apprenticeship	Germany	Team leader	more than 20 years, the last almost 10 years in the same organization	Goods-producing industry Manufacturing sector	350-400
5	Mr. Swimming	Early 30s	male	partnered without children	Tertiary education (university)	Austria	Controller	3-5 years in the same organization	Goods-producing industry Manufacturing sector	900-950
6	Ms. It's US	Late 30s	female	single without children	Lower secondary education, apprenticeship	Switzerland	Analyst	almost 20 years, the last few years in the same organization	Service-providing industry Professional and business services sector	350-400
7	Ms. Arrangeur	Mid 40s	female	married with two children in their teens	Lower secondary education, apprenticeship	Germany	Financial advisor	more than 20 years, mostly in the same organization	Service-providing industry Financial activities sector	750-800

Table 1: Participant overview with personal and organizational information, created by author (2021)

Mr. Mio

Mr. Mio is in his early forties and lives with his family and two children, both around 10 years old, in a small town in Germany. After doing his apprenticeship and starting work elsewhere, he has been employed by a hidden champion in the manufacturing sector for the last nine years and has recently been promoted to be a team leader. His organization employs more than 350 people. He chooses the name Mio because he recognizes himself in the book "Mio, My Son" by Astrid Lindgren (1956) from the very first page to the very last. In the book, a little boy fights against evil. Mr. Mio lives according to Christian values, of which charity colors most of the stories throughout our conversations. He says of himself to be a perfectionist and takes good care of his employees and co-workers.

Talent-identity

He does not explicitly voice anything about seeing himself as talent due to his humble demeanor which corresponds to his value of humility,

"What I'm PROUD of? Is, that I (---) (*Sigh*) (-) proud. (---) Well (*Sigh*) I- (-) can I say that I'm really happy, that I'm capable of, (-) getting so many things on the right track" (initial)

He perceives to be seen as talent by his organization. For example, he says that "she can learn an unbelievable number of things from me" (follow-up). Further, his managers "only heard all the time, also from other colleagues, that there's somebody, who is supposed to be capable" (initial). The talent attribution is there despite of him working at a remote location and "JUST a little bit of contact, also with my managers" (initial).
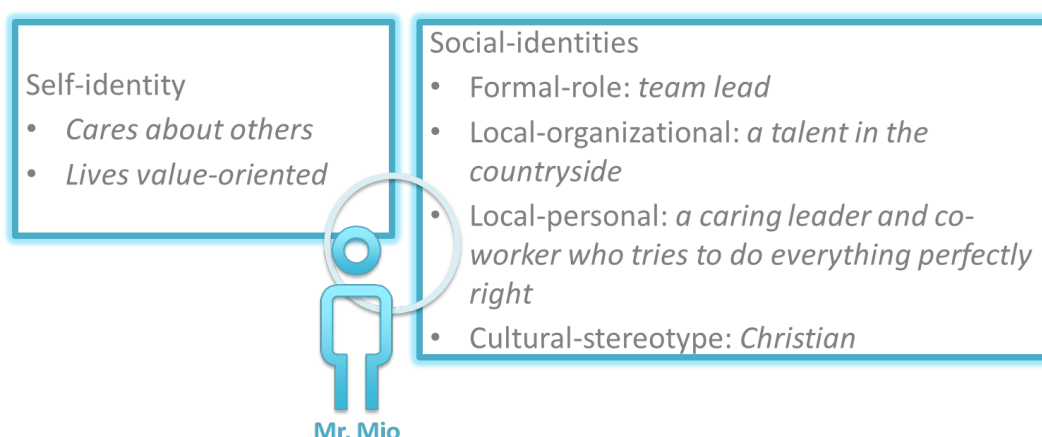
Figure 19: Identity attributions of Mr. Mio, created by author (2020)

Ms. It's-US

Ms. It's-US is in her late thirties, lives in Switzerland, has no partner and no children. After completing an apprenticeship, she has worked for different organizations for almost 20 years. Recently, she has worked as an analyst for an organization with almost 400 employees in the professional and business services sector. Others describe her as a friendly, social and happy co-worker who is eager for knowledge and who you can have fun with. She sees herself as someone who makes sure that everything runs smoothly. She started work at an early age and often discusses talent topics in the light of prior experience and in a more general view on what life and career mean to her. I choose the name "It's-US" for her because she has strong feelings about the perceived distance between leaders, who correspond to the expression *them*, and employees, who correspond to the expression *us*, at her organization.

Talent-identity

She sees herself as talent, "otherwise it would be a little sad" (initial) but is not taken into consideration for a promotion and greatly misses appreciation for her work. She perceives that her organization does not see her as a talent and attributes this to the organization's understanding of talent to differ from her own sense-making,

"Talent can be a little broader (-) broader (-) I believe the (-) the last years, I think, the the (-) last years have probably made me (-) define that for me just like that. (…) if it's not the elite approach (*short laughter*), because then I'd probably be somewhere at the back, (*short laughter*) I'd say, somehow not taken into consideration." (initial & follow-up)

Her own talent attribution and the perceived talent status assigned by the organization differ, which might be the cause for identity struggles and conflict, as explored in Section 4.3.1.

Self-identity
- *A reflexive person with principles*
- *„makes sure that business takes off"*

Social-identities
- Formal-role: C*onsultant*
- Local-organizational: *expert without development path, „the last in the food chain"*
- Local-personal: *"curious and hungry for knowledge and happy and cheerful"*
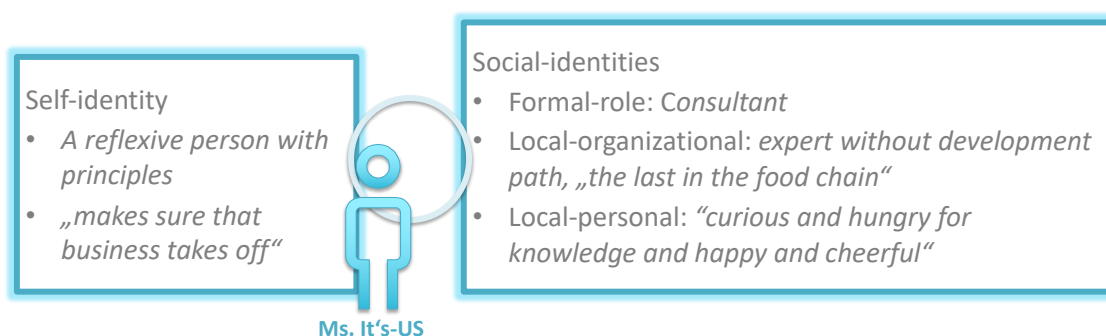
Ms. It's-US

Figure 20: Identity attributions of Ms. It's-US, created by author (2020)

Mr. Excellence

Mr. Excellence is in his late fifties, lives in a small German town and has worked in managerial positions in the financial activities sector for almost forty years. He is married and has three adult children. His organization, where he has invested most of his work life, employs more than 700 people. There, he has experienced various, also very difficult, situations, has adopted a thick skin and sticks to his values. Now he is the manager of a local branch and cares about his customers and employees. He enables his employees to use their talents at work. While he is a doer, he also feels he has something to say and his role includes lots of advising activities. He started his work life as an apprentice and went through further education in his forties.

Talent-identity

I choose the name "Excellence" for him because he defines talent as the prerequisite for becoming excellent. He identifies his talents during a company-led process, his most prominent talent being strategic thinking. He gets good feedback for his success and is seen as talent,

"and then I told my boss at some point, I actually *hold myself back* in my work, and he answers, *I really wouldn't have thought, that you with your results talk about holding yourself back.*" (initial)

He also regards himself to not "*only* work to earn money" (initial) and, with his background as an apprentice, realizes his potential for excellence,

"I have made something out of it. I have accepted it and (-) well, have lived with it, positively lived (-) well (-) yes (---)." (initial)

Figure 21: Identity attributions of Mr. Excellence, created by author (2020)

Ms. Arrangeur

Ms. Arrangeur is in her mid-forties and lives with her husband and two teenage children in a smaller town in Germany. She did an apprenticeship in the financial services organization with almost 800 employees where she has now worked for more than 20 years. Recently, she attended a training and changed position to be a mortgage financial advisor. I give her the name "Arrangeur" because she regards this as her main strength: The French word describes a person who organizes everything very well. She is aware that others describe her as friendly, helpful, funny, patient and competent.

Talent-identity

She herself believes that "everybody has talents, well, everybody has talents (-) and strengths" (initial) and thinks that her employer acts according to an inclusive talent management philosophy, too,

"Yes, the [name of company], the (-), I think (-), has the same opinion, because otherwise they wouldn't have distributed (-) this talent book years ago, with which, so that everybody should (-) do his talents." (initial)

The texts suggest that she internalizes the organizational sense-making of talent, which implies that she sees herself as talent.
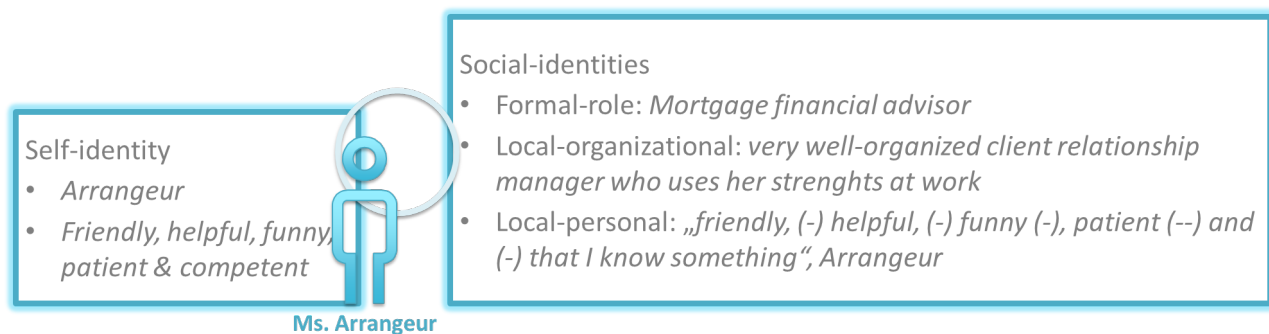
Figure 22: Identity attributions of Ms. Arrangeur, created by author (2020)

Ms. Passion

Ms. Passion is in her late twenties and lives on her own in a large Austrian city. She holds a university degree which enabled her to start work in the leisure and hospitality sector. After more than three years as a Marketing project manager in a smaller organization with almost 100 employees, she just changed roles within the same organization. Together with her new role, many other aspects have changed: She has a new manager, an assigned employee, a new office and has to attend a training program. She is aware that people at work regard her as competent, quite task-oriented, fast-paced, creative and reliable.

Talent-identity

I choose the name Ms. Passion for her because she can develop passion, is quickly on fire and is emotional when she talks. She regards passion as a main characteristic of talents,

"Passion. (*Laughter*) (-) I'd say. Well, (-) for me it's simply, if somebody got passion somewhere" (initial)

Nevertheless, despite being passionate, she feels she does not correspond to the organization's understanding of talent which also mirrors, or inspires, her own understanding of talent,

"Be it a Marcel Hirscher[1], be it- you know, simply these-, they have just concentrated on one thing, where they got a talent, what they have passion for, and then they're simply very good in it, too. But reflecting now on my person, if this is asked, I'm often having difficulties because-, that I really concentrate on one topic and further deepen it and- yes." (initial)

Figure 23: Identity attributions of Ms. Passion, created by author (2020)

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[1] Marcel Hirscher is a former Austrian World Cup alpine ski racer and one of the best alpine skiers in history.

Mr. Swimming

Mr. Swimming is in his early thirties and lives together with his girlfriend in a large Austrian city. In our conversations he jokes a lot, talks about how much fun he has with the team at work and how his digital affinity, developed from childhood onwards, shapes everyday tasks. Having worked as an ambitious controller in a small team for a few years after university, he feels proud of the almost overwhelming tasks he successfully accomplishes. Because he quickly has to take over responsibility and to communicate with senior management, he attributes his tasks more to those of an inhouse consultant than to a controller. His organization is active in the manufacturing sector and employs more than 900 people.

Talent-identity

I give him the name Mr. Swimming because he and his company define talent as jumping in at the deep end. To him, his own and his organization's attribution of talent is very clear. He tells me about multiple situations where leaders of his organization introduced him to others as talent, such as in this example,

"our *CEO* presented me again like that to some person somehow yes *that's [name of interviewee] that's a (-) young talent from our finance team*. (-) He did present me exactly like that to (-) the new sales employee in the branch office" (follow-up)

Mr. Swimming also defines talent as stable, as a given knowledge or skill that enables you "to master a task without working along a list of todos or having instructions on hand" (initial). This is how he tends to describe his own behavior and skillset throughout the narratives, which indicates that he might see himself as talent, too. Further, being quite young, he points out the role of age in talent management which might again be based on his self-concept,

"it's about (-) accompanying young talents in the company, about supporting (-) young talents in the company and of course also about the targeted development (-) of young talents in the company." (initial)

Self-identity
• *Funny*
• *Competent*

Mr. Swimming

Social-identities
• Formal-role: *Controller*
• Local-organizational: *„young talent from our finance team", more an inhouse consultant than a controller*
• Local-personal: *„extreemely funny", ambitious and competent*
• Cultural-stereotype: *„the digital type of person"*
• Social-category: *has studied at university*
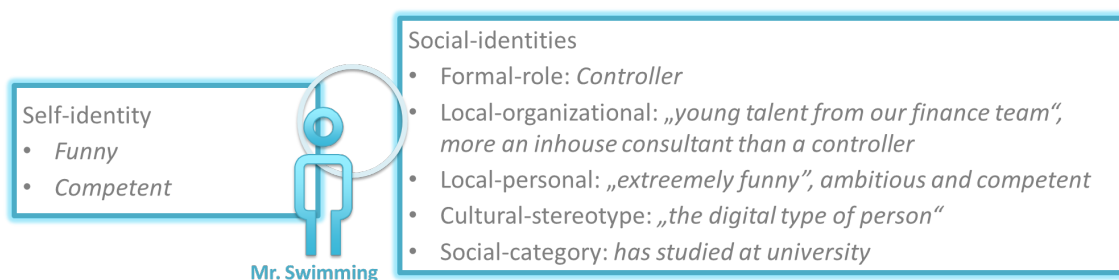
Figure 24: Identity attributions of Mr. Swimming, created by author (2020)

Ms. Appreciative

Ms. Appreciative is in her early thirties, lives in a big city and has worked as a consultant in the professional and business services sector in Germany for some years. She is not in a relationship and has no children. She describes her role to be the one of a "Fachidiot"[2] in her organization with more than 300 employees because she has to stay in the role of an expert although she likes to do something else. I choose the name Ms. Appreciative because she sees the good in every person and openly points this out, in her quiet and careful way. She believes that everyone is a talent and that people are valuable. She always acts quite correctly: she supports her co-workers, she is punctual and she takes care of her relationships. How she handled the diary is also exemplary for her correct behavior: she completes the diary thoroughly and then, while the other respondents simply hand it over, Ms. Appreciative wants to talk about the entries during the handover in order to make sure the information is received correctly by me. She has her principles and is aware that she expects the same correct behavior from others.

Talent-identity

She sees herself as talent, and also perceives that her organization thinks the same. She mentions a capacity for enthusiasm, social intelligence and cognitive intelligence ("good at specialist topics" – initial) as talent characteristics. Later, she describes herself as talent, although it is "awkward to answer, because you of course don't wanna praise yourself too much, or rather, this tends to be unpleasant for me" (initial). Still, she introduces herself as an expert with lots of knowhow, emotional intelligence and passion, which overlaps with her own talent criteria,

"I think that I do not convince with good words but with hopefully specialist competence and that others like to work with me. That is for me, well, the interpersonal topics within a company are also important for me and play a role. I don't only go there to do a nine to five job, but because I for one think the topics are exciting and I want to develop in this regard and of course to also contribute my share to it, but also because I, well, appreciate the folks who I work with and who I do this together with." (initial)

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[2] *Fachidiot* consists of two words, "subject" and "idiot". *Fachidiot* is an expert in a certain field who is not able to see beyond its limits. The word has a negative meaning in German.

Her stories show that her own and the organization's view on herself with regards to talent overlap so that she can internalize her talent-identity.

Self-identity
- *A correct, competent and appreciative person*

Ms. Appreciative

Social-identities
- Formal-role: *Consultant*
- Local-organizational: *talent & an experienced Fachidiot**
- Local-personal: *„very nice and sociable", correct, helpful and appreciative team member*
- Cultural-stereotype: *a woman of principles and structure*
- Social-category: *academic family background*

*Fachidiot consists of two words, „subject" and „idiot". *Fachidiot* is an expert in a certain field who is not able to see beyond its limits.

Figure 25: Identity attributions of Ms. Appreciative, created by author (2020)

4.2   What is talent (management)?

Having introduced the respondents and their social-identities, this is the second of three parts to present the texts of the respondents. It looks at how the participants of this study make sense of talent (management). While my self-knowledge from work and pre understanding developed from the literature inform my early research considerations, the sections to follow focus on talent (management) meanings and meaning creation processes of the respondents.

All participants are asked in the beginning of the three-step diary-interview process how they see talent (management). Although there is a general inclusive consensus which might not be difficult to describe, the individuals' sense-making processes are complex and multifaceted. The respondents make sense of their understanding of talent (management) in relation to other concepts. These are the notion of self, values, discourses on talent, power, rewards and responsibility, and practices they attribute to talent (management). For the individuals, talent (management) does not exist on its own and they regard it as dependent on the environment in which they find themselves. Talent (management) correlates with their inner realities and life-worlds. This implies for me that exploring talent meanings and meaning creation processes must include each person's reality.

4.2.1 Defining talent

This section introduces what talent (management) means to the respondents. In the subsequent paragraphs, the following concepts explore the nature of talent: individual, inclusive and strength-based; stable or developable; context-transferable; and self-aware and reflective. All of the individuals seem to create meaning of talent (management) as individual, inclusive and strength-based. They tend to regard talents as strengths that vary from person to person and that can be used in the workplace,

"But especially focus on the strengths and also put them to use, how it leads to success for yourself and for the others. (…) We have plenty of talents, well, I'd say, we're a mixed crowd of talents and that is really good, everybody has very different talents" (Ms. Passion, initial)

"And independent of the position, where an employee is, (…) yet everybody has individual talents." (Mr. Excellence, initial)

"As everybody is somehow individual, I believe that also talents are individual and that you can't say for sure what is a talent, what isn't a talent. Nevertheless, it might probably stand out somehow due to certain features (…) thus, not everybody is offered development and challenged in every area, but I rather believe that the goal is that everybody is in the end, yes (--), supported, I'd say." (Ms. Appreciative, initial)

A further perspective on talent meanings suggests talent as stable or developable. The respondents make sense in a variety of ways. On the one hand, Mr. Excellence's conceptualization of talent to be a prerequisite for becoming excellent in a certain area suggests a developable orientation towards talent. He makes sense of development by saying "LEARN TRAIN PRACTICE like a top sportsman, then you will reach excellence" (initial). On the other hand, Mr. Swimming and Ms. Arrangeur point out talent as a rather stable concept. In detail, Mr. Swimming refers to it as something you are good at or that enables you to master a task without instructions. Similarly, Ms. Arrangeur is rather happy when she learns about her talents within a company-led process because she can suddenly explain why she performs well in certain activities, "*ohhyes, right! That's why*!" (follow-up). The respondents seem to make sense of talent in the light of two further concepts. They use the question on the comparison of talent management to an animal to point out the meaning of talent as context-transferable, self-aware and reflective,

"Basically, every animal DOES have a talent, it is only to be recognized or …………….. it simply has to fit in the environment." (Ms. Passion, initial)

"a very important point regarding talents and animals are HUGE ears of such a rabbit, which hears fantastically well, because I think, that talent is a lot about (-) listening to yourself and finding out, what does this what's in me do to me, what can develop out of it and so on." (Mr. Excellence, initial)

Besides self-awareness and reflection as means to reach knowledge about individual talents, it also appears as a starting point of an individual to define talent. In detail, the participants seem to engage in an inclusive talent philosophy but sometimes add characteristics and strengths to their definitions. These tend to mirror how they see themselves, which can be observed by talent-identity explorations throughout this chapter. In detail, the texts suggest that Ms. Appreciative, Mr. Excellence and Mr. Swimming define talent based on their self-concept. For them, self-awareness seems to inform their conceptualization of talent. This consideration is further discussed in Section 5.3.1 in the subsequent chapter.

Mr. Swimming also regards various practices as talent management, while he points out the strong focus on age and talents in his sense-making,

"it's about (-) accompanying young talents in the company, about supporting (-) young talents in the company and of course also about the targeted development (-) of young talents in the company." (initial)

Through the dominant sense-making of talent, the focus of this research is rearranged by the work with the respondents. Having planned to explore how people make sense of talent management, the texts suggest otherwise: Being given the freedom to define concepts on their own, the respondents focus much more on the individual notion of talent than on talent management. Much later, they then tend to enlarge their conceptualization to actually managing the own, their colleagues' or their employees' talents, as explored in the subsequent sections. Staying true to the hermeneutic methodology, I let it happen that the respondents adjust the focus of the research. As previously mentioned, a shift from *talent management* to *talent (management)* in the wording of this thesis mirrors this interesting change of perspective, too, where applicable.

4.2.2 Talent practices

This section explores how the individuals create talent (management) meanings based on their perception of talent practices. While some attribute individual practices to talent (management), others seem to make sense of talent (management) within a broader picture assuming a holistic perspective,

"For me, it is a rather (-) holistic picture, talent is for me simply the employee and the whole thing from (-) the beginning, well from recruiting a (-) person until (-) taking care of a person after she or he has left the company. (-) It includes the whole spectrum, to (-) get the (-) employees, to (-) support challenge (*Breathe out*)" (Ms. It's-US, initial)

Further, the meaning creation processes also seem to be based on individual practices. This section explores the following four practices that the respondents attribute to talent management: training and development; feedback; matching people with positions or tasks; and talent identification. As the first out of four talent practices, training and development seems to be conceptualized as both, formal and informal training. Regarding the latter, Mr. Swimming might understand talent management as on-the-job training, as "an everyday working together, through this you actually learn at our company" (initial). Similarly, Ms. Appreciative creates meaning of talent management through learning from her peers,

"of course [you] have to work together and get on and I think it's nice, because you simply get to know so many different perspectives and also modes of work and you can actually also copy something from time to time and use something for yourself, that's a fine thing, because you didn't have that at university." (initial)

Other respondents use more institutionalized aspects of training and development to create talent management meanings, "Today, I've finally made it and put together the training offer for the winter" (Mr. Mio, diary). From the perspective of a formal training participant, Ms. Arrangeur frequently has to attend institutionalized on-the-job trainings and she has just finished a course that is connected to her promotion. The training might partly inform her rather positive attitude towards talent management which she compares to "a caterpillar, and then (-) you stay a caterpillar or you become a butterfly and then there are also really different butterflies for example, yes, so (-) yes" (Ms. Arrangeur, initial). In comparison, Ms. Passion seems to use the talent practice of training to assign more critical meanings to talent management. She currently attends a training program that goes hand in hand with a promotion to be a team leader. She seems to have mixed feelings about it: If she had said no, "this would have caused surprise" (follow-up). Further, the program focuses on reflection

which she, as a self-critical person, already does a lot on her own. She experiences negative consequences and seems to attribute them to talent management,

"But instead of strengthening and motivating me, dealing with my weaknesses has rather made me feel insecure. (…) Because this has frustrated me, I have probably avoided at some point, to think about the development program (and about myself). The many tasks (…) asked too much of me – especially as they would have requested all these different practical examples of situations at work and in private life, and I could hardly think of positive experiences." (diary)

Besides the nature of the program and the inability to reject, she might also critical talent management meanings based on how she was invited to the program. She might attribute the offer to participate to the talent practice of feedback. She seems to feel that she receives feedback to work on social competence and should therefore participate in the program,

"I almost find it a little "unfair", that only a few have to work on themselves – yes have to – not that there is an option. Unfair towards us compared to those that apparently have not been prompted to work on themselves." (diary)

She perceives she is asked to participate in training in order to work on herself. Possibly based on this feedback, she might feel there is an expectation for her to change upon participating in a training that she feels she cannot reject,

"**Does this pressure you?** – (-) (*Hesitation*) YES (-), YES, it does. That I maybe-, that they might expect more from you in the end, that you take more (-) or, or, yes, that you take more out of it or then-, I think, you can-, it is said in advance, that you of course cannot change from one day to the next." (follow-up)

Ms. Passions seems to make sense of talent management in the light of pressure and insecurity that the talent practices of training and development and feedback deliver to her. These feelings might also be the reason why she wants to reduce feedback bias by more comprehensive feedback like "360° feedback" (follow-up). In this and many other stories, the participants seem to rarely make sense of talent (management) to exist on its own. In contrast, the sense-making of talent (management) might rather be connected to the lived reality of a person, to for example feelings, past experiences and individual challenges. The same can be suggested for the notion of feedback, which is included by all talent narratives sooner or later. This is a possible explanation for why feedback appears to mean something different to the participants. For example, while Ms. Passion seems to feel an invasion of

herself through feedback and wishes for ways to reduce feedback bias, Ms. Arrangeur uses feedback from a talent test to find out about her strengths ("then it was so (-) *self-explanatory*" – follow-up) and seems to again relate positive feelings to it. Mr. Mio might regard feedback as a way to get answers. He initiates a yearly talk where his boss "has to answer specific questions from me and so on and (--) because for me it is also always important that everybody knows how things are, where one stands, yes." (initial). And Mr. Excellence seems to make sense of feedback as a platform to act. As a successful and strategic doer, Mr. Excellence's primary reaction to feedback seems to evolve around how to handle it. He tells a story about how his employees give him feedback on his demeanor that he is not the typical boss, the first and last one in the office but that he "*organizes his work like it's best for you*" (follow-up)*.* He describes his reaction as follows,

"Then I answered for *myself* to it, that I say, I may also disappoint employees. (-) Because I also have been disappointed by an employee at some point and I'm also allowed to disappoint them." (follow-up)

It might be that Mr. Excellence acts in talent management true to his own convictions and ideas. As a doer, he might transfer this active component of his personality to talent management practice. He seems to create meaning of feedback as a platform to act. As a doer in feedback, this might mirror what talent management means to him as a whole.

After having explored the talent practices of training and feedback, the respondents also make sense of talent management based on how individuals are matched with positions or tasks. From Mr. Mio's accounts, talent (management) appears as a way to shape work roles in order to "try to put people, where they- where their strengths are" (initial). Among others, Ms. Appreciative seems to also make sense of talent management as an instrument to shape one's role and to plan where to develop to. She tells throughout our conversations that she is dissatisfied with her current role,

"I have the feeling, I'm a little bit of a Fachidiot [*note: Fachidiot consists of two words, "subject" and "idiot". Fachidiot is an expert in a certain field who is not able to see beyond its limits.*] (*Laughter*), this is mean, but it is- you wanted to know what I want to change." (initial)

Her colleagues and her company attribute expert knowledge to her and she is "the one so to speak, that now has been there for the longest time and through this is automatically pushed in this role" (initial). She might increasingly realize that she "would not necessarily need it at all" (initial) and that she might not be drawn to this role. Still, she is the person

everybody calls in case of questions and she shares her knowledge. In her personal meaning creation process, she might feel rather ambivalent about how she experiences talent management.

Talent identification appears as a further talent practice that the respondents use to create meaning of talent management. Experiences at work seem to shape the own sense-making,

"And this is simply ooooonly, because we systematically (-) according to a certain system (-) wanted to identify these strengths and talents as a company. Thus, I can, I can only strongly recommend talent management. Because no person would have known, that she can do it and loves it." (Mr. Excellence, follow-up)

Until now, the section has explored how the respondents engage in meaning creation processes of talent management with regards to a holistic picture and the four individual talent practices. As a final remark, the sense-making appears to have changed for some respondents during the research process. They seem to adapt their views of talent management during the reflection time of diary writing,

"I think when you asked me this question in the last interview- ah, the last interview, whether there is talent management in our company, then I somehow said nope, not at all. (…) But that there is nooothing at all, that's of course not correct either. Also, this story with the [technical name] project, where they immediately include me and say, (-) actually *you're quite young and no plan, [technical name] project would be a great thing for you, come on join in* is also a bit of some sort of talent management." (Mr. Swimming, follow-up)

"because I thought more in detail about it, what it actually is and what belongs to it and I quite often wasn't sure about, what actually belongs to it, I had the feeling, that actually much much more belongs to it, than I was aware of in the beginning" (Ms. Appreciative, follow-up)

4.2.3   Talent and values

This section explores how the individuals create talent (management) meanings based on their values. While values do not appear in the initial conceptual framework, the notion of values emerges from the respondents' texts. This section therefore presents a three-fold interplay of values and talent (management): value-based sense-making of talent (management); value-based assessment of talent (management); and the impact of value-based talent (management) meanings on individual behavior.

The respondents seem to create talent (management) meanings based on individual values. In detail, the texts suggest that some of them look at the notion of inclusion in talent (management) based on their personal values,

"There are actually also different approaches, whether all are talents or some special target group are talents and for me it really is like that, that really all are talents if a company decides for a person, just, because I believe that the company does also see something in the person, when the person is hired and then it's also very clear that this is a talent, that can be accordingly developed and challenged in the areas that might be relevant for the talent" (Ms. Appreciative, initial)

While Ms. Appreciative seems to develop and adapt some of her opinions further during the research process, she reassures her inclusive value-based understanding of talent in later conversations, "I just decided for myself, that somehow every human is valuable and that there is a reason, why you have employed the person" (follow-up). Ms. It's-US also seems to draw her inclusive understanding of talent from her own values, which she perceives to differ from the values of her organization,

"It just doesn't have to be, because one always says talent, is somebody, who is really somehow talented in something, but for me it's actually everybody, who well, all people do somehow have a a (--) a talent for something." (initial)

Mr. Mio's inclusive sense-making of talent seems to be informed by Christian values based on his Christian cultural background. Meaning creation processes of talent (management) might therefore help him to reflect and define his own understanding of talent (management) as opposed to how others behave. The notion of inclusive talent appears to have become a life principle because of various personal experiences, especially in private life, as he recounts one story,

"And (-) right before the baptism the pastor just says to me, *you, actually you can also baptize her because you have the abi- ability and you you know that, you have actually been there many times* and well and that is simply (-) to recognize that somebody is able to do something and and and to trust him as well, yes, and it doesn't always have to be perfect when you do it for the first time or well, to also accept (-) he does it in his way" (initial)

This leads me to think about the inclusive or exclusive perception of talent (management) to be an ethical dilemma, a question of justice and embedded beliefs in mankind. For example, although Mr. Swimming adopts an inclusive talent definition in front of me and in front of himself, he doubts that any of my participants has ever answered the question of how to define talent,

"Some talent has- I mean, there are surely people, who have more distinctive talents than others, I believe, that there are actually differences, but I believe in principle that everybody can do something. Yes, can't they? (…) (*Laughter*) Has any of your interview partners ever given a satisfying answer to this question?" (initial)

He seems to be insecure about conceptualizing talent and might therefore feel he must follow inclusive talent management meanings, which is that everybody has talents or strengths. A possible reason might be that this is what he perceives as the right thing to say, or what is morally right, or what might be a common truth.

As a consequence of talent (management) sense-making through values, it appears from the texts that the value-based understanding of talent helps individuals to assess talent (management). Ms. Appreciative recounts a story about a manager making sexual advances during a team event. She might attribute this unprofessional behavior to talent management because it concerns a leader. This contradicts her personal values and expectation of how one ought to behave, which is that "Management should appear professionally, because company/employer are presented at the same time" (diary). As a correct person with clear expectations of correct behavior, this situation might violate her values and convictions and

is therefore perceived as injustice by her. For her and other participants, talent (management) seems to stir up emotions,

"And that has somehow still been really on my mind I gotta say, because I do have quite a strong opinion on how one behaves, if one is in a relationship, towards other people of the gender, the opposite gender." (follow-up)

The value-based understanding of inclusive talent also seems to impact how Ms. It's-US assesses talent (management), and her work environment as a whole. The texts suggest that she feels torn between two worlds: On the one hand, she wants to get on well with her colleagues, that "the folks like to come for a drink in the evening" (initial). But on the other hand, she seems to accept that they do not share her life principles and values. She is unsure whether they are "a pack of wolves or (-) a- a herd of sheep" (initial). The texts repeatedly indicate that although she might feel like an "outsider" (initial), she also partly adopts their way of thinking, "one still does also get a little bit on this ground" (initial). Further, the texts suggest that her value-based inclusive understanding of talent, which she perceives to oppose her organization's and coworkers' talent understanding, influences how she behaves towards others at work. To her, talent (management) is an instrument to appreciate others, to leave no one behind and to adhere to her principles. This indicates that her value-based talent understanding has an impact on her behavior at work. Mr. Mio seems to also make sense of his values to steer his talent (management) actions,

"I cannot imagine it differently because because (-) for one if you look at the professional life, my neighbor, my person opposite just can't not matter to me" (initial)

In summary, throughout the texts, the participants reflect on how their values shape their thinking. Values tend to appear as a sense-making driver of talent (management), but also seem to color how the respondents perceive and assess situations they attribute to talent (management). They use (life) principles and values to distinguish right from wrong. Further, their value-based understanding of talent seems to impact their behavior because they take decisions and act.

4.2.4 Talent discourses

This section explores how the individuals create talent (management) meanings based on discourses. The following concepts emerge as sense-making drivers from the work with the respondents: common knowledge from reading work on talent (management); family background; discourses on talent, power, rewards and responsibility.

Reading work on talent

This section explores how the individuals create talent (management) meanings based on reading work on talent (management). Three of the participants explain how they make sense of talent (management) through academic literature, non-academic reading and public discussions. Their reading suggests implications on the reflection process of their own ideas and on the expectations towards the organization,

"For one, literature actually always discusses a little bit, how you define talent, that really didn't leave me untouched, but I rather picked it up and you think about how you, or at least me, how you'd define it and how you'd see it." (Ms. Appreciative, follow-up)

Reading work on talent seems to create a desired image for Mr. Swimming. Based on what he reads, he wishes for his supervisor to employ more talent practices,

"I'm saying talent management, or such (-) feedback, such feedback talks or you know, this what you know from the from the literature I'm saying, he is more like hands-on *I'm just going for it*. (----)" (initial)

To Ms. It's-US, reading work on talent (management) seems to inform her ideas. She reads about how to define talent management during her time of reflection and diary writing. She writes that she found out about the definition of talent management, "A so called "elite approach"" (diary). In our follow-up conversation, her readings lead her to question her existing inclusive definition of talent (management). I encourage her that her opinions are valuable, and we continue talking about it. The problem behind the elite approach for her is that it mirrors the meritocracy of our society that she does not want to be part of. Reading work about talent (management) seems to help her thoughts evolve and reflect on her situation at work and in the world.

Family background

This section explores how the individuals create talent (management) meanings based on the family background. Ms. Appreciative seems to assign meaning to talent (management) based on her family background, and the voiced and unvoiced expectations from her parents. She used to see her father working long hours so that it is normal for her now to work more than "nine to five" (initial). It was expected, though never voiced, that she would do her a-levels and go to university; the work morale at home might impact her talent and work understanding,

"(--) then (-) it's actually all the same to them now, if I make a great career or not, whereas (--) I would actually say now, that my Dad was actually very successful in his job and I think you always bear this in mind a bit and (-) there you saw of course, he worked somehow a whole lot and you have- you also notice a bit, that you gotta work a lot, to be successful, I'd say that now." (initial)

While this informs her understanding of how to succeed at work, she seems to also struggle to break free from expectations regarding her career and sees autonomy as something desirable,

"But, nooo, otherwise I'd say, that I feel, that I can actually control it myself" (initial)

Mr. Excellence's definition of talent might also be informed by his background. Born into a working-class family, he worked his way up from being an apprentice to managerial positions. Through hard work and lots of effort, he has made what he perceives as a great career. His history might therefore inform how he makes sense of talent, which is to reach excellence by intense training,

"It's written already in the bible "He who performs excellently in the seemingly small things, is also set on larger tasks (if available and if the position is also free)." (diary)

He repeats multiple times that talents have to be developed and that this is lots of effort. He seems to admire academia, "It is a great honor for me, that you also let my experience and knowledge be part of your valuable work." (diary), and is proud of how far he got in life.

Organizational discourses on talent

This section explores how the individuals create talent (management) meanings based on organizational talent discourses. It specifically looks at where the personal and the organization's understanding of talent (management) overlap or oppose each other. The following concepts appear from the texts: overlapping organizational and individual sense-making of talent (management); internalizing organizational talent discourses; individually developing these discourses further; opposing these discourses.

Starting with the first concept, some respondents seem to feel that their own sense-making of talent (management) overlaps with what they perceive as organizational talent discourses. Ms. Appreciative sees a match of her ideas of inclusion with the organizational discourse, because "in such medium sized smaller companies like ours now, I find, I find it nicer, well, it suits me personally more." (initial). In contrast, others internalize organizational talent discourses, which can concern the following aspects:

- Talent definition, such as to be able to work independently, to succeed in one's domain
- The nature of talent management, such as inclusive or win-win
- Talent practices, such as identification

Mr. Swimming, as someone who perceives to be regarded as a talent by his organization, seems to have internalized the organizational discourse on talent definition to be able to work independently,

"There is no talent management program or some other-, something like that, at our company talent management is simply that you throw people into the deep end and find out, whether they can swim. (…) Talent (-) is I believe for me (--) at work what I associate with it is to be able to quickly complete tasks, for which you I'd say, are not really trained." (initial)

He applies this definition to himself, together with the talent characteristic of young age which is introduced earlier. He seems to have a talent-identity and complies to his own and his company's definition of talent, which might make him proud,

"At first also a little overwhelmed, of course, because …. Suddenly, you actually got *huuuuuuuuge tasks* in front of you, which are there for the long-term and you actually gotta work together with important people (-) who are *waaaaaaay* out of your league but who you partly gotta take apart as controller-, gotta do that through questions, through re…., through trying to get to the bottom of things." (initial)

Besides internalizing organizational discourses on talent definitions, Ms. Passion additionally seems to adopt the organizational understanding on the nature of talent management as a win-win outcome. Both concepts of meaning creation are explored in the next paragraphs. Engaging in reflection, Ms. Passion observes herself to internalize talent discourses of her organization. She perceives her tourism organization to predominately focus on external talents and to characterize talent by succeeding in one domain,

"Yes, well, when you just asked, how I came up with this, I actually also did have his voice in my ear a little bit, of our managing director, how he also always puts people, actually our PARTNERS, on a pedestal. (…) For example a retired ranger. Well, we have different people, or a young wild gourmet chef or so, well, we have a lot of special people and that's nice, that we can engage people with these talents, to come to us, in other markets." (initial)

Acknowledging that she regards herself as being self-critical, internalizing the talent understanding of her organization seems to have negative consequences for her. She appears sad about still being passionate about so many things "but not to concentrate on ONE thing" (initial). This seems to be one way where organizational talent discourses influence her own sense-making. Another similar situation is where she seems to adopt the organizational discourse on talent management to provide win-win outcomes for both, employee and employer,

"It took a little bit, but then they tried nevertheless, to also get something for the company, well, to-, positively, how d'you say? – **To use?** – Well, to create a win-win situation so to say." (initial)

Examples where she also tends to regard the nature of talent management as result-oriented like her organization appear throughout our conversations, for example,

"there is actually no exam, it's-, well, it's not like that, that you can say at the end (-), to what extent did you personally benefit from this or how (--), how well you've applied this now, yes." (follow-up)

It appears from the texts that Ms. Passion adopts the talent definition and the nature of talent (management) from her organization. Also, Ms. Arrangeur seems to internalize the organizational sense-making on the inclusive nature of talent management and on how to learn about talents. In the quote below, she talks about both, her own ideas of talent (management), what her organization regards as talent and how the employer identifies talents of employees, at different moments of our conversation. The overlap of these two

accounts is noticeable, as both seem to regard talent as inclusive, where talents can be identified by tests. This suggests that she internalizes the organizational discourse on talent (management) and makes it her reality,

"For me personally (-) it's more like that (-), that everybody has talents (-) and they are just identified through some tests or so and then (-) you have a look, that you develop this person. (…) Well, that was loooong ago (-), I believe it's been eight years or so, where we determined our talents, or seven years, where we read such a book with talents and at the end there was a talent test (-)." (initial)

A potential reason for her to internalize organizational talent discourses is that it is convenient for her, because she might have never thought about talent (management) prior to our conversations. However, another explanation could be that adopting her organization's talent understanding is beneficial to her, as she associates something positive with it. She might regard knowing about her talents and being seen as a talent due to the perceived inclusive talent understanding of the organization as positive.

In comparison to internalizing talent discourses, Mr. Excellence makes sense of talent (management) through both, an individual as well as an organizational lens. In detail, he uses organizational discourses to make sense of talent (management) and then develops the concept further: He has thought about talent management and might use the internalized organizational discourse of many years with the same company ("we" at the beginning of our conversations) to justify what he thinks of talent management. However, in the later course of our conversations and after some reflection, Mr. Excellence suddenly seems to observe a tension at his work,

"everybody has his tasks, his work task, according to the work contract, according to position and so on, and yet everybody has individual talents" (initial)

After talent identification, he regards the second step to be often missing in his organization. That is, there is "NOT enough possibility to use the talents" (initial), as explored further in the later section *Organizational discourses on responsibility*. He seems to make sense of his company's talent (management) understanding and develops the organization's ideas and opinions further. As a fourth concept of this section, Mr. Mio opposes organizational talent discourses because they differ from how he individually constructs talent (management), from how he sees the world and from his values,

"And of all things completely (-) completely senseless, yes, well completely (-) contrary to what we're actually about, ah talking about, about (-) talents, (-) because at first I gotta know, what he *can* actually do, before I tell him, what he what he could potentially do at our company." (follow-up)

In conclusion, the respondents use organizational talent discourses to different extents in order to make sense of talent (management). While some perceive an overlap of personal and organizational ideas or develop organizational discourses further, others internalize or oppose them. Section 4.3 develops these considerations further. In detail, it explores how personal and organizational talent meanings influence the formation of identity.

Organizational discourses on power

This section explores how the individuals create talent (management) meanings based on organizational talent power discourses. It again specifically looks at where the personal and the organization's understanding of talent (management) overlap or oppose each other. The following concepts appear from the texts: inclusion instead of power distance; and talent as not the decisive factor for power. Ms. It's-US seems to make sense of talent (management) as inclusive. However, as opposed to her own understanding, organizational discourses and actions on power distance appear to contradict her team spirt and seem to indicate for her that her organization does not take everybody in,

"*It's always we and you,* (-) I might have told you before, simply well (-) yes, so, we*eee have decided* or *for youuuuu*, well, *weeee,* well in our leadership circle, and *youuuuuu* as employees, or (-) uuuuuus and you" (initial)

She might therefore use talent power discourses in the form of perceived power distance as opposed to her notion of inclusion to make sense of talent (management). In doing so, she seems to attribute an understanding of employees as "resources" to her organization,

"Hmm, well, for me it should actually simply be the the (-) simply all, simply the resour- well, no, that's silly, too, not the resources, but simply the employees, are the talent for me." (initial)

Mr. Excellence uses different concepts to get closer to what talent (management) means to him. He experiences many events that he might attribute to the abuse of power and dominance, for example,

"It's always one side that dominates at the moment, and currently I'm on the side, that DOESN'T dominate but it's okay, we make the best out of it. (…) Or to pressure, when somebody pressures me and shouts at me, I did have that at some point, well, I looked at the clock, twelve minutes being shouted at, twelve minutes from the CEO (-), loud, shouted, twelve minutes aaaaand (-) I change to quiet and passing on mode. (-) Because all of the aggression, which is apparent, that you make yourself simply transparent, that all of this can simply blow through you like the wind. (--) You react to that like that, yes, something like that." (initial / follow-up)

Power and dominance appear as reoccurring schemes in our conversations. But Mr. Excellence opposes the experiences related to power and makes sense of talent (management) to have an "incredible amount of abilities (-) and (--) but it's NOT the decisive FACTOR for, for power, success or dominance, but (-) it's something precious, that can also be shy" (initial). The texts suggest that he uses experiences at work around power and dominance to create talent (management) meanings. Throughout the conversations, where his matters of heart repeatedly surface, he shows that he, who "has treated his employees fairly" (follow-up), who "has never abused the power I had" (follow-up) and who acts "like driving a motorbike, the weakest (-) determines the pace. (-) Yes." (initial), positions himself and his conceptualization of talent (management) against the superiors who take unfair decisions and abuse the power given to them.

Organizational discourses on rewards

This section explores how the individuals create talent (management) meanings based on organizational talent reward discourses. In detail, it looks at two different views: On the one hand, there are potential and actual rewards of talent (management). On the other hand, talent (management) is regarded as a desirable reward or as something very positive. Regarding the first aspect, the respondents make sense of talent (management) to create rewards for employees. The following quotes exemplify the benefits of visibility and development,

"The reward is- I think it's (-), that you say, (*Clears his throat*) I'm seen. (-) Just like I am, I'm valuable for the company or for my boss." (Mr. Excellence, follow-up)

"Well, it's unbelievable, what you can, when you inveeeeest into a person, (-) what you can achieve in half a year, well what you can- well this is what you're getting back"
(Mr. Mio, follow-up)

This is quite interesting because it fits Mr. Mio's presentation of himself, a man of values and charity. He makes sense of talent management as being an instrument to reward him, also in relation to his values. Values are explored in detail in Section 4.2.3. Regarding the second aspect, the texts suggest that the desirable reward of talent (management) depends on specific criteria, which are: task fulfillment; individual performance; length of service; to meet behavioral expectations. With regards to task fulfillment, Mr. Swimming narrates that after having proven himself with small tasks he is rewarded and assigned more important tasks by his organization, which makes him proud. As an ambitious person, he might also be more inclined to look for positive consequences of his work successes. In contrast to a reward for task fulfillment, Ms. Appreciative engages in a different sense-making and perceives the reward to depend on individual performance and length of service,

"For one thing, of course on the performance, and for another, also on, (-) on, I'd say, status or rather well, how long you're with the company, then you get a training at some point, that you can also choose on your own" (follow-up)

Although organizational discourses can potentially explain Ms. Appreciative's attitude, an additional option is her notion of self: As the disciplined and correct person she is, she might want to actively search for correlations between tangible factors and desired talent practices. In contrast to that, other respondents seem to perceive talent management at their organization as rather arbitrary and random, and therefore engage in sense-making that

mirrors these thoughts. Ms. Passion seems to attribute talent practices such as her role change primarily to coincidence. A challenging situation seems to pull her organization to deliver talent development, and pushes Ms. Passion into talent development,

"I think, it simply also arose from a personnel change, well, somebody left and through that, well, it got the ball rolling, you know, through that, there was the need to change something there." (initial)

These discussions raise the question of the implications of seeing talent (management) as a reward for specific criteria. Ms. Appreciative seems to project her own understanding of rewards and talent on how she treats her colleagues: if a co-worker meets her behavioral expectations, she might reward her or him with what she regards as talent practices for this positive experience and she might help her or him grow. But she also seems to use the absence of talent practices or the voicing of critical opinions to punish colleagues,

"I think, if somebody wastes his opportunity, then it's not that easy at all, to re- (*Laughter*), that is also something, I got to work on, that I don't always immediately have an opinion which is then, probably, more difficult to reverse, but I do really think that I'm not that kind of person, who clings to everything or who always has to be the center of attention within a project, but that I LIKE to share this role – with whoever, yes, (-) and I challenge them." (initial)

This process also seems to take place bottom-up. She talks about a difficult situation with a board member (also compare Section 4.2.3),

"I'd say, that sounds silly, but everybody has some kind of role and the leader role, some factors actually go hand in hand with it I think and for me, professional appearance in situations that concern the company belongs to this. And that was such a situation. (…) I don't have a lot to do with [name of board member] per se, that's why it's completely fine, but I haven't forgotten it either, I gotta say." (follow-up)

In conclusion, talent (management) appears as an instrument to reward, and to punish. People are rewarded for task fulfillment, good performance, length of service and for meeting expectations. If people do not live up to these criteria, talent (management) is conceptualized as a measure of punishment. This might also impact an employee's view on talent (management) and on what one has to deliver in order to be rewarded.

Organizational discourses on responsibility

This section explores how the individuals create talent (management) meanings based on organizational talent responsibility discourses. The texts suggest that the respondents attribute the practice of talent management more to external factors than to internal ones, which raises questions on self-talent management. The following concepts arise from the texts: organizational versus self-responsibility for individual talent; and processes of handing over responsibility. For Mr. Excellence, the individual and organizational understanding of talent management seems to diverge on the question of responsibility: whereas his organization promotes self-responsibility, he is in favor of organizational support in talent development. Through reflecting on this incongruence, he creates meanings of talent (management),

"my employer thinks that once you have fostered and identified talents, then it's the self-responsibility of each employee to make something out of it. (…) You can compare it to learning to play a musical instrument, you'd prefer to play music all the time, but you also gotta go to school, clean the house at some point and so on." (initial)

In contrast, Mr. Swimming accepts his organization's narrative on responsibility in talent management in multiple situations. An example is training which "is also something, that I have to take care of completely on my own. If and how I attend some training." (initial). Ms. Passion also makes sense of talent management as a phenomenon of responsibility; being offered a promotion and training, she seems to give a part of her responsibility away to the organization,

"I don't see this as handing over something, to be honest, but more like (-) you're calling to them and there's an echo coming back or something like this. Well, it actually is a good feedback and (-) working together on it, as I said, a win-win situation for the employer and for me. Well, it's-, handing over, yes, I do have the feeling I can actively take part in it, yes. Within the possibilities, but-, yes." (initial)

The texts suggest that her situation represents the majority of the respondents who explain the limits of self-management. They tend to experience a certain amount of freedom and choice within a clearly defined frame,

"And that he gets where he might want to develop towards or where he might have to, well, it depends. (…) she of course RATHER specifies it on the one side, but on the other side we can shape it and it's within our hands, what I very much appreciate and where we, so to

say, also have from the top, not top-DOWN, but from team lead, somehow really, there, I don't wanna say no borders, but certainly many freedoms, to, well, to develop into a direction where we wanna go, IF we want this. Well, everybody can do it at his own pace, everybody can do this in his area and I do appreciate it very much that we are somehow seen as individual there and are also individually supported." (Ms. Appreciative, initial)

This is particularly interesting because the texts only show little indication for a shift of responsibility for talent management from employers to employees. However, they suggest that the employees want to engage more in self-talent management. For example, Ms. Appreciative's perceptions seem to change over the research process and transform the felt insecurity in the initial interview into clarity later on. The perceived incongruence of the organizational discourse and the own understanding of responsibility, individualism and autonomy frustrates her. While she introduces one talent measure as major development opportunity at the beginning of our talk, she calls it a "compromise" (follow-up) towards the end of our conversations.

4.3 Negotiating talent (management)

Having introduced the respondents, talent meanings and meaning creation processes, this is the last of three parts to present the texts of the participants. It explores the role of talent (management) in identity formation. In detail, it looks at whether individuals are rather shaped by talent (management), or whether they rather engage in individual agency and shape the self. I also analyze which social-identity categories of each individual are affected by identity making mechanisms in talent (management). Additionally, I explore identity formation in the context of whether an individual opposes or embraces a prevalent talent discourse, action or talent attribution. Along with the narratives, I introduce organizational and individual characteristics for the reader to be able to relate to the respondents. The section is structured as follows: first, I look at identity formation when individuals resist talent (management); then, I analyze how individuals embrace and internalize talent (management). And finally, I explore how the participants construct identity in uncertain times in the context of talent (management). Figure 26 gives an overview of the discussions to follow and serves to visualize the contents of Table 2 below. I differentiate between talent discourses and talent practices or actions as components of talent management.

[1]Talent-identity [2]No talent-identity
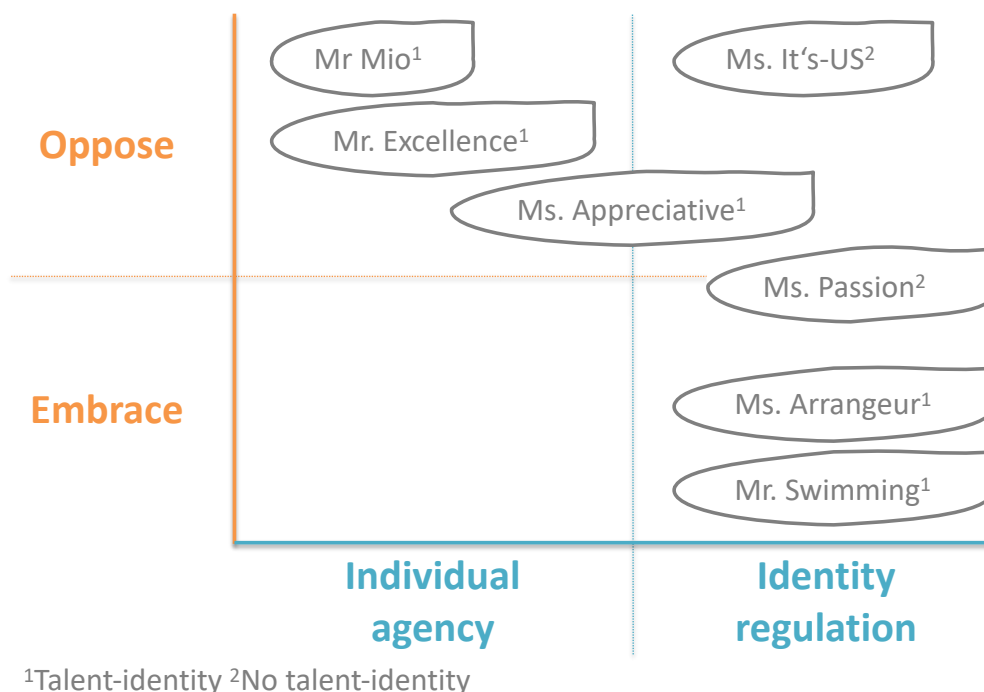
Note: The identity construction of the respondents differs depending on the talent discourse or talent action one looks at (see Table 1). This graph visualizes a tendency of each individual's identity construction.

Figure 26: The respondents' identity construction in talent (management), created by author (2020)

Identity construction in talent (management)							
Who - Individual-level characteristics - Organizational-level characteristics	**opposes/ embraces**	**discourse/ practice**	**agency/ regulation**	**social-identity**	**keyword for SI**	**based on**	**mechanisms**
Mr. Mio - Early 40s, married, two small children, apprenticeship, Germany - Manufacturing sector, 350-400 employees	embraces	talent practice (attr. of talent)	agency	local-organizational	talent	self	SI = self
	opposes	talent discourse & practices	agency	local-personal	caring leader	values, self	reflection and self-awareness not-me position identity work & practices - power
	opposes	talent discourse & practices	agency	cultural-stereotype	Christian	values, self	reflection and self-awareness not-me position identity work & practices - power
Mr. Excellence - Late 50s, married, three adult children, apprenticeship & diploma, Germany - Financial activities sector, 700-750 employees	embraces	talent practice (attr. of talent)	agency	local-organizational	talent	self	SI = self
	opposes	talent practices	agency	local-personal	authentic, honest, fair	values, self	reflection not-me position identity work & practices (change the rules of the game) - power
	opposes	talent discourse	agency	local-organizational	enabler	values	reflection identity work & practices - power
	opposes	talent power discourse	agency	local-personal	value-oriented	values, self	self-awarenesss identity work & practices - lack of power
	embraces	manager discourse	regulation	cultural-stereotype	thick-skinned		identity work
Ms. It's-US - Late 30s, single, apprenticeship, Switzerland - Professional and business services sector, 350-400 employees	opposes	talent practice (attr. of talent)	agency	local-organizational	no-talent	self	self-awareness not-me position lack of appreciation identity work
	opposes	talent discourse (joint understanding of organization and coworkers)	regulation	formal-role SI & local-organizational	expert consultant, vertical career, but in org. up or out, long hours, commited	values, self	role-making and role-taking not-me position identity work & no practices - lack of power
Ms. Arrangeur - Mid 40s, married, two teenage children, apprenticeship, Germany - Financial activities sector, 750-800 employees	embraces	talent discourse ("all are talents")	regulation	local-organizational	talent	self	reflection
	embraces	talent practice (attr. of competence)	regulation	local-personal	competent	self	attribution of competence and appreciation
	embraces	talent practice (talent test)	regulation	local-organizational & local-personal	arrangeur and others	self	attribution of competence and appreciation
Mr. Swimming - Early 30s, partnered, university education, Austria - Manufacturing sector, 900-950 employees	embraces	talent practice (feedback, attr. of talent)	regulation	local-organizational	talent	self	SI = self
	embraces	talent practice (feedback)	regulation	local-personal	funny	self	
Ms. Passion - Late 20s, single, , university education, Austria - Leisure and hospitality sector, 50-100 employees	embraces	talent discourse (talent = passionate about one thing)	regulation	local-organizational	no-talent	self	SI = self
	opposes/ embraces	talent practice (feedback)	regulation	local-organizational & local-personal	passionate, social	values, self	role-making and role-taking lack of power
Ms. Appreciative - Early 30s, single, university education, Germany - Professional and business services sector, 300-350 employees	embraces	talent practice (attr. of talent)	agency	local-organizational	talent	self	SI = self
	opposes	talent discourse & practices (own role)	regulation	local-organizational	Fachidiot	self	role-making and role-taking lack of power
	opposes	talent discourse & practice (arbitrary)	agency	local-personal & cultural-stereotype	correct, principle, reward	values, self	reflection

Table 2: The respondents' identity construction in talent (management), created by author (2020)

4.3.1 Opposing talent discourses and actions

To shape identity by positioning oneself against organizational talent discourses or actions emerges as a theme from the texts. The texts suggest that the respondents use opposition as a means to strengthen their self-concept. A variety of narratives about opposition surface: individuals, who perceive organizational talent (management) to differ quite a lot from their own understanding of talent, talk with rather strong emotions about these discrepancies. In contrast, only "mild deviations" seem to be mirrored in more moderate storytelling. Further, the results indicate that the amount of power an individual possesses over organizational talent discourses and actions might also be an influence factor in identity construction (see *The power game* at the end of this section).

This section starts by introducing texts where individuals oppose organizational discourses and actions that they perceive as inauthentic, dishonest or hypocritical, unfair, neglecting and incorrect. Thereby, they seem to engage in identity work to shape the self to be authentic, honest, fair, caring, correct and diligent. Mr. Excellence seems to regard himself as authentic because he says "I didn't want to (-) twist myself" (follow-up). He might reinforce his awareness of the self by opposing narratives about talent actions of his financial company with more than 700 employees that seem inauthentic or dishonest to him,

"But on the other hand, above everything else, I just can't hear this (-) well, this, *if I could, then I would, and stuff like that*, anymore, it's just im-possi-bly un-bear-able (-) because (-) you'll certainly be disappointed." (follow-up)

Mr. Excellence seems honest to himself ("because I also have such tasks, where I know, now I'm in my ANTI-talent" – initial) and others describe him as "fair boss, but also clear position" (initial). He might therefore use talent stories that contradict honesty and fairness throughout the interviews to strengthen his self,

"Then they somehow succeeded, both, to flatter the decision maker, a board member, (-) so much, well, and through their study program and their know-how in digitalization and new world and what else and 4.0 (-) the things, they they say, appear incredibly exciting and great, (-) the decision maker is 60 years old (-), is excited, can't judge at all, what they're talking about, yes." (follow-up)

Mr. Mio, who introduces the term "life principle" (initial), also seems to feel a difference in how he and his manufacturing company with almost 400 employees make sense of talent (management). By expressing the perceived wrongs of his organization, he opposes its talent actions and discourses. Thereby, he might create inputs into his social-identities in a way that makes them appealing to himself. This then might strengthen his self-identity. Mr. Mio's value-based inclusive understanding of talent seems to be informed by his Christian background, him also having a cultural-stereotype social-identity of being a Christian. He uses the term "life principle" multiple times. He seems to value charity, honesty, transparency and justice in himself and admires the same in other people. His narratives evolve around how he opposes his organization's doings, which he might regard as hypocritical and neglecting. In doing so, he seems to engage in identity work and to internalize his local-personal social-identity of an honest and caring leader and co-worker,

"And then also this this this fuss of my direct supervisor, along the lines of (-) he'll bite somebody's head off and blah blah blah (--) he'll read them the Riot Act and he said such things all the time and, and at the same time, they go for lunch every day (…) And I'm also involved a little bit in this mess, because on the one hand I gotta be loyal to my my supervisor and I really can't go to the boys beforehand and say (--) *rather be careful, don't take it at face value,* because then I'd stab my boss in the back before anything happens (--) (*Muttering away to himself*), on the other hand you don't want to let it come to the moment (-), when they're again completely frustrated. (*Laughter*) But it just is like that at our company." (follow-up)

"well, they didn't wanna offer a clean solution for the interim period to me (…) And I said there must be a clean solution and don't don't put me there first thing and then you'll just shove away the other guy and something like that. Because I've experienced quite a lot at our company, yes. (…) Of course, everybody can just blend into the background and they can can just turn around and leave the company, but in that case nothing will ever change at our company." (initial)

In the quotes above, his voice bears much emotion. A possible explanation is that his values are utterly important to him and he feels aversion towards his organization's doings. He tells many stories where he works against the system, which, for him, seems to symbolize prevalent talent discourses and talent actions. All the time, the texts suggest that he shapes his identity through identity work in the form of talk. He uses the question of comparing talent management to an animal to set a clear distinction between his and his organization's talent practices, a caring and responsible elephant as opposed to a tiger,

"there are so many animals, that don't care about anything, well, they get kids and then they're away and simply leave them to their fate (…) all such animals like the tiger, like the lion (-), how they are all in principle loners. (…) maybe, it's more an elephant herd, that that that (---) that is aware of their responsibility, the young animals are in the middle, they are protected, there there there are those, that lead, something like that." (initial)

In the follow-up interview, I observe that he talks more quickly. A reason for that might be that he has thought about everything during the reflection time of diary writing. This could imply that reflection and self-awareness are mechanisms for him to get a clear idea on who he is and what situation he finds himself in. He blurts out that Obama "is criticized for getting the peace nobel prize (-) so so quickly" and that "probably more heads of state have the intention to drive forward the world peace, but one is also somehow trapped in a certain system and (-) can't (-) put it into practice" (follow-up). He seems to compare this political situation to himself: Despite his own "Alltagswahnsinn [*closest translation: everyday madness*]" (diary) and despite "this situation of pressure in which I find myself (-) to make things (-) things possible, that are actually not wanted at all at our company" (follow-up), he still works against the system. Through using narratives about his convictions and values opposed to his organization's talent doings, he seems to strengthen his self-identity and to influence his social-identities. Like him, Ms. Appreciative, might experience something similar and might regard organizational talent (management) in her services organization with more than 300 employees as incorrect. This is possibly opposed to her own notion of a diligent and correct person, as this example shows,

"I even had my apprenticeship and EVERYTHING, and I still think, that I somehow indirectly felt from my parents, that it's completely fine and I can do it, if I want it, but I think, they would prefer me to study at university." (initial)

At work, she seems to fulfill all tasks diligently, is "very nice and sociable" (initial) and dutifully accepts the "Fachidiot[3]" (initial) role she is attributed although she seems not to like it. The texts suggest that she internalizes certain characteristics that define her job role in order to do everything correctly and nicely. She for example describes herself as an expert, although she seems to oppose this term and might want to get away from this attribution. She says multiple times that her "approach is always to be taken seriously or to be perceived via competence" (initial) as an expert in her specific field. She seems to regard herself as talent and expects from the organization to treat her like she thinks she ought to be treated. For her, the previously explored incident with the manager belongs to talent management. In her view, the organization might have behaved badly, which contradicts first, her definition of talent ("look out for everybody, when you decide for a person" – initial), and second, her values. She seems to perceive that what she expects from the organization with regards to being treated as talent, has not been fulfilled and she appears deeply agitated to me: She is "extremely shocked" and "it reflects badly on the company" and "the management must behave professionally (…) it's hurt me" (all oral information regarding diary). In another situation, she seems to feel similarly: the texts suggest that she regards talent practices as a reward for good performance and years of employment with the organization, which is previously explored in this chapter. She appears disappointed that she does not receive training nor enough feedback, although she might feel she earns it,

"feedback is indeed something very important and that's why I'm always open and think, that we actually get this way too rarely (…) I also think, that it's somehow a signal, that you somehow still believe in the person and that you somehow wanna actively develop her and that's missing for me, because I for example don't do any training this year, what I find very unfortunate, but if it isn't planned, then well (-) it just is like that. And (-) yes. (-) That's why I think, it's some kind of reward and also appreciation." (initial / follow-up)

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[3] *Fachidiot* consists of two words, "subject" and "idiot". *Fachidiot* is an expert in a certain field who is not able to see beyond its limits.

That she does not get the reward she expects in accordance with the correct and diligent way she expects to be treated, seems to influence her local-organizational social-identity of "Fachidiot". There is no point in developing further and she ought to stay in this role,

"And it was clearly communicated, that this is my role, that I already have, towards which I actually don't have to develop at all, because I actually already got it, I'd say. And that's GOOD (-), but I miss a bit to develop myself." (initial)

Through opposing the talent actions of her organization (i.e. not fulfilling both, the expectations for correct management behavior and for correct allocation of talent rewards), she seems to engage in identity work for her values and ideas of right and correct behavior. The texts suggest that she promotes her local-personal social-identity (i.e. correct) and internalizes it into her self-identity. She also seems to question her local-organizational social-identity (i.e. expert position), which is discussed in the subsequent section.

Until now, this section has explored texts where individuals oppose organizational discourses and actions, thereby engaging in identity work in form of talk. The second part of this section looks at how individuals engage in identity work by acting opposed to organizational discourses and actions with the following concepts: to act as an enabler; and to identify and develop talents of others. Mr. Excellence seems to act as enabler in talent management in his organization that is based in Germany. This is interesting because he describes that his organization, after having identified a person's talents, puts responsibility on the individual for "making something out of it" (initial), as explored in the previous section on *Organizational discourses on talent*. He, however, acts as enabler and lets people work as much as possible, he suggests 20 percent, using their talents. He tells many stories where he helps people to use their strengths at work, despite of the formal roles they have. As an example, one employee has "so much creativity and so much love for plants and so on, and then she got to take care of the plants, yes." (follow-up). For Mr. Mio, talent (management) seems to provide a platform to actively shape his workplace, at least partially, and to behave true to his convictions. Through acting opposed to organizational rules of conduct that he accepts (he often says "it just is like that in our company" – initial, follow-up), he might engage in identity work. In other words, he seems to use his own sense-making of talent to strengthen the self. It seems tiring for him and not rewarded by his organization, "when my boss actually wanna know at some point (-) what I've actually done and so, then he doesn't understand, that I took care of the employees because they are employed, they get their salary and they have to do their job and that's it" (initial).

Although facing difficulties by his company and high pressure on himself ("Because the pressure, that I put on myself, naturally overwhelms me (-) at some point." – initial), he seems to import his understanding of talent (management) in a tiring and exhausting process into his workplace. He seems to aim at identifying and developing everybody's strengths, while time seems scarce and pressure is up. He says he still goes for it because he is convinced and that is who he is, "I (-) I can't do anything different" (initial), and he has "always had people around me, well not only at work but also in private who have just supported me in my in- in- well in the talent that I have, yes, and in my possibilities, and like this it has somehow become a life principle." (initial). The texts therefore suggest that he forms his identity through talent narratives and actions, both based on values and his own notion of the self.

In conclusion, it is interesting that while Mr. Excellence actively seems to work on identity construction through distancing himself from certain talent discourses and practices at the organization, he also agrees with his organization on many other talent issues. The texts indicate that there are different levels of opposition; for example, Mr. Mio completely opposes everything around talent (management) at his organization while Mr. Excellence picks certain discourses and practices and puts them against some of his values and convictions to construct his identity. Both participants share some characteristics: they are both family fathers, they are older than 40, have worked at their organizations for a longer time and live in Germany. However, they are based in different industry sectors and organizational-level characteristics differ.

The power game

A previous section discusses how the respondents make sense of talent (management) in the context of organizational talent power discourses. This section explores how the individuals form identity in the light of what they attribute to power in talent (management). The texts suggest that power relates to different facets of talent. The first aspect to be explored relates to being aware of own talents. This seems to boost self-confidence and to enable individuals not to play along the rules and to withstand the perceived abuse of power,

"in any case, one topic is a certain self-confidence, because (-) employees or also myself, if they do a job, a task, where they also know of themselves, I possess this talent, then they automatically assume, well half-automatically assume, it also depends on the type of person, that they are also good at that and then it's (-) the challenge rather becomes a GAME (-), rather becomes a FUN FACTOR." (Mr. Excellence, initial)

Second, the perceived amount of power an individual possesses seems to influence in how far talent (management) can be used for identity construction. This theme is connected to individual agency because, like in previous accounts in this section, individuals seem to oppose discourses in order to strengthen the self and to influence their social-identities. The concepts that some of the respondents oppose are as follows: abuse of power; nepotism; no talent-identity; no power due to power distance; and own role. The manager Mr. Excellence is caught in the middle of a game: it appears to me that all our conversations evolve around power and "a feeling and an atmosphere of manipulation" (follow-up). As follows, I explore how he uses stories, that oppose talent power discourses, to work on his self-identity and local-personal social-identity of "value-oriented". Although he seems to know the organizational code of conduct, the texts suggest that he consciously decides against playing by the rules. In doing so, he seems to engage in value-oriented behavior instead. An example is the concept of networking and nepotism,

"But I didn't want it, I'm- I didn't (-) didn't want to twist myself. (--) I am happy that I am, like I am and (-) deliver good performance, good work, (-) I'd describe it as value-oriented work. But those, who are value-oriented, actually often aren't the winners. (…) I've built a network, to get information. But I haven't done it, in order to be promoted." (follow-up)

Instead of participating in the game around power present in his organization, he seems to rather focus on excellence, and talent which is "NOT the decisive FACTOR for, for power, success or dominance" (initial) (see also the previous section on *Organizational discourses on power*),

"And I do have some problems behind me in my company with hi- big conflicts and I think, that especially this RESILIENCE, that I've developed or with which I could answer, is strongly connected to the model, that I've done things being in a flow. (…) In my area I do it differently and I've surely angered people there (…) they always ask me HOW DO YOU DO IT? (…) that motivated me, to prove, that you get better results, if you do it differently." (initial / phone call for clarification)

Being successful through his own doing seems to be his "answer to that, this pact situation" (phone call for clarification). He recounts a situation where he is assigned a rather difficult case, "along the lines, *THERE he shall fail*" (phone call for clarification) and it seems that he is participating in the game. He seems to win when it comes to excellent performance and great results, but observes the consequence of his behavior which is a lack of appreciation,

"With this result we're of course the best branch in the company. It's clear, the rest is below 100 somewhere there they're struggling. (…) Shit yes, that's really good. That's really great, yeah. Yes, that's the excellence then. That's the excellence, THAT is it. (…) Being successful is quite nice, whereas the more difficult part is of course to act like this in the long run. That means, less appreciation from the management, because you don't support the system, *he doesn't join, therefore he actually criticizes it*." (initial / phone call for clarification)

He still "talks about the things that NOBODY SAYS" (initial) and is "the man of clear words, I call the things by their name" (follow-up) but he steps down at work. In the interview, he asks me in which role to answer my interview questions and I naturally favor the current role. His position in the game seems to change. He still leads by excellent performance, but he seems to lack power now, feels the distance to the headquarter. The game seems to lose its intensity because "they simply have too much power and we got to implement the decisions which are not really thought-through" (initial). He seems disappointed by the lack of interest of the headquarter in his advice and he seems tired now after having played the game for so many years. Still, his local-personal social-identity and self-identity of "value-oriented" might be reinforced by his actions and his narratives around power. Being aware of his talents (excellence) seems to enable him not to play along the rules and to actively oppose the power discourse in his organization. Because he can still "act", he can use the

opposition to power discourses for his identity construction. The analyst Ms. It's-US in the Swiss services sector opposes various talent discourses and actions of her organization but compared to other respondents, she, as an employee not being part of the leadership circle, seems to feel she has no influence nor power. She perceives a power distance between employees and leadership (see also *Organizational discourses on power*) and the next paragraphs explore how this might influence her identity construction in the light of talent power discourses.

Before examining this in detail, I explore the various talent discourses and actions she opposes: The talent image of no-talent which she perceives to be attributed to her does not correspond to her notion of self. She feels like "the last in the food chain" or "somewhere at the end" (both follow-up) at her organization but she regards herself as somebody who "makes sure that business takes off" (initial). Her self-image therefore seems different from her local-organizational social-identity. She regards herself more competent than her supervisor, "he doesn't have (-)- for (?) me he doesn't necessarily have the prof- well (-)- I actually don't see him as comp- (*Sigh*) how should I say? (-), regarding the competence (*Short laughter*), he's not entitled to (*Laughter*) me something-" (initial). She also has lots of prior experience. She seems to oppose the no-talent image that is attributed to her in her local-organizational social-identity. But at the same time, she perceives that she, how she is and what her values are, seems not to fulfill the prevalent talent discourse of what a talent is at her organization. She perceives that her organization contradicts her talent definition, which is that talent can also be horizontal instead of vertical, up the career ladder. Further, she seems to regard her peers' values to be different from her own. This might lead to a constant struggle to stay true to herself and to live according to what she thinks is right, as the following quotes exemplify:

- Compared to her co-workers who she perceives to live according to the career path of "how is it always called, up or out (*English pronunciation*) (…) It's like that in our case (-) a little bit in sweet and nice" (initial), she is "not that kind of person, who wants to climb the career ladder, otherwise I could throw myself in and say *go, chop-chop-chop* and would probably get further" (initial).
- "But I think, yes, ssss- I don't know, if you if you if you get further, if you always say all is good (-). And all is positive and. (-) Yeeeeees. (-) Yeah." (follow-up)
- "so this- again this achievement-oriented society. I find it a little (--) where I actually rather (-) tryyyy to diiiiiiiistance (-) myself from it." (follow-up)

- "I definitely also don't wwww- work at the right place aaaaactually (*short laughter*) well for for this approach somehow (*breathe in*)" (follow-up)
- "can I find a place for myself in the company, that I'm still well and that I don't somehow- well, I somehow don't want to be a part of- well, probably I'm already a little bit a part of it or" (follow-up)

The texts suggest that the categories of formal-role and local-organizational social-identities are related to work roles in her case. They seem shaped by talent discourses and talent actions at her organization although she seems to oppose them. She might experience her role to be shaped, as a given, with limited option to shape it herself. For example, a possible reason for why she is not promoted could be that she might not correspond to the talent criteria,

"isn't it a topic at all, that I get this role, well, that they see me there at all. (…) it doesn't matter, what you do, it doesn't play a role, it doesn't interest anybody (…) But also to move forward in your field or to see some kinda path- well, to be shown some path, that would develop me (-) so that I'd stay, I don't see that in our company." (initial)

Returning to discussions on talent power discourses, she seems powerless when it comes to changing or influencing the status quo of talent discourses and actions at her organization. She perceives the reason is that there is a power distance and that she is not part of the leadership circle, where "simply everything is decided and defined and done there in this circle and then you hea- hear again from the managers and then you realize, *ah they've talked about something again*. (…) I simply always ask, you, who on earth is us now, and who on earth is you now?" (initial).

Being "distant" from the leadership circle, she regards talent decisions as arbitrary and inauthentic. Interestingly, the two individuals with a no-talent identity both address the negative comparison of employees – themselves – to "capital" (Ms. Passion, initial) or "resources" (Ms. It's-US, initial) and talk both about missing appreciation. They both live on their own in different countries, Switzerland and Austria, work in highly specialized roles and are aged below 40. They seem to perceive that they are treated unfairly because they and their work is not appreciated, they do not get enough feedback, and are attributed a no-talent status. The texts suggest that, if they perceive that their organization regards them as "capital" or "resources", they feel a rather personal detachment from the organization, taking an anonymous part in it and consequently, feeling powerless.

"but I think, that one could simply still strengthen the (--), the own (-), the own (-) capital sounds so stupid, but this, well, the employees, more and (--) show appreciation, appreciation, yes, in many respects, yes. (*Laughter*)" (Ms. Passion, initial)

"Not really. (-) I really miss that. (-) I think that's reall- that's really lacking at our company, because you don't get a resp- well I don't get a resp- well I have no idea. (…) to really (-) concern yourself with the person, I simply regard that as appreciation" (Ms. It's-US, initial)

Two other respondents discussed above engage in identity work and focus on changing matters in their organizations, which demands lots of effort. But Ms. It's-US seems to have no power in her organization with more than 350 employees because she is not in the leadership circle where decisions are taken. She still talks about discrepancies of her own values and the self, versus values and people she knows at her organization. The texts introduce that she works on identity with agentive aspects but struggles to present herself as she sees herself. Because she cannot actively change anything, her consequence at some point will be to leave the organization. One possible reason is to distance herself from their talent understanding,

"to stay for for *a longer time* with the company (-), I don't really see that, well I don't see myself, because I'm not the (-) kind of person, who wants to go for a career" (initial)

Similarly, Ms. Appreciative, who works as a consultant in Germany, feels trapped in her role of "Fachidiot"[4] (initial) and is "automatically pushed in this role" (initial). One example is that she is asked by her manager to divide her days for questions of other co-workers,

"Request of manager – Support

- Support of other employees in case of questions
  Idea: Assign days for questions" (diary)

She repeatedly asks for a change of her work role and makes sense of talent management to be connected to role making and role taking. And the role she is assigned seems to shape her local-organizational social-identity. She also perceives to lack the power to change this: She only gets a "compromise with [name of task], but it's of course also clearly communicated by the employer, that because there's simply nobody else in [name of

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[4] *Fachidiot* consists of two words, "subject" and "idiot". *Fachidiot* is an expert in a certain field who is not able to see beyond its limits.

department], clear-, or not many experts, that it's clear, that I stay in this field by all means"
(initial).

In conclusion, possessing or not possessing power over talent discourses and actions
appears as a strong theme in identity construction. While all individuals of the current section
oppose organizational talent discourses and actions to varying degrees, they all engage in
identity work by open resistance. However, the agentive aspect of identity construction gets
stronger when individuals also possess the power to shape their identity by being active,
and consequently talking about their actions.

4.3.2 Embracing talent discourses and actions

To shape identity by internalizing organizational talent discourses or actions emerges as a
theme from the texts. Examples of talent (management) to be discussed are talent tests,
feedback, attribution of competence and talent-identity. The first respondent is the mid-aged
financial advisor Ms. Arrangeur who seems to internalize the results of a talent test and
consequently, appears more self-confident. It is interesting that the voice of Ms. Arrangeur's
narratives changes between the initial interview on the one hand, and the diary and the
follow-up interview on the other hand. A potential reason for this is that after the first
interview, she looks for her talent test results ("I "dug up" my talents from the kitchen
cupboard in the [company name]" – diary) which provide her with more self-confidence.
During the initial interview she is insecure although she seems to know that she does a great
job,

"What are you proud of in your job? – (-) (*Sigh*) I don't know. (-) I can't think of anything.
Ask me again. **What are you proud of in your job?** (*Breathe out*) (-) (*Repeats question for
herself*) (--) I don't know. (…) I have much more confidence in myself now (-), well, with the
experience, yes, with the experience and (-) with (-) and with (-) aaaaall the past experience,
where you realize again and again *with clients there, and clients there, and clients there*,
that you- well, that appreciation- (-) that they give appreciation and- yes. There you rather
got (-) a more (-) self-confident manner now and (-) that you say *I can do it*, than (-) fifteen
years ago! (-) Yes, right. There you get much (-) more competent, (-) much more competent, and
(-) there (-) yes. For sure." (initial)

However, after the initial interview and after having explored the talent test results, she seems to reflect on many situations that, for her, all confirm her top strengths, for example,

"Now it's clear to me, why I always feel responsible for everything at work and why I always work at "full speed" → maximum performance & a sense of responsibility are apparently my strengths (I'd forgotten, I only knew Arrangeur + bonding capacity)" (diary)

I notice that she expresses herself more self-assured in the diary and in the follow-up interview: The security of the talent test results might attribute competence and provide appreciation. These notions appear throughout our conversations, for example when she describes her local-personal social-identity,

"they think, that I (-) (*Laughter*) friendly, (-) helpful, (-) funny (-), patient (--) and (-) that I know something. How do you call that? – **Competent?** – Competent. Yes, right. – **They think, that you're competent, that's great.** – Yeaaah, they do, they also always ask me. *Can you help me there, can you help me there, can you help me there, can you do this for me, can you do this for me.* Yes. Right. (*Laughter*)" (initial)

Besides her colleagues asking for help, the talent test results also seem to attribute competence and offer appreciation, and she seems to embrace the results with regards to her local-organizational and local-personal social-identities by internalizing them into her self-identity. The texts suggest that this strengthens her self-identity, the notion of who she is, and she perceives this as positive, increasing her self-esteem,

"aaaand when I read it again, then I suddenly thought *Aha! That's why (-) I'm doing great* (-) in the advisory service, especially at work now, with the clients, becaaaause I'm apparently really (-) good with communication and bonding capacity and that's why the clients who wanna come all feel at home" (follow-up)

Talking about talent management, Ms. Arrangeur frequently introduces the unusual word "Arrangeur", which is one of the results of the talent test. Only when I ask about the meaning of the French word, she would explain it to me as "Arrangeur is somebody, who takes care of a million things and who arranges many things" (initial). Whereas the wording is very specific company language and uncommon in everyday German, her almost 800 co-workers most probably know it, too. Using the word as if it were the most natural thing in the world, she might have internalized being an "Arrangeur" into her self-identity. Readily accepting the results and wording of the talent test might be a way for Ms. Arrangeur to choose the right

discourse and identity. Fully accepting the talent of "Arrangeur", appearing happy for knowing about it, she seems to embrace this social-identity as an element of her self-identity.

Mr. Swimming, quite new to his Austrian manufacturing organization with more than 900 employees, also seems to adopt what he understands as company language and uses it quite naturally as well, for example "townhall meeting" (follow-up), or "we always say such a Single Source of Truth" (initial). It is interesting that his and Ms. Arrangeur's talent understanding also seem to conform to how they perceive their respective organization's understanding. This is explored in detail in the section on *Organizational discourses on talent*. While a talent test seems to shape Ms. Arrangeur's identity construction, feedback might do the same for Mr. Swimming.

Having explored the notion of feedback earlier, the following paragraphs explore what feedback means to the respondents with regards to identity construction. Mr. Swimming gets good feedback for being funny and seems to make it a part of his role. He explores the word "feedback loop" where private feedback influences professional feedback and vice versa. Throughout our conversations, he seems to be joking: "am I on air?" (initial) is the opening phrase when we first meet, even before I can say anything else. For the first interview, he prepares a list of words that are difficult to write; he uses this list for jokes and light conversation. In a difficult situation, the words would possibly have provided safety and distraction. He pushes topics away that are not funny: one of the senior managers who performs rather poorly and is not regarded as talent (opposite to the controller Mr. Swimming), is well connected and the general manager's buddy. Mr. Swimming seems to perceives this to be unfair and definitely not funny, and we do not further talk about the topic. A possible reason for integrating the trait of being funny into his self-identity might be the good feedback he receives for it,

"I think, they mainly find me extreemely funny, because I hear this extremely often, that I'm extreemely funny, I think I'm the FUNNIEST person on earth." (initial)

During our first conversation, Mr. Swimming's girlfriend is with us. In some cases, his voice turns to a whisper which might indicate that it is something very important. When talking about talent management and how it influences the self, his voice turns to a whisper,

"(*Repeats the question for himself*) Because, there actually isn't really an intentional talent management, I think, that it (---) rather (-) doesn't influence me, (-) not at all. (…) I'd say, talent management doesn't influence my work so much, but rather the direct feedback, that I get for my work. That's an influence factor." (initial)

Feedback emerges a strong mechanism for him: Seen as a "*young talent from our finance team*" (follow-up) by his supervisors, he seems to also regard himself as talent. The texts suggest that he is insecure. A possible reason is that he is afraid that I as a talent management expert might batter his local-organizational social-identity. This could lead to him holding on to feedback and internalizing it into his self-identity. In case of insecurity, he still has diversion methods.

4.3.3 Uncertainty and talent discourses and actions

Being torn when making sense of talent discourses is another theme that emerges from the texts. In the previous narratives, the individuals experience identity choice or imposition at work and quite clearly either oppose or embrace talent (management). However, the texts suggest that individuals who find themselves in the middle of uncertainty or change do not respond that clearly to talent discourses and actions. The marketing manager Ms. Passion finds herself in an opaque and insecure situation during her job change within her small Austrian organization with almost 100 employees,

"that I might also be in general a little more insecure through this than where I'd be otherwise, because SO much is coming together at once." (follow-up)

Like Mr. Swimming, she also talks about a feedback loop where private and professional feedback influence each other. In private life, where she lives on her own in a large Austrian city, she gets feedback that she "should partly hold back more" (initial) whereas in professional life, she is "very task-oriented and not enough, or could be more, also like (-) well to see it a little bit more relaxed and to watch out more for people, simply for the interpersonal matters, not too much pace and simply also more these sensitivities (Laughter). Yes." (initial). The texts suggest that Ms. Passion feels she has to work on what others pick out as her major weakness because she is offered to attain a training program, as previously explored in Section 4.2.2. She seems to feel that she should change to be more social and caring in order to fit the image of a future leader at her organization,

"I'm curious, how the training will continue, but at the same time it's also putting me under stress, that it might be expected from me, to be a "perfect" person & exemplary leader overnight (or until the end of the course)!" (Diary)

At the same time, she feels she has to show passion, what she perceives to be a talent characteristic, to inspire others, "And it's also this passion again, that I for example have to transport in MY role to the journalists or that I have to pass on to them, so that THEY can also basically help, so that this FIRE, this FLAME, is also kindled in them, and that THEY develop passion for it" (initial).

The texts suggest that Ms. Passion perceives her organization to have a clear image of the character traits she must have to be a good leader and a successful marketing manager. She seems to oppose these expectations but feels insecure about what is actually happening and how to cope with it,

„Especially, because I just got the problem, talent versus trained [*in German "andressiert" which means to train an animal to do something*]. (-) I just thought-, does a dolphin really possess the talent, I mean does he already have a natural talent, to carry out great jumps and so on, but, or has he been trained by people, so that he does it now?" (initial)

„But I think, what I gotta learn in this respect, is that I don't assess every single feedback EQUALLY, well that I don't always accept it as it is or that I don't take it too much to heart, but (--) that I'm also quite clear, where (-) well where, how should I say, what is important to ME, my values, how do I wanna be and not, how WOULD OTHERS like me to be" (follow-up)

It is important to note that the concept of values keeps surfacing in different ways throughout the texts. Ms. Passion seems to regard it as conceptually similar to self-identity. The texts suggest that Ms. Passion is aware that there is a gap between the self as-is and the ideal self and she struggles to sort it out. Reflection is one way for her to make sense of what is happening and to negotiate identity in the light of talent issues. She regards herself as a self-critical person ("I'm in principle a very (*Laughter*) reflexive person" – initial) and therefore experiences reflection as rather painful, "I personally become rather more SELF-CRITICAL through this, what I'd rather, what is one of my credos, what I should rather lose." (initial)

4.4 Conclusion of the exploration

The conclusion of this chapter summarizes the texts, which build the foundation for discussing the research findings in Chapter 5. The first part of Chapter 4 explores social-identities and talent-identities of the respondents. The individuals have different backgrounds, come from varying age groups and have different years of employment with their respective organizations. It becomes apparent that five out of seven individuals have a talent-identity, which means that they see themselves as talent, and perceive their organization to do so, too. Two participants have a no talent-identity because they perceive not to be seen as talent by their organization. The potential reason for both is that they feel not to correspond to the talent criteria of their respective organization. The texts suggest that Ms. It's-US partly influences this social-identity with her own notion of talent but feels a dissonance between the self and talent-identity.

The second part of the exploration chapter then looks at how the respondents make sense of talent (management). It becomes apparent that the meanings they attribute to talent (management) are multi-faceted and do not exist on their own. More precisely, the texts suggest that talent (management) coexists with the internal notion of self and own values as well as external factors. These include actual and desired talent practices as well as organizational talent, talent power, talent reward and talent responsibility discourses. The own family background and interest in reading work on talent (management) also inform personal talent meanings.

And finally, the last part of the exploration chapter presents how individuals construct their identity in the light of talent (management). The texts suggest that the respondents work on the negotiated external aspects of identity alongside the internal aspects of identity. Illustrations of the interplay can be found in Figure 26 and Table 2. Overall, the texts indicate that the individuals use different identity-making resources to negotiate talent discourses, talent actions and their attribution of talent. By establishing links between the notion of self and available discursive notions of social-identities, I explore the interplay of identity and talent (management).

5   Critical discussion

The previous chapter explores the texts free from other dominant narratives. This chapter now enters into a dialogue with existing work in this area and thereby places the research in the academic world. I also explore how my pre understanding and life history influence the interpretations, and how I contribute to the discussion in my role as researcher.

The chapter is divided into four parts. The first part reflects on how the work with the respondents informs my understanding of the research area. To do that, I introduce the final conceptual framework and compare it with my initial considerations. The second part of the chapter then looks at existing concepts in talent management. Following, I discuss themes on the role of the self in talent (management). And finally, the fourth part explores themes related to agency and structure in talent (management). Along the way, I introduce sub-themes wherever relevant. The chapter concludes with a transition to Chapter 6.

A final remark regards the writing style of the chapter. Initially, I plan to discuss each theme in a rather closed cycle. However, to account for how the respondents make sense of the relationships between the themes, the discussion must be structured differently. I therefore put the different themes together in a more fluid approach and seek to provide a full picture of the research area. This should enable the reader to look at the whole chapter as an account of what is happening at different scenes of action. I visualize this journey by "discussion breaks" along the way in Figure 27. The illustration is used throughout the chapter to provide guidance and structure.

In the previous chapter, I refer to country-level, organizational-level and individual-level characteristics of the participants in order to enable the reader to relate to the specific cases. However, in this chapter, I do not contrast different characteristics such as countries or organizational size as the findings cannot be generalized due to the sample size.
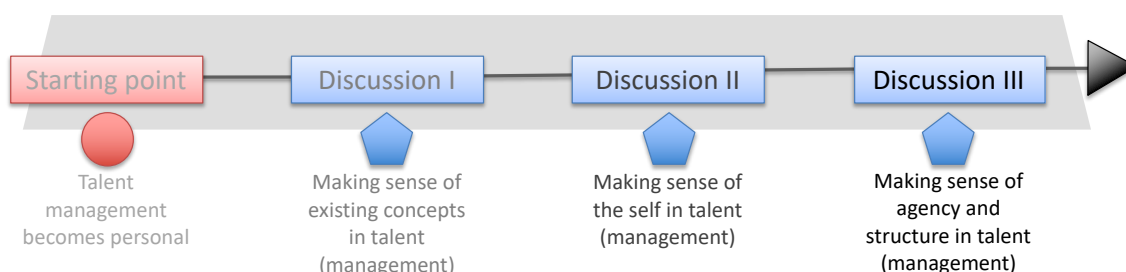
Figure 27: Journey of Chapter 5, created by author (2021)

5.1 Introducing the final conceptual framework

This is the first part of the discussion chapter. Two years ago, I developed the initial conceptual framework based on my pre understanding in Chapter 2, as shown in Figure 28. This was the starting point for designing the research approach in Chapter 3. However, the work with the respondents shapes my understanding of the research area in Chapter 4. In Chapter 5, I now introduce the final conceptual framework (see Figure 29) and compare it with my initial understanding of the research area.
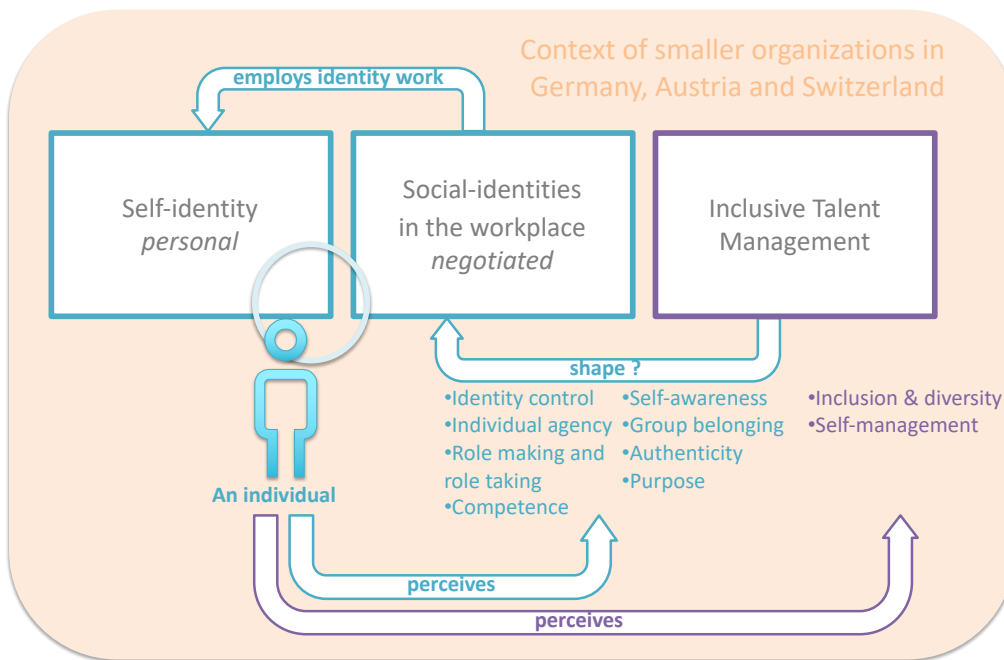
Figure 28: Initial conceptual framework "talent management and identity" based on pre understanding, created by author (2018)
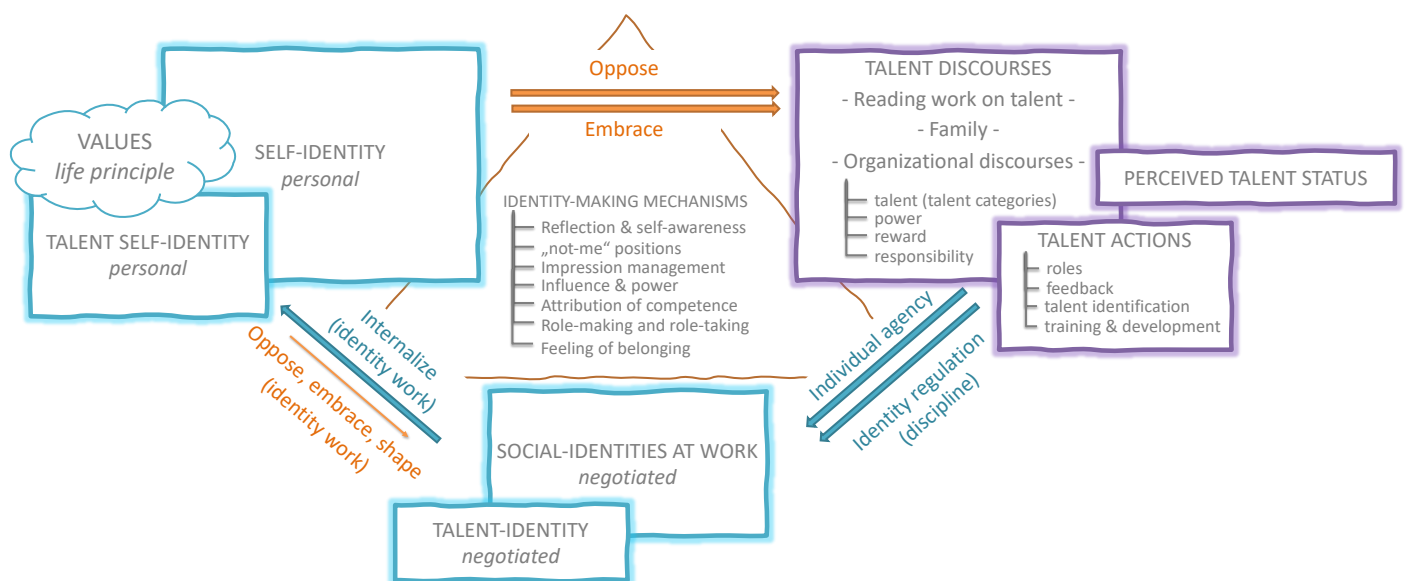
Figure 29: Final conceptual framework "talent (management) and identity", created by author (2021)

Reflecting on the visual representation, the initial conceptual framework is rather organized in boxes, curvy lines and bold arrows. The model illustrates clear labels and a straight-forward color code. It also has a frame which shows my initial belief in boundaries. In comparison, the form of the final conceptual framework includes edgy lines, more links among the various parts of the structure and arrows with dual meanings. My understanding of talent (management) and identity has developed towards a more fluid concept. The rather edgy nature of the triangle and the sharp lines indicate a less round and therefore sharper understanding of the phenomenon. I acknowledge that the "dark side" of talent management exists and that navigating through this world is sometimes difficult. Counting in difficulty can also be the reason for the absence of clear boundaries in the final conceptual framework. There is no limit to sense-making, and the world is not a pleasant place for an individual. This does not only mirror the emerging understanding of the research area but also my personal development towards being more critical and direct, calling things by their name. In this light, the two frameworks can be observed as an illustration of both, the findings of this study and auto-ethnographic aspects of the journey. Comparing my early research considerations with the final conceptual framework, I highlight the following key areas for the upcoming discussion:

- The relationship of the self and personal values to talent meanings
- Power and rewards as major sense-making drivers of talent (management)
- The context of smaller organizations in Germany, Austria and Switzerland
- The existence of inclusion in talent (management)
- Identity making mechanisms in talent (management)
- The perceived absence of self-talent management
- The interplay of individual and extra-individual factors in meaning creation processes

In conclusion, the comparison of the two frameworks provides an overview of how the understanding of the research area has developed. The remainder of the chapter explores the areas highlighted for discussion.

5.2   Making sense of talent (management)

This is the second part of the discussion chapter. It answers both research questions by exploring how employees make sense of existing concepts in talent (management). In detail, I reflect on talent meanings, talent status and the research context of inclusive talent management. Figure 30 places the discussion in the broader context of this chapter's journey.
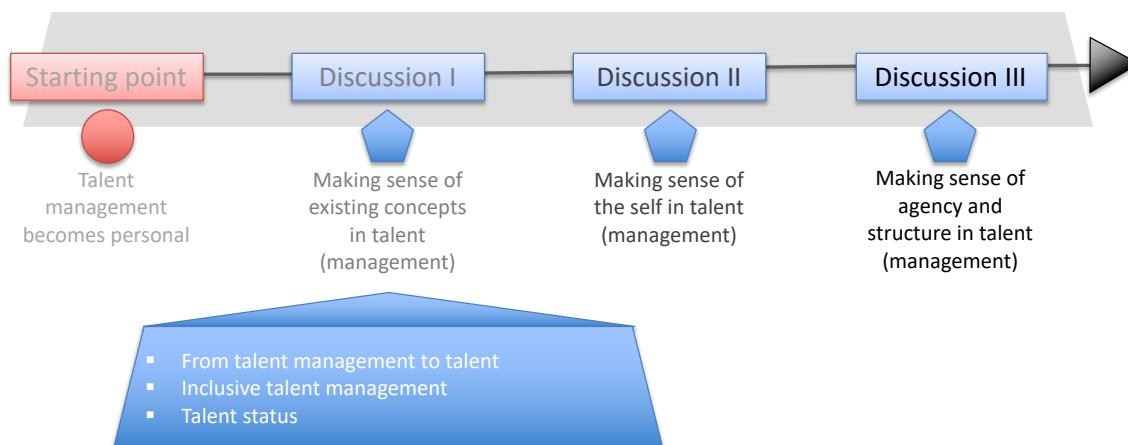
Figure 30: Journey of Chapter 5. Making sense of existing concepts in talent (management), created by author (2021)

5.2.1   The personal notion of talent

This section introduces a journey of sense-making. Along the way, unexpected adventures come up. My perspective is informed by the participants' sense-making of their individual realities. Already on the road, I therefore question my pre understanding of talent management. In this section, I explore how the respondents and I make sense of the personal notion of talent.

Prior to the doctoral journey, I naturally looked at talent management from organizational and managerial perspectives. I deliberately choose the word *naturally* because I am mainly employed to achieve organizational and managerial objectives. When I started with the research, my main aim was to gain different perspectives on the world. This is why I developed a research project that explores talent management through the eyes of employees. Because I expected the study to challenge my views and hidden assumptions, I decided to be open to both. However, it indeed surprises me where I find myself now. The path has taken a rather sudden turn. The participants and I develop our considerations further together. I perceive it as enriching to let my perspective be informed by the work with

the respondents. While talent management is situated at the organizational level, this study focuses on the individual level. There, the change of wording from *talent management* to *talent (management)* includes both, the notion of talent and talent management. This is an example of the mutual sense-making in this hermeneutic study (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). To point out our sense-making, I use the first-person plural (*we*) from now on, where relevant.

But what actually is the mutual sense-making of talent? From talent management to talent.

For the individuals, the sense-making of talent (management) is not so much about talent practices. They rather concentrate on the meanings they personally associate with talent (management). Wiblen and McDonnell (2020) introduce *talent* as a social construct and the process of talent meaning creation as complex, diverse and "subject to ongoing negotiation" (p. 496). In establishing talent meanings, the self plays an important role. Consequently, I explore the perceptions and meanings the individuals attribute to talent (management) in the further course of this chapter, instead of talent practices themselves.

Alvesson and Kärreman (2000) introduce a relevant distinction between discourse and meaning. Distinguishing between "durable" and "transient" meaning (p. 1130), they explore different standpoints on how stable meaning can be independent of context and language. Can meaning exist beyond interaction and language? Talent (management) appears as a way of sense-making and as a personal concept from the work with the respondents. I take into account that context, specific experiences or talk influence the individual understanding of talent (management) to a certain extent, depending on the person. Watson (1994) introduces that discourses affect meaning creation. In detail, talent (management) rather emerges as a personal notion than a temporal meaning that is strictly coupled with discourse (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000).

Contrary to my initial expectations, the respondents arrive at talent *management* thoughts much later, if at all, after giving meaning to *talent* itself. That is, they rather ignore the *management* part and solely focus on *talent*. They tend to create meanings and negotiate identity based on *talent*. Being aware of me setting out to explore talent management, it is particularly interesting that the respondents determinedly engage in a different sense-making. I appreciate that this happens as my own pre understanding does not to limit their thinking to evolve in a divergent way.

The initial review of literature in Chapter 2 points out the prevalent focus on organizational and managerial perspectives in talent management research (Thunnissen, 2016; Thunnissen & Gallardo-Gallardo, 2019). The term *talent management* might therefore already imply a certain lens due to the *management* focus of the terminology. In contrast, we make sense of talent as a personal concept. I previously reflected that I *naturally* used to make sense of talent management from organizational and managerial perspectives. Maybe, the respondents also *naturally* look at the individual notion of talent instead of talent management because this is something they can and want to relate to and which they can and want to make sense of. Both, organizational and individual perspectives, co-exist and together provide a more comprehensive interpretation of talent management.

5.2.2   Talent status in inclusive talent management

This section explores talent status, in the course of which I analyze what this implies for discussing the research findings. The expression *talent status* is rather used in exclusive talent management (Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016). It is connected to being seen as unique, gifted and special by the organization and part of an elite group; individuals are categorized according to certain criteria as organizational talent (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Scullion & Collings, 2010; Tansley & Tietze, 2013). In contrast, all participants share an inclusive talent definition in my research. That is the belief that all people have talents (Dries, 2013). The research context is also inclusive: All respondents are employed by smaller organizations in Germany, Austria and the German-speaking part of Switzerland, which implies a rather inclusive approach to talent management (Festing et al., 2013; Meyers et al., 2020). They all work at organizations that do not employ an exclusive talent philosophy or elite talent practices. Because of this, I previously assumed that talent status would not appear from the research. However, despite of the respondents' own belief in inclusive talent and despite of the organizational, national and cultural context of inclusive talent management, they indeed perceive talent attributions. The participants range from employees who perceive to be seen as talent to employees who perceive not to correspond to the talent understanding of their organization. All of them make sense of perceived talent status and negotiate it throughout our conversations.

There are two possible explanations for perceived talent status in inclusive talent management. One possibility is that the respondents do not perceive talent (management) at their organization as inclusive, despite of the organizational, national and cultural context and their own talent philosophy. The existence of talent status can therefore be explained by the talent environment. This consideration leads to questions on the existence of inclusive talent management as such, which promises something to employees that it might not be able to deliver. The expectations and experiences therefore differ (Clarke & Scurry, 2020). In contrast, the other explanation assumes that inclusive talent management does indeed exist. Consequently, perceived talent status would then not only occur in exclusive talent management, but also in inclusive talent management. That means that talent status is independent of organizational talent philosophy, and that a person's sense-making of talent status influences perceptions and reactions regardless of the talent environment at work.

In conclusion, the strong appearance of perceived talent status in this research is an unexpected finding. It does not only raise a number of questions but also shapes the critical discussion as a whole. I regard this finding as an invitation to also compare, contrast and support the analysis with existing work on talent status.

5.3 Making sense of the self in talent (management)

Previous considerations of talent meanings, inclusion and talent status serve as a foundation for the discussions to follow. This is the third part of the discussion chapter. It again answers both research questions by exploring how people create talent meanings and construct identity in talent (management). In detail, the following sections focus on how the self and talent (management) are interrelated. I explore major personal themes that arise from the exploration of the texts. These are self-concept and self-awareness; talent self-identity and talent-identity; social-identities in talent (management); and the notion of values. Figure 31 again places the discussion in the broader context of this chapter's journey.
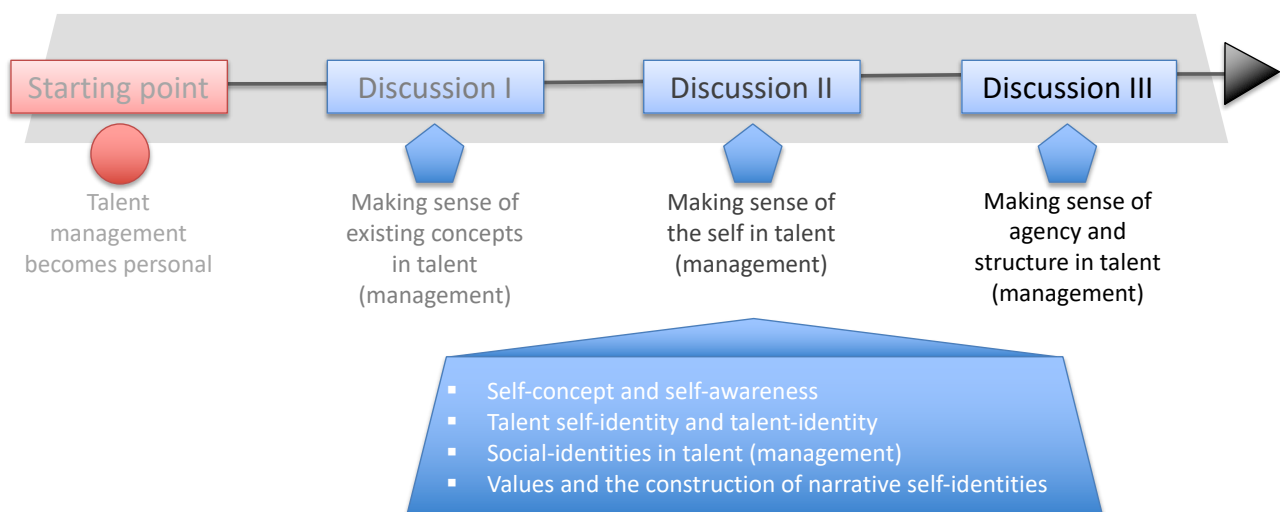
Figure 31: Journey of Chapter 5. Making sense of the self and talent, created by author (2021)

The respondents and I make sense of talent (management) and identity to be related in two ways. First, the individual understanding of talent links to the internal notion of who we are and to our values. Another expression for the internal notion of who we are, is *self-concept* or *self-identity*. And second, our perception of talent discourses and actions influences identity. Figure 32 visualizes the interplay between the self and talent (management). It is a segment of the final conceptual framework.
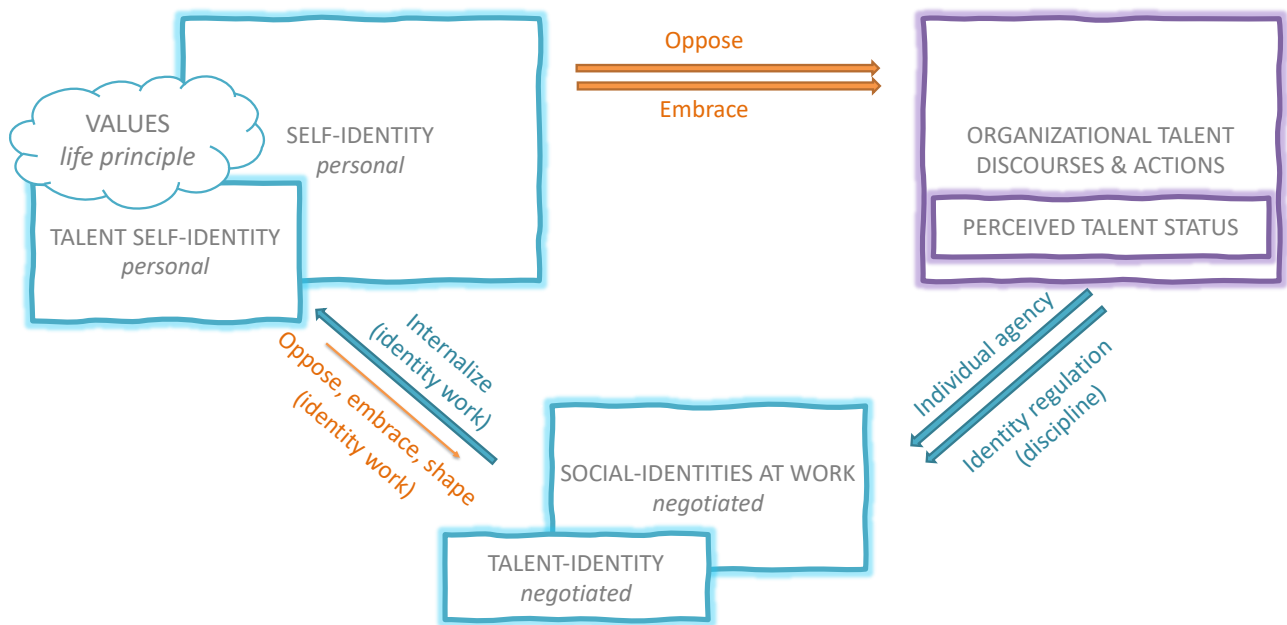
Figure 32: The self in talent (management), created by author (2020)

What follows is a detailed exploration of these relationships in the light of five questions:

1) Self-concept: Defining talent, defining myself?
2) How is the own notion of talent related to talent (management)?
3) How do employees negotiate talent self-identity and talent-identity?
4) Which social-identities are negotiated in talent (management)?
5) Which role do values play in identity formation and talent (management)?

Throughout the discussion, I continue to take the first overall finding into account that talent (management) is a personal concept for the respondents and for myself, too.

5.3.1 Self-concept: Defining talent, defining myself?

Having previously established talent (management) as a co-constructed individual notion, this section now points out the role of self-identity for talent meanings. Previous research looks at how organizational and managerial meanings of talent are constructed and refers to the importance of context (Wiblen & McDonnell, 2020). A further context in the construction of talent meanings is the self. In detail, self-identity, "the individual's own notion of who or what they are" (Watson, 2008, p. 131), plays an integral role in constructing talent meanings.

On the one hand, all respondents share an inclusive understanding of talent, which means that they regard all people to have talents (Dries, 2013). But on the other hand, they also add some characteristics which they derive from their understanding of self. Examples are age, strengths, emotional and cognitive intelligence, emotions, behavioral aspects (for example how to approach a task), or skills. They therefore use the self-concept as a starting point to construct talent meanings. One possible reason is that they want to strengthen a self-concept through conceptualizing talent. This is then why talent meanings mirror how they see themselves (Cooper & Thatcher, 2010).

Considering consequences of constructing talent meanings from self-identity, I reflect on three notions. First, by basing talent meanings on the self-concept, the respondents engage in self-awareness and reflection. It is interesting that especially Ms. Passion considers her behavior in her role and engages in identity work. Her high level of self-awareness and reflection can be due to her personality, as she also points out. But it can also arise from her work context which is currently characterized by uncertainty and change (Ibarra, 1999). By reflecting on herself, she experiences contradicting feelings and self-doubt (Brown, 2015). Second, because the respondents use self-identity to define talent, talent meanings are likely to vary from person to person. Additionally, the variety of talent meanings can depend on personal interests and differing views on talent (Wiblen & McDonnell, 2020). And third, this also shows that constructing talent meanings cannot be removed from everyday life but must be taken into account when making sense of this phenomenon.

5.3.2 How is the own notion of talent related to talent (management)?

This section discusses the relationships between talent (management) and identity. In doing so, I conceptually differentiate between *talent self-identity* and *talent-identity*. Talent-identity based on Watson (2008) is a negotiated social-identity. It is therefore *the cultural, discursive or institutional notion of whether one might be a talent* (compare Watson, 2008). It is constructed through talk and negotiates whether an individual is seen as talent or not. In more detail, I include talent-identity in the group of local-organizational social-identities (Watson, 2008). This category is the most fitting because the participants mainly make sense of talent attributions related to organizational and role issues. However, Watson (2008) argues that social-identity categories often overlap. Further, talent, as a part of self-identity, is also negotiated through identity work. I therefore introduce talent self-identity as an *internal notion or awareness of individual talent* (compare Watson, 2008).

The relationship between talent self-identity and talent-identity arises as follows from the work with the respondents. On the one hand, talent self-identity inspires the own sense-making of talent and partly influences talent-identity. And on the other hand, talent-identity is negotiated and possibly internalized into talent self-identity. For most respondents, talent self-identity and talent-identity rather overlap, while some experience conflict.

How is perceived talent status related to talent self-identity and talent-identity?

This finding has implications for talent status. In contrast to perceived or official talent status that is attributed by an organization (e.g. Björkman et al., 2013), I introduce talent-identity as negotiated. Therefore, I consider talent status to be only part of the story. More precisely, perceived talent status is a part of negotiating the own talent. The notion of whether one is a talent, or not, appears as discursively constructed as opposed to solely attributed by an organization. Negotiating talent-identity serves as a differentiator between talent status on the one hand, and identity issues on the other hand. Talent status does therefore not necessarily influence personal identity but is included in the negotiation of talent-identity. The research indicates that talent status is one available discourse among a variety of discourses in this world (Watson, 2008), that an individual can or must use to form identity. Discursive identity construction of being a talent or not therefore matters.

It has been previously argued that individuals discursively construct desirable identities based on formal talent status. They do so when they are connoted as unique, gifted or special or belong to an elite group (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Scullion & Collings, 2010; Tansley & Tietze, 2013). Talent pool membership shapes how individuals see their

development and possible futures, and thereby impacts identity (Swailes & Blackburn, 2016). Talent pool labels (e.g. "emerging talent") can also equal identity labels for employees (Tansley, Foster, Harris, Stewart, Sempik, Turner & Williams, 2007). Previous work indicates that people use formal talent status and official talent pool labels for their discursive construction of identity.

This leads me to question the importance of naming and verbal or written designations as opposed to perceived talent status. The official naming of talent plays an integral role in exclusive talent management (Kirk, 2020). Considerations of naming, talent and identity are now explored before I then compare them with the exploration of the texts. By exploring the importance of language in human interaction, Strauss (2017) looks at how individuals cope with names. He finds that organizations assign an identity to an individual when they characterize a person as talent. Kirk (2020) looks at this phenomenon in an exclusive talent management environment with regards to global talent: Based on Brown (2015), Kirk (2020) explores that individuals perceive "global talent" as desirable and choose this name for themselves. In doing so, they impose its associated identity on themselves. At the same time, calling people "global talent" can also force them into this identity. The naming of global talent starts an identity construction process where individuals engage in identity work to negotiate and resist identity attributions.

In conclusion, in contrast to existing work on exclusive talent management, the respondents are not openly communicated their talent status. One possible reason is that official instruments like for example talent pools do not exist, or at least the respondents do not know about their existence. Nevertheless, perceptions of talent attributions play a role in identity construction. Employees compare perceived talent status with their self-concept and an identity construction process is started. Engaging in identity work, individuals negotiate perceived talent status as one of multiple available discourses. In doing so, they work on talent self-identity and partly influence talent-identity.

5.3.3 How do employees negotiate talent self-identity and talent-identity?

The previous section conceptualizes the relationship between talent and identity. It introduces talent self-identity and talent-identity and shows how these interact with perceived talent status. This section focuses on identity construction mechanisms of talent-identity and talent self-identity. I look at how the respondents embrace or oppose talent-identity, and why they do so. Instead of *embracing* or *opposing*, Benwell and Stokoe (2012) note *associating* or *distancing* oneself from identity attributions. Brown (2015) finds that people *accommodate* the identities on offer to them, *modify* them or *distance* themselves from them.

All respondents but Ms. It's-US embrace their negotiated talent-identities. As previously explored, negotiated talent-identities potentially take perceived talent status into account. There are four possible explanations for embracing talent-identity. First, most of the respondents perceive talent-identity to mirror their self-image. Individuals who perceive to be seen as talent embrace this talent-identity and internalize it into the self. Second, Ms. Passion internalizes organizational talent discourses to explain her perceived no-talent status. She perceives not to be seen as talent and therefore strives to fulfill the internalized talent image of the organization. In doing so, she influences her talent-identity which also affects her sense of self. She is shaped by talent attributions and experiences identity struggles; she is torn between her self-identity and her wish for, or imposition of, normalization being a conforming co-worker and leader. Alvesson (2010) introduces this situation as "stencil" identity. Contrary to my own rather positive and optimist view of identity construction (Alvesson, 2010), I acknowledge that people also form identity in the context of discipline. Individual factors like talent discourses shape individuals and encourage them to embrace and internalize identity templates. Third, Ms. Arrangeur perceives as the only respondent that her organization employs inclusive talent management. For her, this means that all employees are seen as talent. This strengthens her self-image and she readily negotiates identity based on organizational talent discourses and actions. And fourth, some of the respondents have stayed with their organizations for a long time, which increases the probability that the individuals have internalized organizational identity (Hochschild, 2012). The research adopts this argument for organizational talent discourses.

Ms. It's-US is the only respondent who opposes the perceived talent status and her discursively constructed talent-identity. She does so because this contradicts her notion of self, the talent self-identity. To create an alternative image, she uses "not-me" positions (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) and actively engages in identity work. Previous work on anti-identity (e.g. Kirk, 2016; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) and disidentification (Elsbach, 1999) is explored in more detail in Section 5.4.2.

In conclusion, this section shows how employees form talent self-identity and talent-identity. The respondents tend to internalize talent-identity into the self out of various reasons explored above. Only Ms. It's-US opposes talent-identity and therefore develops "not-me" positions. Figure 33 gives an overview of identity formation in talent (management). It illustrates both, the interpretations of this section and also later discussions. In detail, it visualizes that employees oppose or embrace talent (management) which then starts an identity construction process. They engage in identity work and individual agency, or experience identity regulation. Throughout the chapter, the figure serves as an ongoing thread that the discussion continuously returns to.

*Social-identity corresponds to the notion of self, e.g. talent-identity corresponds to talent self-identity
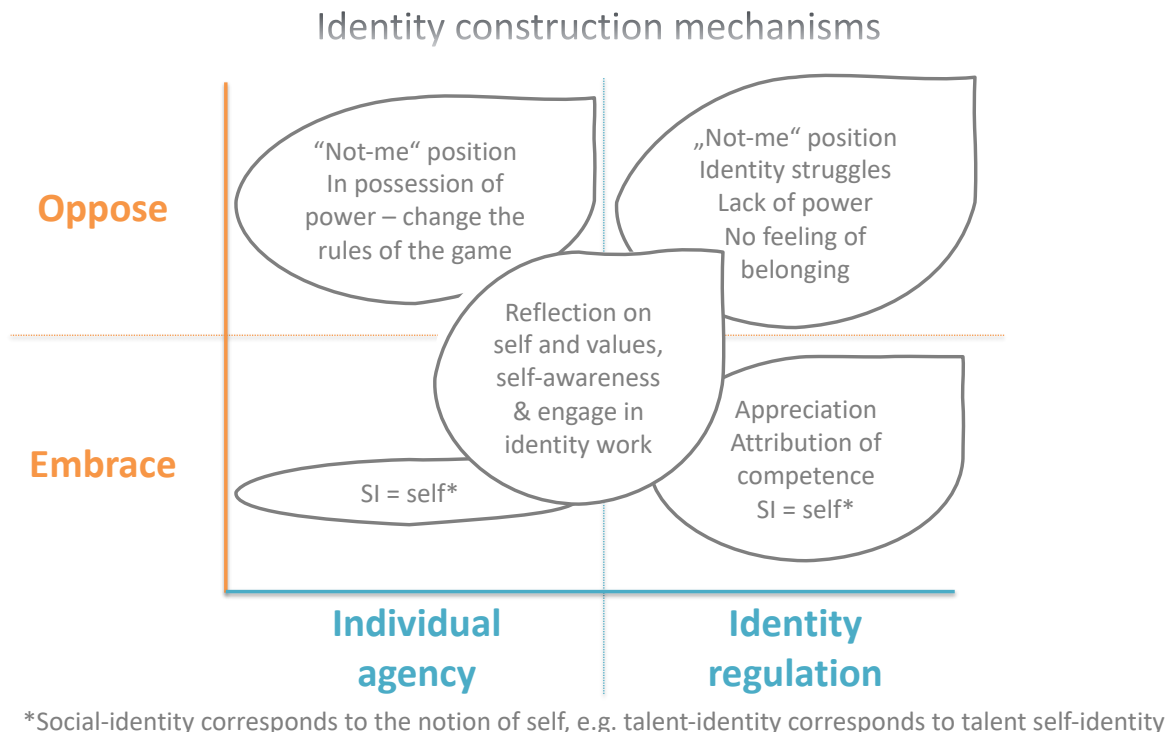
Figure 33: Identity construction mechanisms in talent (management), created by author (2020)

5.3.4 Which social-identities are negotiated in talent (management)?

Besides talent-identity, other social-identities are also negotiated in the context of talent (management). What follows is an exploration of each social-identity category. I acknowledge that the content of each category can also overlap (Watson, 2008). By exploring local-organizational, local-personal, formal-role and cultural-stereotype social-identities (Watson, 2008), this section deepens the understanding of talent (management) and identity. Figure 34 draws on the identity relationships from the work with the respondents (see Table 2 in Chapter 4 for details).
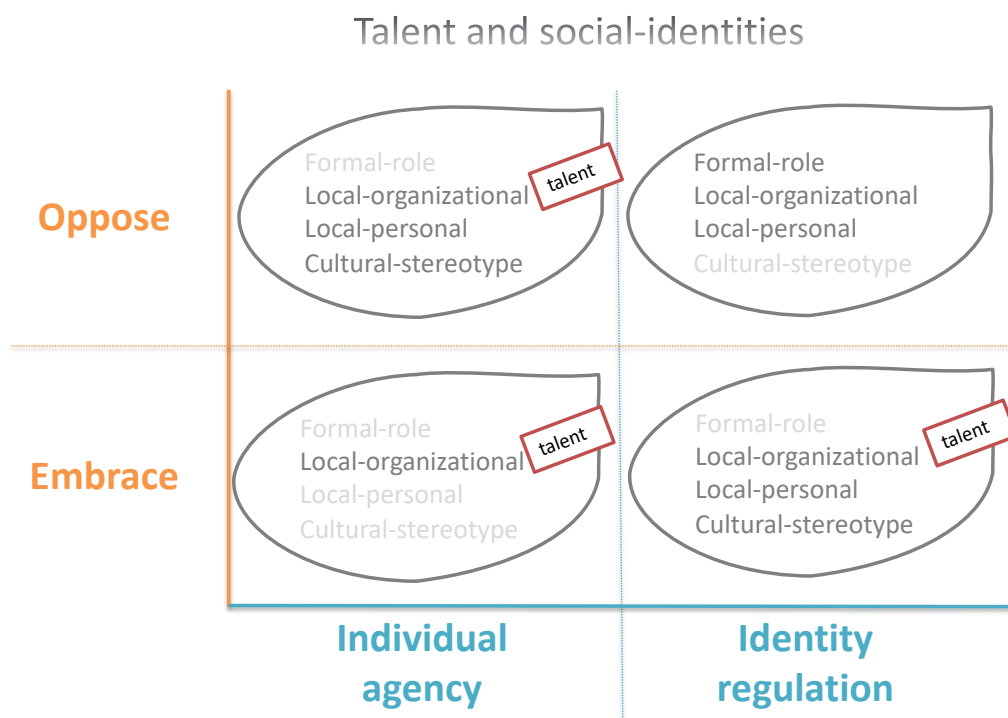
Figure 34: Negotiating social-identities in talent (management), created by author (2020)

Local-organizational social-identity

Local-organizational social-identity appears in a wide conceptual variety and exists in every of the four quadrants of Figure 34. This category is negotiated with talent (management); examples are:

- Talent discourses on roles
- Talent discourses on how to work, advance and treat others
- Talent practices, such as talent test results, feedback and role-shaping action
- Talent discourses and practices related to whether a person is seen as a talent or not.

There are two possible reasons for the high prevalence of this category. First, I assign talent-identity to belong to local-organizational social-identities, which already focuses much of my attention on this category. And second, another possible explanation is that talent discourses and actions are used to predominately negotiate roles and activities.

Local-personal social-identity

Local-personal social-identity is the second most frequently negotiated category with talent (management). This shows that the respondents make sense of talent (management) to play a role in how others see them. This again reinforces my understanding of the personal notion of talent (management). Local-personal social-identity is negotiated with talent (management); examples are:

- Embrace the talent action of feedback (e.g. on being competent or funny) and internalize it into the self-identity
- Oppose e.g. inauthentic, dishonest / hypocritical, unfair, neglecting and incorrect talent discourses and actions to shape identity that is e.g. authentic, value-oriented, honest, fair, caring, correct and diligent.

Formal-role social-identity

Formal-role social-identity is quite rarely negotiated with talent (management). Only Ms. It's-US relates this category to talent (management). In detail, she perceives that leaders and co-workers use organizational talent discourses to create a joint narrative on formal roles and the "right" career ambitions. Theory on socialization of an individual into an organization or other social group (Becker, 1977; McAuley et al., 2014) can possibly explain what is happening. Because "their" sense-making differs from her own, Ms. It's-US perceives not to belong and places herself outside of a social group (Alvesson et al., 2008). Further, she also wants to protect aspects of her self (Brown, 2006) that contrast the perceived organizational identity. This is why she quite strongly opposes formal-role and local-organizational social-identities, and the nature of her job as a whole. This then starts an identity construction process.

Cultural-stereotype social-identity

Cultural-stereotype social-identity only appears twice in the work with the respondents. The relationship between talent (management) and identity is different than with the other social-identity categories. Instead of an ongoing negotiation, cultural-stereotype social-identity is rather used to make sense of talent (management); examples are:

- Mr. Mio who relates being a Christian to talent (management) and values
- Mr. Excellence who relates being a thick-skinned manager to his behavior in talent (management).

In conclusion, the respondents primarily negotiate local-organizational and local-personal social-identities with talent (management), whereas formal-role and cultural-stereotype social-identities also surface from time to time.

5.3.5 Which role do values play in identity formation and talent (management)?

This section explores individual and organizational value-based considerations on talent and identity issues. To begin with, I discuss the two-fold role of personal values in talent (management). First, the sense-making of talent (management) is closely related to a personal understanding of ethics, justice and values. Values can be imagined as a pair of glasses that color what the respondents and I regard as talent (management). How we understand talent (management) is therefore influenced by our personal values. Values drive how people perceive concepts in work life (Fraj & Martinez, 2006), which also applies to talent (management). Personally, I appreciate that all people are and have talents. My values are based on my cultural and family background and inform my talent understanding. In hindsight, I reflect on my initial research considerations in the light of values, ethics and justice: the inclusive sense-making of talent (management) adopted as a conceptual foundation for this research might have been the only viable way for me to approach talent issues.

The second perspective on values evolves around judgement. In addition to informing our understanding of talent (management), values also cause people to assess, embrace and distance themselves from talent (management). In contrast to the more dynamic construct of identity (e.g. Kärreman & Alvesson, 2001), values remain relatively stable over time (e.g. Kamakura & Nowak, 1992; Rokeach, 1968). Mr. Mio introduces "life principles" and bases his reactions and attitudes to organizational talent discourses and practices on them. Previous research explores values as a way to explain motives that lie behind certain behavior (e.g. Kamakura & Nowak, 1992; Rokeach, 1968). As a consequence of judgement, employees resist organizational talent discourses and actions if they perceive a dissonance to their values and "life principles". Examples from the research are as follows:

- Utilitarian discourses that regard people as a means to an end rather than human beings (Painter-Morland et al., 2018)
- Talent (management) that mirrors power distance, the abuse of power or dominance
- Leadership or co-worker behavior that contradict the own values (e.g. inauthentic, dishonest / hypocritical, unfair, neglecting or incorrect)
- Feedback bias
- Talent attributions and role expectations that differ from the own understanding.

When employees resist talent (management) based on "life principles", they sometimes engage in disidentification (Elsbach, 1999) or not-me positions (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). In doing so, they actively separate their identity from organizational identity (Erlsbach, 1999) or from work situations and role expectations (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). They create counter-images on "who I am not" (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Their stories often have central themes, such as helping others, fighting for the right cause at work or being aware of right and wrong. In contrast to their perception of talent (management), the respondents create an image of themselves that is ethical, fair, authentic, honest, caring, correct or charitable. Through identity work, they actively construct identities in relation to ethics, justice and values. This relates to phronetic identity work which "positions the self in relation to contextually specific notions of morality – of good and bad, right and wrong" (Bardon, Brown & Pezé, 2017, p. 959). The term phronesis signifies practical wisdom and is a necessary condition of virtue. Aristotle distinguishes it from theoretical knowledge or means-end reasoning (Phronesis, 2016). Particularly those employees who feel powerful (also compare Section 5.4.1) influence talent (management) at their organizations in accordance with their values. A possible explanation is that they experience a high amount of individual agency that enables them to arrange their world of work.

Especially in times of upheaval and organizational change, "life principles" provide security and resilience to the respondents. I relate this to narrative self-identity (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) which is "associated with personal history and orientations "outside" the immediate work context" (p. 1185). It is imported to the work environment as a central dimension of identity and constitutes a platform to return to for comfort and stability (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Most social psychologists argue that individuals construct selves from a stable set of meanings while identities at work, in certain roles or at home change much faster (Brown, 2015).

The discussion on individual values raises questions on how organizational values interact with identity and talent (management). Therefore, I now explore organizational value-based considerations. In what follows, I introduce three arguments on organizational values. First, I show on the example of inclusion that organizational values impact the individual sense-making and judgement of talent (management). Employees make sense of organizational values to interact with talent philosophy. For example, in the initial conceptual framework I introduce the notion of inclusion as a synonym for inclusive talent management. Adding to my pre understanding, we now relate inclusive talent (management) to personal as well as organizational values. Having previously seen inclusion as a mere description of talent

management, the respondents and I make sense of it as a deep-rooted value that inspires private and organizational life. We therefore regard the choice between an inclusive or exclusive understanding of talent (management) as fundamental and value-based. As mentioned above, personal values inform our understanding and judgement of talent (management). Inclusion therefore emerges as a strong indicator and assessment factor in talent (management). All respondents make sense of talent (management) as inclusive and assess whether the own and the organizational understanding of inclusion overlap. A perceived divide then again can lead to employee attitudes, such as resistance. Summarizing the argument, employees perceive organizational values to inform talent philosophy; this perception has indeed effects on the person. This emerging sense-making adds to existing literature that regards employees to be rather directly affected by talent practices (Arthur & Boyles, 2007) and not so much by talent philosophy. If there is no official talent communication, individuals draw conclusions on talent philosophy from other aspects, such as reward, responsibility and power discourses and actions, or the behavior of their leaders. Both, Dries and De Gieter (2014) and Festing et al. (2015) introduce a lack of transparent communication about talent management to lead to frustration and dissatisfaction in talents. Sumelius et al. (2020) further show that strategic ambiguity has only few long-term positive effects for employees.

In the second argument on organizational values, I show its impact on identity construction processes. Ms. Arrangeur is the only respondent who regards talent (management) as inclusive. She embraces inclusive organizational talent discourses and internalizes them into her self-identity. Because her organization sees everyone as talent, she also regards herself as talent. In doing so, she internalizes the outcome of talent actions and adopts company-specific language as a part of her self-identity. Her understanding of organizational values and talent philosophy has positive effects on her self-image, confidence, self-esteem and self-assurance. This example shows positive employee reactions to organizational values. But it raises the question of whether embracing organizational values can potentially also lead to negative consequences. Previous research on excusive talent management shows that organizational values play an important role in forming individual identity. Talents continuously redefine individual values through identity work and by that, take decisions about the importance of work in their lives. The feel identity struggles because they must make sure to be still seen as unique while internalizing organizational values and norms over time (Tansley & Tietze, 2013).

The third argument evolves around organizational values and self-worth. The findings indicate that organizational talent philosophy and talent actions impact the own perception of self-worth. Embracing or opposing talent discourses and practices acts as a source of self-worth, helps individuals to preserve self-worth (compare Snow & Anderson, 1987) and increases doubts on self-worth. An interplay of talent (management) and self-worth arises from the work with the respondents in the following forms:

- The notion of self corresponds to the organizational talent image or not; or perceived talent status corresponds to talent self-identity or not; perceived talent status is a powerful sign from the organization regarding the value of an employee (Swailes, 2013)
- The personal perception of talent discourses; for example, utilitarian discourses invoke different associations with self-worth than inclusive discourses
- The personal perception of talent practices; for example, feedback can augment self-criticism which leads a person to internalize aspects to increase the own self-worth.

In conclusion, this section explores the multifaceted role of values in talent (management) and identity issues. I differentiate between individual and organizational value-based considerations and discuss their consequences for employees.

5.4 Making sense of agency and structure in talent (management)

This is the fourth part of the discussion chapter. It again answers both research questions by exploring how people create talent meanings and construct identity in talent (management). In detail, the following sections explore agency and structure in talent (management). The main themes are agency and power; discipline; the reward of talent management vs. talent management as a reward. Figure 35 again places the discussion in the broader context of this chapter's journey.
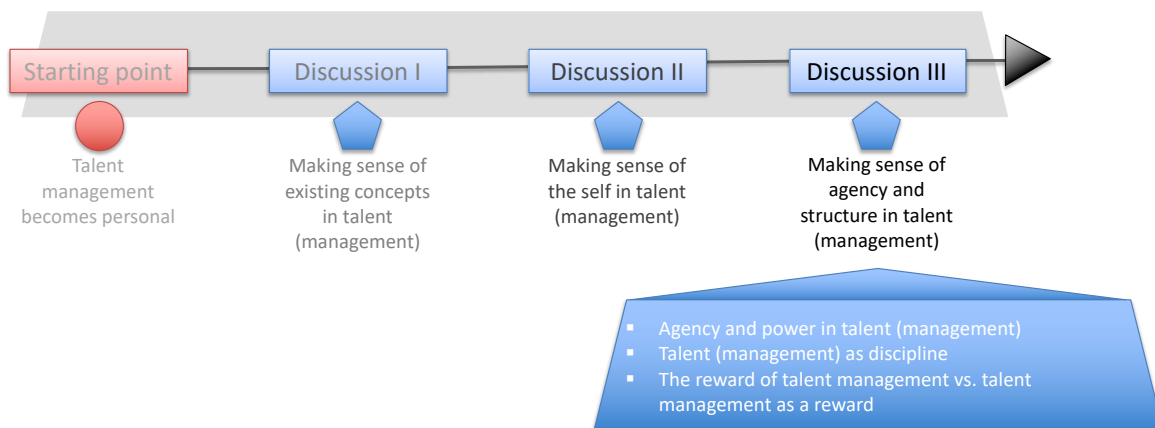
Figure 35: Journey of Chapter 5. Making sense of agency and structure in talent (management), created by author (2021)

Reflecting on my emerging optimist view of identity formation

Because I participate in sense-making, I reflect on my views on identity formation. I started writing the following introductory sentence: *Employees construct talent (management) based on a variety of external factors, which are imposed on them or offered to them.* Upon reflection, this sentence shows my emerging optimist and positive view of identity construction (Alvesson, 2010). Compared to an alternative introduction of Clarke and Scurry (2020) "*how individual expectations of talent management (…) are shaped (…) by factors external to the organization*" (p. 967), I use more active formulations in the sentence above. This can potentially be explained by just a question of wording or by being a non-native English speaker. But to me, it rather mirrors my understanding of an individual's agentive role in identity formation. While I initially considered the personal sense-making of talent management to be mainly shaped by an organization, my understanding has been informed by the work with the respondents. Keeping my own development in mind, the next sections show that the respondents experience an interplay of agency and structure in talent (management).

5.4.1 Agency & power

This section introduces the theme of power. Power appears in a conceptual variety throughout the study, which I aim to discuss as follows. As an opening remark, power only appears in the work with respondents who oppose organizational talent (management), as shown in Figure 36 (compare Figure 33 for more details). That is, employees who rather embrace talent discourses and actions do not relate talent (management) to power.

Who relates talent (management) to power?
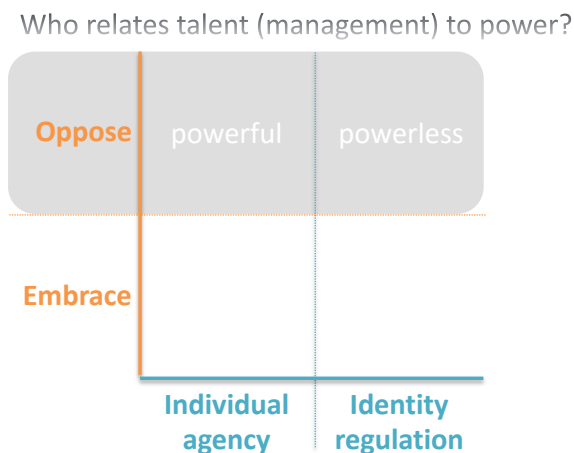
Figure 36: Who relates talent (management) to power?, created by author (2021)

Bearing this in mind, the notion of power arises in two forms. First, like self-concept and personal values before, employees use power to understand and assess talent (management) at their organization. To them, talent (management) refers to talk and actions about power relations, decision power and power distance. And second, employees who feel powerful react differently to talent (management) than those who feel powerless. Employee attitudes especially concern the extent of agency in identity construction and talent (management). The remainder of the section explores the reactions of employees with different perceived levels of power in detail.

Those who regard themselves powerless experience control and discipline. They appear as rather passive. They can neither influence the design of talent (management) at their organization nor can they shape their roles. With regards to consequences, employees feel trapped and left without leeway to change anything. They feel not to get the deserved appreciation but cannot influence it. Others feel not to belong because the organizational talent understanding diverges from their own. Referring to Figure 36 (compare Figure 33 for details), powerless individuals rather experience identity regulation in talent (management) and therefore struggle to construct a view of themselves. A "struggler" goes through "a jungle of messiness and contradictions in the pursuit of a sense of self" (Alvesson, 2010, p. 200).

Identity struggles can be perceived as rather light (e.g. Ibarra, 1999) or to even involve self-alienation (Costas & Fleming, 2009). To mitigate regulation, powerless employees actively engage in identity work, negotiate discourses and promote "not-me" positions (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). They also engage in skepticism and humor when evaluating organizational talent practices and discourses. Based on Goffman (1959), Kunda (1992) separates front-stage selves that embrace the own role from attitudes and feelings.

Having previously explored perceived talent status, I expected to see effects of talent status on employee reactions. Previous literature (e.g. Björkman et al., 2013) observes attitudinal differences based on perceived talent status. In detail, it is argued that the perception of being identified as talent matters even more than official talent status (Björkman et al., 2013). However, to feel powerless is independent of perceived talent status. A previous study on exclusive talent management (Daubner-Siva et al., 2018) shows that talents feel empowered and powerless at the same time when they must comply with behavioral expectations. Daubner-Siva et al. (2018) introduce this state as the *talent paradox*. I argue that both, employees with a perceived talent and no-talent status, experience feelings of powerlessness. Seeing oneself as powerless is therefore rather connected to a limited extent of agency than to perceived talent status. That perceived talent status does rather not appear to influence power considerations can also be explained by the inclusive talent (management) context. De Boeck et al. (2018) suggest that bargaining power and inclusion are directly related: a higher degree of inclusion makes a person less unique for an organization, which lowers the own bargaining power.

In contrast, those who regard themselves powerful experience individual agency. They appear as rather active. By opposing organizational talent (management), they influence the rules of the game. These range from minor tweaks to major changes. Although the impact might be minor for the organization, it is indeed significant to the self and the direct environment. Examples from this research are:

- The agentive aspect of role taking
- To act opposed to organizational rules of conduct; examples are to act as an enabler, or to identify and develop talents from others.

Employees who possess power over talent (management), and be it only to a small extent, openly resist broader talent issues at the organization. In doing so, they engage in identity work. Seeing oneself as powerful is therefore related to a high extent of agency. Employees first act and then talk about their actions, which leads to two possible implications. First, talent actions are therefore a way to form identity, which raises questions on the nature of identity work. While previous research mostly concentrates on the discursive aspects of identity work, others argue that it involves dramaturgical-behavioral performances (Down & Reveley, 2009; Goffman, 1990; McAuley et al., 2014) besides discursive negotiation. Powerful employees therefore use other means than solely talk to work on identity. Second, forming identity through talent actions influences organizational life. Returning to Chapter 4, there are some examples of how self-awareness in talent (management) steers powerful individuals to take decisions and talk about them. This adds to previous research that analyzes how identity work impacts a person's everyday life and decision-making processes at work (e.g. Alvesson & Willmott, 2002).

In contrast to what has been said, Bardon, Brown and Pezé (2017) find that managers who have a certain degree of freedom over their own activities only rarely resist the rules of conduct of their organization. However, when they then find solutions that confirm them "as being "good" people" (Bardon et al., 2017, p. 959), they feel a sense of achievement. Powerful employees even experience a liberalizing effect when they oppose their organization's understanding of talent and act according to that. As a person who gets satisfaction out of "swimming against the current", I can relate to this. While I would openly question teachers when I was a child, I have learned in a process of socialization to behave differently. Today, however, I still state my opinion regardless of the consequences. In opposing talent discourses I experience situations with different levels of power. When I sometimes indeed "make the difference", I also feel a liberalizing effect. A possible explanation is that the participants and I feel content to be authentic and to be able to live according to our values. In all areas of life, I assume a positive and optimistic view of identity construction, which constitutes an agentive exercise for me (Alvesson, 2010). Although power was not included in my initial conceptual framework on talent (management) and identity, I have reflected on it during the field research. It is important for the reader and myself to know my underlying assumptions.

During the initial review of literature in Chapter 2, I question whether one perceives the number of discourses to choose from as positive (Giddens, 1991) or burdensome (Sennett, 1998). Upon reflection, each person makes sense of talent (management) and its impact on identity in a very personal way. In conclusion, the amount of agency plays a decisive role in how powerful employees feel in talent (management). There is a high variety in how active or passive individuals act in talent (management), which relates to individual variations of identity work (Watson, 2008). Being powerful enables employees to form identity and to choose which discourses to negotiate, regardless of whether they are imposed on them or offered to them. After uncovering the conceptual variety of talent power discourses and actions in this section, the next theme concentrates on discipline.

5.4.2 Discipline: the invasion of the self

This section discusses talent (management) as discipline. Employees experience discipline in form of talent discourses and actions. Jointly making sense of what is happening, the participants and I regard the invasion of the self to consist of three parts, which at the same time mirror the structure of this section. First, an individual feels pulled towards an identity option; second, an individual feels pushed towards adopting an identity option through discipline; and third, an individual feels pushed away from an identity option.

As an opening remark, two groups of employees make sense of talent (management) as discipline, as shown in Figure 37 (compare Figure 33 for details). First, discipline appears in the work with respondents who embrace organizational talent (management). And second, employees who oppose organizational talent (management) but regard themselves as powerless also experience discipline. That is, employees who feel powerful experience fewer effects of discipline through talent discourses and actions. A likely explanation is a high amount of individual agency that enables them to arrange their world of work. In doing so, they resist organizational discipline and rather live according to "life principles".

Who experiences talent (management) as discipline?
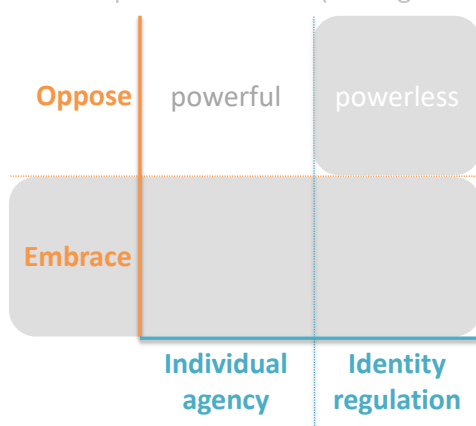
Figure 37: Who experiences talent (management) as discipline?, created by author (2021)

Further, perceived talent status does not play a role in whether employees experience discipline. The identities of both individuals with a perceived no-talent status are rather disciplined by talent discourses and actions. A possible reason is that these respondents see themselves as powerless, as discussed in the previous Section 5.4.1. They therefore see limited options to engage in individual agency or to influence existing talent discourses and actions. Respondents with a perceived talent status both, engage in individual agency and experience discipline. Perceived talent status also does not influence whether an individual embraces or opposes talent discourses and actions. There is no identifiable

pattern of talent status that explains this to happen, compare Figure 26 and Table 2 in Chapter 4. This is contrary to previous work that finds attitudinal differences based on perceived talent status (e.g. Björkman et al., 2013). The mixed findings with regards to employee reactions to perceived talent status add to my emerging understanding that the interplay of talent and identity depends on the person.

Having clarified who experiences talent (management) as discipline, I explore the first of three concepts of this section. It evolves around employees who feel pulled towards an identity option. A possible explanation is that one's social-identity corresponds to the notion of self, as shown in Figure 33, or that the own and the organization's understanding of talent overlap. This is the only situation where discipline is connected to individual agency in this study. Further, positive talent (management) experiences with a certain group can pull a person towards an identity option (e.g. Miller & Miller, 1990; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002). There are various encounters that the individuals perceive as positive and attribute to talent discourses and actions within a group or the organization, such as:

- Positive feedback from others on behavior, character traits and on conforming to role expectations
- Attribution of competence
- The feeling of belonging
- Having a good time and fun with a group
- A favorable perception of an organization's understanding of talent (e.g. inclusive nature, talent characteristics like to be able to work independently, to succeed in one domain)
- Positive feelings originating from talent test results.

These pull factors start an identity construction process, where participants engage in identity work. They feel the urge to respond, albeit this is mostly through embracing talent discourses and actions. The positive experiences can therefore also be regarded as external forces that exercise control over identity (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). There are two possible reasons for identity construction based on pull factors. First, employees negotiate identity while taking favorable identity options into account. For example, Ms. Arrangeur uses specific company language on her talents to describe her self-concept. Mr. Swimming internalizes certain behavior that he gets good feedback for into his self-identity. This leads back to initial discussions on talent-identity and talent self-identity, where individuals tend to internalize favorable talent attributions, such as the talent label (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Scullion & Collings, 2010; Tansley & Tietze, 2013). A second possible explanation is the

concept of belonging to a social group or the organization. According to McAuley et al. (2014, p. 327), people as emotional beings long for meaning and commitment which is both provided by belonging to an organization. These considerations question the actual and desired balance of individual agency and conformity.

Leading to the second concept of this section, employees feel pushed to adopt an identity option through discipline. Talent (management) emerges as an external force that exercises control over employee identity (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). Identity regulation aims at creating normalization (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Foucault, 1977). To do that, social groups and organizations exert control as socializing institutions (Becker, 1977; McAuley et al., 2014). The respondents experience discipline that they attribute to talent discourses and practices, such as:

- Role expectations to become someone a person is not
- A role that one feels pushed towards
- Formal and informal training where a person perceives to be pushed to work on oneself
- Perceived feedback bias
- To be left out of promotion processes (perceived reward discourses and actions)
- Perceived organizational discourses on the nature and characteristics of talent.

It might catch the reader's eye that organizational discipline refers more to perceived discourses than to actual talent practices. A possible explanation is that smaller organizations often lack transparency in talent management. Rules of conduct are then more informal than formal (Festing et al., 2013). Employees therefore perceive control from rather informal happenings and perceptions. However, another possible reason is that the sense-making of employees rather concentrates on the meanings they assign to talent (management) instead of actual talent practices.

The consequences in the form of employee reactions are manifold. Keeping in mind that the findings show a high number of personal variations, the same is true for employee attitudes to organizational control in the context of talent (management). Because it is not in my interest to generalize the results, I rather perceive it as added value to provide a range of responses to organizational discipline, where individuals are pushed to adopt identity options. I use the illustration by De Boeck et al. (2018) (see Figure 9) to categorize employee reactions to discipline into affective, cognitive and behavioral components. First, I explore affective employee reactions. One consequence of organizational discipline is normalization, which Alvesson (2010) describes as assuming a "stencil" identity. People are "a product of the operations of power offering a hard-to-resist template" (p. 207). It is therefore likely that these measures push an individual to assume a conformist self (Collinson, 2003), when a person defines present and future selves. An example is Ms. Passion who experiences organizational discipline. She understands talent (management) to enforce rules of conduct for her role as co-worker and future leader. She must show passion when coping with external partners and empathy for her peers. A possible explanation is Hochschild's (2012) theoretical position on the negative aspects of engineering emotions. McAuley et al. (2014) explore emotional labor as an expectation of showing feelings, whether or not a person is actually experiencing them. Further, identity struggles occur when employees are torn between organizational discourses and the notion of self (Alvesson, 2010). They experience organizational discipline in form of talent discourses and actions (see also e.g. Kirk, 2020; Tansley & Tietze, 2013). Other respondents act their part in order to conform to the rules but inside, they feel resentment and skepticism. This relates to Willmott (1993), Costas and Fleming (2009) and Sturdy (1998) where employees react with cynicism, irony and humor when they perceive to be pushed to become someone they are not.

Second, there is a variety of behavioral employee reactions. Employees reflect on what is happening through self-questioning and discourses with others (Watson, 2008). In doing so, they engage in identity work and negotiate the identities that are imposed on them. For example, Mr. Swimming understands the organizational sense-making of talent to be able to fulfill tasks that he regards as challenging and too big for him. He internalizes this discourse by employing identity work in the form of talk, where he presents various examples of being successful in doing so. And third, with regards to cognitive employee reactions, individuals react with self-doubts on whether they are "right". Therefore, discipline increases self-criticism and doubts on self-worth. As a consequence, Ms. Passion wishes to reduce feedback bias by alternative methods.

The final part of this section explores that individuals feel pushed away from an identity option. This can arise from negative experiences with the organization or a social group within the organization (e.g. Miller & Miller, 1990; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002). As a consequence, a person crafts an anti-identity which offers a powerful counter-image to what their organization or social group stands for (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). There are various encounters that the individuals perceive as negative and attribute to talent discourses and actions within a group or the organization, such as:

- Negative feedback on character traits or on not meeting role expectations
- No or little attribution of competence and appreciation
- When the group abuses power
- Inauthentic, dishonest, unfair, neglecting and incorrect behavior
- A more general aversion to "up-or-out" discourses, power distance, nepotism or to prevalent working attitudes, such as working long hours to show off.

Reflecting on the previous paragraphs, I realize that social groups, socialization, belonging and identity are very sensitive topics for me. Since I was 18, I have consciously tried to limit the influence social groups can exert over me. This behavior is related to one dramatic experience in my teens where I belonged to a social group. Because I was deeply involved, the influence of the group members over me, my behavior and my values was too high. The group experience lasted several years and ended when I moved away for university with broken ties to most of my friends, almost family. After what happened I decided never to let a group of people come as close to me again. Now, I rarely voluntarily open up, which could also be why this thesis – intentionally – poses a major challenge for me. Bearing these considerations in mind, it becomes clearer to me, and hopefully also to the reader, why some of the more recent discussions I engage with sound rather distanced.

However, reflecting on my professional life, my responses to situations at work have changed over the years and I have also slowly adopted company-induced language and behavior. There are various reasons for my socialization. I receive good feedback when I show a high level of organizational identification and I learn in on-the-job trainings about work routines. Further, organizational agents provide advice on "how it works" and the appraisal system is based on complying with organizational rules of conduct. Referring to earlier reflections, it is interesting that I clearly conceptually connect this phenomenon to procedures, as a part of disciplinary control (Foucault, 1977), and not to a question of belonging to social groups. Reflecting on internalizing discipline, I rather question prevalent talent discourses and actions. This potentially leads to many situations where I separate my

reactions from my real feelings and attitudes. I possibly engage in some parts in acting, adhering to rules of conduct (Hochschild, 2012), without letting the act come too close to myself (Goffman, 1959; Kunda, 1992). I experience an ambiguous situation where I am aware that I am valuable and try to comply with norms to succeed at work. To me, being successful is connected to a certain pressure to adhere to rules of conduct. This inspired me in the first place to explore talent (management) and identity in the workplace.

Reflecting on my own position, I primarily understand identity formation as agentive which mirrors my positive and optimistic views (Alvesson, 2010). In contrast, this section now leads me to a rather Foucauldian or poststructuralist understanding of how talent and identity issues are related. Identity regulation emerges as an important aspect of organizational control (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002), through which discourses produce the positions individuals are located in (Alvesson, 2010). This section therefore explores the rather passive role of employees and the active role of discipline (Foucault, 1977), while my own understanding and prior experiences differ from what is described. In making sense of identity regulation through talent (management), I still assume an active role of the individuals. The wording of the section mirrors my view of people as agents. Similarly, Alvesson and Kärreman (2007) see Human Resource Management as a set of meanings that employees use to construct an organizational and individual identity instead of a system of processes and rules. In order to point out my interpretations, I deliberately do not change the writing to a more passive voice. As a consequence, the participants and I create meaning of what is happening in talent and identity issues at work. Identity thereby emerges as a product of agency and control (Watson, 2012).

In conclusion, there is no one-to-one relationship of a person, for example a respondent of this study or myself, to one way of identity construction. As Alvesson (2010) points out, "one image (or root metaphor or gestalt) does not capture everything" (p. 208). That means that I acknowledge that identity construction processes are complex, multifaceted and that various agentive and control processes can take place at the same time.

5.4.3 The reward of talent management or talent management as a reward

This section explores the theme of rewards from two conceptual perspectives: the reward(s) of talent management; and talent management as a desirable reward. Interrelated concepts are the mutual gains assumption, psychological contract theory, impression management and the inclusiveness of talent management.

First, talent management creates rewards for employees. These include a boost of self-esteem, to know to be able to give something, to know about individual talents, to develop, and to be visible. To some, talent philosophy (e.g. that everyone is included) and practices (e.g. talent identification) are beneficial and rewarding. This mindset is possibly based on the mutual gains assumption where talent practices are regarded to equally benefit the employer and the employee (Thunnissen et al., 2013). The second perspective sees talent management as a desirable reward. Talent practices like training or feedback recognize services and achievements. To some, talent management as a reward is based on fulfilling task expectations, meeting behavioral rules of conduct, and on performing well. Further, rewards are put in relation to factors an employee cannot directly influence, such as length of service or age. Especially the finding on age raises questions on how inclusive talent management actually is. While inclusive talent management focuses on all or the majority of employees (Swailes et al., 2014), age appears as a factor for talent management. Reflecting on the sample group of this study, inclusive talent management also rather refers to white collar employees in contrast to blue collar workers or peripheral staff. Although some researchers look at the necessity and the effects of contingent work on talent management, the literature is rather inconclusive (Collings & Isichei, 2018).

A possible explanation for talent management as a reward is delivered by psychological contract theory. People create expectations based on previously received promises (Clarke & Scurry, 2020). Some respondents expect a reward in the form of talent management based on talent actions, such as talent talks and feedback. While expectations and actual experiences are consistent for some employees, they differ for others (Clarke & Scurry, 2020). An inconsistency does not only produce dissatisfaction, disappointment and a feeling of not realizing the own potential (Clarke & Scurry, 2020) but also plants ideas on punishment.

With regards to employee reactions to talent management as a desirable reward, individuals reflect on behavior and identity to pinpoint a reason of why they are denied desired talent practices. Inconsistent experiences therefore increase self-doubt. Moreover, employees react to talent management as a reward by managing their impression. In order to receive desired talent practices, some respondents feel the need to deliver something or become someone they are not. They divide the notion of self from impression management, which is how they act in front of others. The self is then a performed character with performances being more or less credible to others (Goffman, 1990). For a more detailed discussion, refer to previous explorations of front-stage selves (Kunda, 1992; Goffman, 1959) in this chapter.

Personally, I also feel dissatisfied when talent management is not available. However, this irritation can be rather explained by Herzberg's (1964) theory: I regard talent management as a hygiene factor that must be present in the workplace. Further, I make sense of talent management to signal that the organization sees potential in me and wants to invest in me. Any absence of this "signal" does not lead to doubts about what I have done "wrong". Like some of the participants, I put the responsibility of what is happening to external factors, such as the possibly arbitrary nature of talent management.

5.5   Conclusion of the discussion

Chapter 5 critically discusses the research area and uses different perspectives to question and interpret what is happening. I compare, contrast and explain the respondents' accounts and uncover hidden meanings by considering existing literature. Further, I take on the perspective of the reader and challenge the interpretations. And last, I look at my role as a researcher, and at how my pre understanding and life history add to the research. The interpretations now provide the foundation for discussing the research findings in a broader context in Chapter 6, *Conclusions and personal reflections*.

6   Conclusions and personal reflections

While the previous chapters develop, interpret and discuss themes on talent (management) and identity issues, this final chapter draws together the research findings. It thereby provides a holistic perspective on the research area and places the work in a broader context. On my doctoral journey, I have engaged in an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon of talent (management) and identity for almost five years. It is a journey of dramatic performances and backstage happenings, where the respondents and I together make sense of what is happening. I have been on the road to develop an understanding of identity formation in the context of talent (management), which I can build theory and recommendations for practice on. The findings of this study can therefore be seen as an accumulation of understanding, developed from conceptual and empirical research over the whole duration of my doctoral journey (e.g. Svensson, 2013).

In what follows, I embark on a detailed review of my contributions to Human Resource and management practice, and to talent management and identity theory. The subsequent section then reflects on the research methodology and identifies contributions to research practice. Then, I review the research aim and objectives. By exploring strengths and limitations of the work, I give recommendations for future research. Finally, I share contributions to my own professional practice and personal reflections on the journey undertaken, that is now progressing to the next chapter in life.

6.1 My contribution to practice

This section presents implications for business practice. Having adopted an individual level of analysis throughout the research process, I now consciously change perspective and look at what the findings mean for Human Resource and management practice. Introducing the thesis, I point out an ambivalence between employees being considered as "passive recipients" of talent practices and change management initiatives on the one hand, and as a main target group of talent management on the other hand in talent management design and implementation. I ask what talent management meanings and identity mechanisms of employees reveal if we listen and take them into account. This is now the time to return to this initial problem statement and explore the implications of the findings for practice in the form of three pillars, as illustrated by Figure 38. After exploring recommendations for Human Resource and management practice, I reflect on the implications for my leading role in designing and implementing talent management processes.
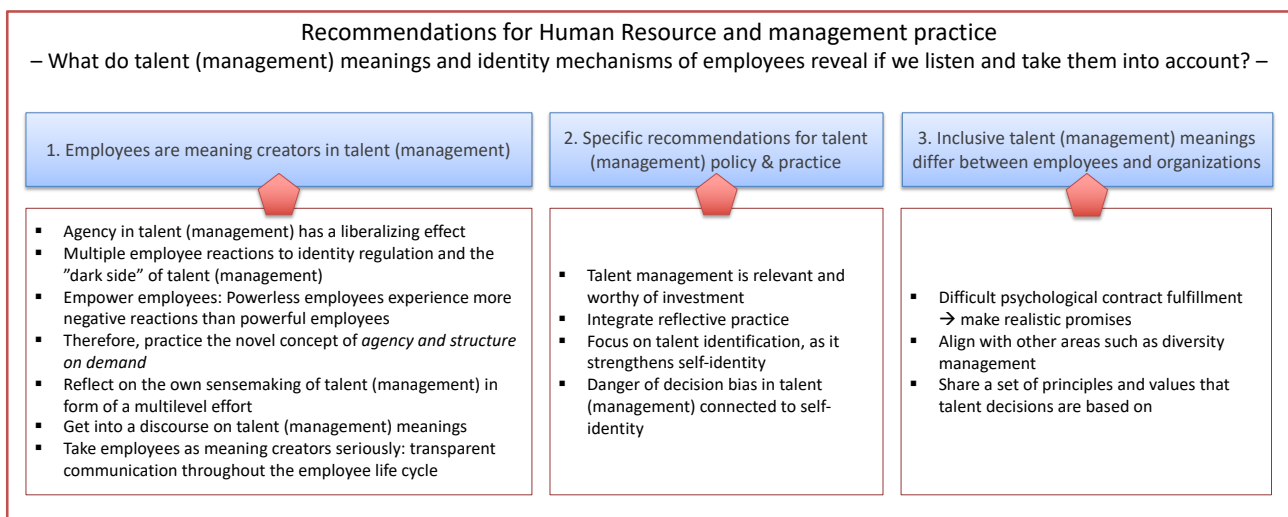
Figure 38: My contribution to Human Resource and management practice, created by author (2021)

1. Employees are meaning creators in talent (management)

Employees emerge as meaning creators in talent (management) from the study. From my experience in the workplace, design and implementation processes of talent management are currently failing to take employees as agents into account. However, the research shows that they are indeed involved and develop their own understanding of talent (management). Controlling mechanisms do not show the desired effect. Employees perceive talent (management) philosophy, policies and practices, and create meaning of what is happening. They conceptualize their own talent, and how they position themselves towards tensions in talent (management). Then, they compare their own thinking with how they perceive their organization's talent management. Therefore, a variety of talent meanings co-exist within an organization. As opposed to "passive recipients", employees should be regarded as agents in talent (management). Employees as meaning creators experience positive effects when they can act in talent (management). In fact, they feel powerful and experience liberalizing effects when they are attributed space for individual agency. This reflects the zeitgeist where responsibility is transferred from employers to employees: employees assume more responsibility for their own development and career than in earlier times.

But to what extent do employees react negatively to talent (management), and why? The research confirms the existence of the "dark side" of talent management. Employees indeed also experience negative consequences of talent (management) with regards to identity construction: talent (management) mechanisms push and pull individuals to adopt certain identity options. Employees react in a number of ways to the attempts of identity regulation. They resist organizational talent discourses and practices through talk and actions or internalize certain aspects into the self. While some consider leaving the organization, others adopt company language in their natural way of talking. Further, interfering with identity issues can plant doubts on self-worth, leads to identity struggles and invites a person to adopt an identity template shaped by the organization. Self-doubt can also arise from situations where the expectations on talent (management) created by an organization do not fit the actual experiences of employees. It is important for managers and Human Resource professionals to acknowledge that talent (management) also has negative consequences for employees, and that this depends on the person.

Employee reactions are summarized in Figure 39 according to affective, cognitive and behavioral reactions (De Boeck et al., 2018), while a more detailed discussion can be revisited in Section 5.4.2.

AFFECTIVE	COGNITIVE	BEHAVIORAL
• Identity struggles • Resentment, skepticism and humor • Normalization & emotional labour	• Self-criticism and self-doubt	• Self-questioning • Identity work (discourse with others) • Crafting „not-me" positions • Resistance • Turnover intentions
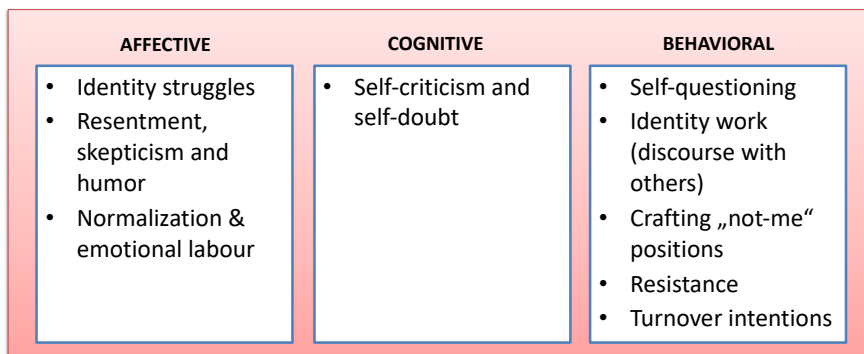
Figure 39: Employee reactions to the "dark side" of talent (management), created by author (2021)

But how do employees experience the "dark side" of talent (management) in practice? The respondents experience discipline primarily through perceived talent actions and discourses. They rarely point their finger at a specific talent action, or formal and official talk. They experience discipline when they feel pushed to be different, or when their own and their organization's talent understanding do not fit. In the introduction to the thesis, I reflect on how I increasingly become aware of unwritten rules as I advance along a career path. The findings of the work show that especially informal activities shape how we think about and react to talent (management). This explains why I experience difficulty in clearly articulating the challenges of harmonizing organizational and my personal views on talent management: "informal" can also take place beneath the surface in the form of hidden meanings, which are at times difficult to grasp. As Hochschild (2012) introduces, the relationship between the self and the job gets more complicated, the more rewarding and the longer the employment. It is interesting though, that employees who feel powerless in talent (management) are more inclined to relate talent (management) meanings to discipline. That is, employees who feel empowered rather experience positive and liberalizing effects of talent (management): The feeling of power and agency enables them to choose which discourses and actions to negotiate, regardless of whether they are imposed on them or offered to them. In conclusion, insights on the "dark side" of talent (management) can sensitize practitioners and put focus on perceptions as opposed to formalization – continuously taking into account the very personal nature of employee reactions.

What recommendations for practice can then be derived from the multi-faceted array of employee reactions to talent (management)? The findings point out that *the more structure the better* does not work well for the individual in talent (management). The research therefore recommends to Human Resource functions to find a balance between agency and structure in talent (management). I propose the concept of *agency and structure on demand*, where organizations deploy a mixture of shared meanings and space for individual agency, and where employees are enabled to choose. In this concept, the Human Resource function introduces alternative processes to account for individual variations. One example for "space" is to offer to employees to act as a mentor for less experienced colleagues; or to hand over responsibility to employees to shape their role, to choose trainings, career paths and development opportunities, should they wish to do so. For that, it must be transparent what is possible and how an employee can get to where he or she aspires to develop towards. Other examples for "space" concern an open feedback and exchange culture, where Human Resource professionals are approachable for employees and managers and act as a mentor and coach. They could for example support in the identification of strengths and offer counseling and career advice. Managers could continuously be in contact with employees, as opposed to (half-) yearly performance talks. The work with the respondents shows that the demand for structure and space is as diverse as the constructed talent (management) meanings themselves. I therefore suggest offering flexibility for structure and agency in talent management processes. It is not necessary to choose between strict approvals and self-nomination, but more flexible processes can be designed instead: For example, to only offer the opportunity to choose a career path or to raise one's hand for a promotion – some employees will be happy to do so, in line with their self-concept, while others will wish for more guidance and support.

Why is *agency and structure on demand* relevant? The relevance of this concept is illustrated by two examples: First, the research shows that there are employees who actively resist talent (management) at the organization and who have turnover intentions; however, especially these individuals crave for more space. Human Resource professionals and managers can give attention to how these individuals are supported and given enough space for the individual agency they strive for. In doing so, these employees can live according to their self-concept and values; they will be content to incorporate some of their ideas as agents. A second reason for the relevance of *agency and structure on demand* is that empowering employees and offering flexibility in talent (management) mitigates the negative effects of the "dark side" of talent (management). To be powerful, employees must be enabled. The amount of attributed agency and space plays a decisive role in how

powerful employees feel in talent (management), and *agency and structure on demand* emerges as a powerful recommendation for practice.

The train of thought on *agency and structure on demand* invariably leads to questions on process harmonization, novel responsibilities for managers and employees, the need for clear standards for everyone, system implementation and reporting. These challenges are naturally all valid and need to be thought through because the results of this work strongly point out the need for a more flexible talent management function. Structure as we now "know" it, neither satisfies the need for individual agency nor the possibility to participate in meaning creation. However, solely agency on the other hand would also leave employees behind. Employees as agents and as individuals have individual demands, experiences, histories and expectations, which should be taken into account in talent management design.

With regards to current events, the field work was collected before the global pandemic of Covid-19 began. With the progression of the global crisis, private and professional lives have become increasingly interwoven. Employers feel responsible for previously strictly private matters; work takes place at home; and living rooms and bedrooms are changed to offices during day time. While uncertainty might increase identity struggles and other negative consequences of talent (management), informal talent (management) discourses and actions are less likely to take place in these difficult times. As informal practices have more effects on identity mechanisms than official ones, the new balance between private and professional lives might increase self-awareness as a consequence, leading employees to question the interaction of the self-concept with talent (management) in the workplace.

As the context of this research is smaller organizations, *agency and structure on demand* is especially relevant to them, albeit not exclusively. Naturally, it fits the context because smaller organizations, in contrast to multinationals, often do not have formal policies in place. For example, Harsch and Festing (2020) introduce the term "individualized talent management", which is often present in smaller organizations and is characterized by autonomy and flexibility. However, after conceptual and empirical research on this area over the whole duration of my doctoral journey, I come to the conclusion that *agency and structure on demand* offers an answer to important needs, and that employees, including myself, strive for a level of autonomy and individual agency in talent (management), independent of organization size.

Besides flexibility in talent (management) processes and policies, a contribution to Human Resource practice is to reflect on the communication of talent (management): I recommend professionals to reflect on the sense-making of talent (management) within an organization. An individual's role as meaning creator implies that a shared meaning of talent cannot exist among employees. Wiblen and McDonnell (2020) conclude from a multi-level analysis that talent meanings are negotiated by various stakeholders with different agendas and perspectives. The present research shows that talent meanings are drawn from a combination of individual and extra-individual factors, which makes talent meanings a personal affair: While talent discourses and actions play a major role in the sense-making of employees, the extent of influence differs from person to person. Sense-making is therefore a highly social activity through exchanging stories, where people interpret and explore what is happening around them within internal and contextual factors, that an organization often cannot – and might not want to – control. A practical consideration from the research is therefore to reach an understanding of talent (management) in form of a multilevel effort including organizational, managerial and employee views. More precisely, the experience with the individual employee level of analysis on this doctoral journey challenges my hidden assumptions and taken for granted knowledge. Engaging with employee perspectives in this study therefore provides rich answers to the research questions. Because employee perspectives also add value in practice, the findings of the study encourage practitioners to take this into consideration. In particular, it can be beneficial to look at organizational phenomena not only from organizational and managerial views, but also from an employee perspective.

Human Resource functions can deploy a combination of agency and structure by reflecting on what an organization stands for, and to account for differences in talent meanings. Human Resource professionals and leaders could cope with these findings by allowing space for individual sense-making of talent, and simultaneously exploring additional ways of getting into a discourse on talent meanings. By that, I mean both, exploring shared meanings of talent (management) and leaving space for individuals to act and talk according to their notion of self and their own values in the context of talent (management). In practice, this means not to introduce "truths" about talent (management), but to rather mirror shared values and organizational culture. Human Resource professionals could facilitate this by more creative informal ways to reach social groups, individuals and informal networks within the organization. Using other media could encourage the exchange of stories. An example could be a blog, journal, lunch dates or a podcast with changing visitors from different levels

of the organization where the initiator has the role of an employee without managerial responsibilities.

Stakeholders from different levels can help to create and further transport organizational talent discourses. However, there are two important factors to keep in mind. First, in order to change or newly introduce talent meanings, organizational actors, such as the Human Resource function or management, must know about the current talent discourses. And second, it is important to bear in mind that others will listen and watch, thereby assessing whether what is told is true (Goffman, 1959). Therefore, the findings of the study indicate to base the process of meaning creation on various levels and to constantly evaluate it. For example, Human Resource professionals can put talent philosophy on the agenda of reoccurring meetings (e.g. in a yearly or half-yearly cycle), inviting stakeholders from multiple levels to the discussion.

A joint conversation about talent (management) can set expectations and increase transparency. I recommend organizations to be as transparent as possible about how they make sense of talent (management) throughout the employee life cycle, but especially during the initial stages of employee attraction. It can give some indication on whether an individual fits to organizational talent culture, and on whether the organizational talent environment appeals to a person. If cultural considerations and expectations are already discussed and transparently communicated in the recruiting process, the negative consequences can potentially be limited. In detail, negative employee reactions with regards to psychological contract considerations and the "dark side" of talent management might be less likely to appear.

2. Specific recommendations for talent (management) policy & practice

Having derived practical and communication-related implications of employees as meaning creators in talent (management), the second part of this section explores further recommendations from the research for Human Resource policy and practice. To begin with, the research confirms that talent (management) is indeed relevant for today's changing global world, as opposed to the doubts I raise in Chapter 2. The study reinforces its raison d'être from an employee perspective: employees want to engage with talent (management). Talent (management) is much more to employees than a sub-domain of Human Resources. They determinedly choose talent discourses and actions to make sense of the organizational understanding of talent. Furthermore, they draw on responsibility, reward and power discourses and practices to somehow get an idea of what is happening at their

organizations. As meaning creators, employees assess in how far the organizational understanding fits their own. They crave for alignment of their own, their organization's, their coworkers' and their leaders' ideas on talent. They regard talent (management) as a part of organizational culture. The study therefore contributes to practice by asserting the relevance of talent management.

Having established the relevance of talent (management), I give three specific recommendations on Human Resource policy and practice: First, I recommend including reflective practice in talent actions out of two reasons. On the one hand, the sense-making of the participants has evolved over the six weeks of the reflective research process. And on the other hand, they especially appreciate the value which its reflective nature delivers to them. In conclusion, reflective practice could also add value for the professional practice of employees, and for the organization as a whole. In a talent action, employees could for example reflect on learnings from work situations or learn how to engage with reflective practice in the workplace. For the employees to openly reflect on what is happening, they would need to feel safe within the organization (Dubouloy, 2004).

Second, the research encourages Human Resource professionals to focus on talent identification as this talent practice has positive effects on identity formation. Employees who learn about their talents are more self-assured and confident than others, which shows that talent identification strengthens the self-concept.

And third, the work contributes to practice by pointing out the potential danger of decision bias. While the respondents think that all people have talents, their talent definitions also mirror certain aspects of their self-identity. This means that individuals define talent by possessing characteristics or behavior that they attribute to themselves, too. This can potentially lead to subconscious bias in decision taking. For example, to evaluate colleagues or employees more positively who are similar to one when assigning talent practices or giving feedback. The research adds to practice by pointing out effects on organizational life. Organizational decision-takers can account for that by mitigating decision bias based on talent.

3. Inclusive talent (management) meanings differ between employees and organizations

Having previously explored a variety of practical implications, the third part of this section looks at what the perceived absence of inclusion in inclusive talent management implies for organizations. For employees, inclusive talent management is present, but often not real. All of the respondents personally make sense of talent as inclusive and think that all people have talents. But only very few regard talent (management) at their organization as inclusive. That is, the perceived absence of elite talent practices does not directly lead to inclusive talent meanings. They perceive unfairness, injustice and selection bias, instead of diversity, inclusion, justice and fairness. This research therefore contributes to practice by introducing doubts on the commonly acknowledged "truth" that inclusive talent (management) exists. This has two practical implications on communication and organizational culture, which are discussed as follows.

First, organizational culture shapes the expectations of employees in the context of talent (management). Organizational values are used to assess talent (management) at an organization, and the choice between an inclusive and exclusive understanding of talent (management) is fundamental and value-based for employees. *Inclusive* emerges as a strong signal connected to concepts like diversity, justice and fairness. Using the notion of inclusion for communicating about talent (management) creates false expectations in employees. The promise is not kept. Because expectations regarding inclusion are difficult to fulfill for managers and Human Resources, the communication to employees can be changed to fit a more realistic talent (management) experience. To limit the promises communicated by using a term like *inclusive* talent management, I propose to introduce *people-centered* as a novel description.

And second, the research also offers a practical contribution to inclusion and diversity at an organization. Because of the contrasting perceptions of inclusive talent (management) from employee and organizational perspectives, I suggest reflecting on how to incorporate ethics, justice and inclusion in talent (management), if this is aimed at by an organization. This can happen in alignment with other areas like diversity management. A recommendation from the research is to develop and share a set of principles and values that talent decisions can be based on. The research therefore contributes to discussions on inclusion, as opposed to elite talent practices.

In conclusion, this section presents my contribution to Human Resource and management practice in the form of three pillars. Reflecting on my leading role in designing and implementing talent management processes, I think my work becomes more meaningful when the considerations on *agency and structure on demand*, increased flexibility and space are taken into account. Having established the relevance of talent management and the agentive role of employees in the same, combining both will lead to success, purpose and meaningful work. The research influences how I think about the purpose of my job. I have become passionate about people-centered talent (management) and I am excited about integrating it more in the workplace. During field work, I write into my research diary,

"I have always found my job fulfilling, but not essential to life, after these interviews I think, it is more important than I thought" (Research diary, November 12, 2019)

Personally, I have consciously turned away from the comfortable, natural and familiar organizational and managerial perspectives towards talent (management) during the research journey. Having now reversed the view to where I came from, I realize and strongly point out the benefit of including employee perspectives in the design and implementation of talent management processes. Multilevel sense-making and people-centered talent management are areas that I can develop further and integrate in my own practice. Additionally, the interplay of talent (management) with individual and extra-individual aspects informs my own practice: acknowledging this relationship influences how I make sense of talent (management) and how I act in the workplace. The findings contribute to Human Resource and management practice by pointing out a balance of agency and structure in talent (management). Organizations that reflect on and transparently communicate about talent (management) can acknowledge that parallel meanings exist and in doing so, leave freedom for employees. By all participants involved, the liberalizing effect of individual agency is perceived as utterly positive.

6.2 My contribution to theory

After discussing practical implications, this section shows how the study is linked to the theoretical perspective of others. The research contributes to literature by focusing on the under-examined area of talent management and identity. It has brought focus to how employees attribute meaning to talent (management) and construct identity in the light of talent (management). In the beginning of the journey, I identified four significant gaps in the talent management literature to which I have successfully contributed through my work. Those are as follows: exploring the interplay of talent management and identity to get a deeper understanding of the "dark side" of talent management in the prevalent positive paradigm of talent management (Daubner-Siva et al., 2017; De Boeck et al., 2018); to give voice to employee views in smaller organizations (Thunnissen, 2016; Thunnissen & Gallardo-Gallardo, 2019); to build a more inclusive understanding of talent management (Al Ariss et al., 2014); and to offer a more independent view of talent status (Bonneton et al., 2020; De Boeck et al., 2018; Swailes & Blackburn, 2016). In what follows, I embark on a detailed review of my contribution to theory again along three pillars, as illustrated by Figure 40. In doing so, I position my work and simultaneously place it in a broader context.

My contribution to knowledge

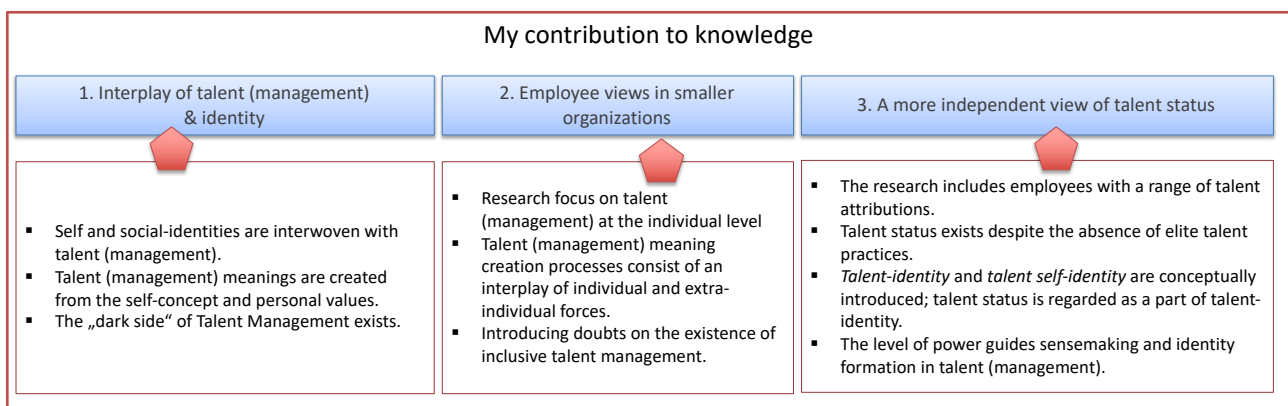| 1. Interplay of talent (management) & identity	2. Employee views in smaller organizations	3. A more independent view of talent status
▪ Self and social-identities are interwoven with talent (management). ▪ Talent (management) meanings are created from the self-concept and personal values. ▪ The „dark side" of Talent Management exists.	▪ Research focus on talent (management) at the individual level ▪ Talent (management) meaning creation processes consist of an interplay of individual and extra-individual forces. ▪ Introducing doubts on the existence of inclusive talent management.	▪ The research includes employees with a range of talent attributions. ▪ Talent status exists despite the absence of elite talent practices. ▪ *Talent-identity* and *talent self-identity* are conceptually introduced; talent status is regarded as a part of talent-identity. ▪ The level of power guides sensemaking and identity formation in talent (management).

Figure 40: My contribution to knowledge, created by author (2021)

1. Interplay of talent (management) & identity

Previous work on the "dark side" of talent management is currently difficult to place in the prevalent positive paradigm of talent management (De Boeck et al., 2018). This research is therefore driven by inconsistent findings on how talent management influences employee attitudes, and especially identity formation. I find that self and social-identities are interwoven with talent (management). Responding to the first research objective – *to explore self and social-identities with regards to talent (management)* –, the research extends knowledge by developing an understanding of how identity and talent (management) interact. It shows a variety of relationships between self-identity, social-identities and talent (management). Employees use talent (management) to reflect on their own notion of talent, roles at work, how others see them and the self-concept.

It is particularly interesting that I could create links between specific talent discourses and practices on the one hand, and employee identity formation processes on the other hand, which can be revisited in Table 2. Another novel consideration is that employees use the self-concept and personal values to engage in processes of talent (management) meaning creation. Taking in the emerging crucial role of inner realities and life-worlds in meaning creation processes, we use them as a lens to experience the world as a whole, and organizational life in particular.

Further, the study contributes to knowledge by showing that employees form their identity in interaction with talent (management): How people perceive talent discourses and practices plays a significant role in how active or passive they feel they can act. Talent (management) provides space for agency and regulates identity through discipline; the work therefore reaches the second research objectives, which is *to explore talent (management) as a means to encourage individual agency or exercise identity control*. However, the degree to which the respondents experience agency or structure, or both, through talent (management) is personal and depends on the individual. Adding to previous work on identity construction of talents in talent management (Dubouloy, 2004; Kirk, 2016, 2019, 2020; Tansley & Tietze, 2013), a variety of employee reactions to inclusive talent (management) is discussed in the preceding chapters. I thereby also respond to the call from Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) who encourage to open-mindedly explore how people construct identity in an organizational environment.

Instead of reflecting on employee reactions and identity mechanisms in detail in relation to agency, structure and power, I point out a few selected thoughts on identity formation in talent (management) as follows. Drawing on literature, I previously make sense of self-talent management in the context of responsibility. In particular, I assumed that the shift of responsibility from employer to employees (Al Ariss et al., 2014) would also appear in the work with the respondents. Instead, the research relates considerations on self-talent management more to individual agency, perceived power and personality than to responsibility. Employees who possess power over their own actions in talent (management) focus more on the agentive aspects of identity formation. As agents, they take over responsibility for talent (management). In contrast, employees who feel powerless experience more identity control, even if they oppose talent discourses and actions. What does this mean for the field of talent management? These considerations again lead me to the novel concept of *agency and structure on demand*: I argue that talent management is on the verge of change towards more flexibility, more individualization and less discipline out of two reasons, which are as follows: first, discipline in talent (management) does not fit new career concepts which assumes an active role of individuals who take control of their careers, and therefore focus on self-responsibility and self-initiation (e.g. Farndale et al., 2014; Maxwell, Ogden & Broadbridge, 2010). Crowley-Henry et al. (2019) introduce that talent practices reflecting the complexity of individual careers are more successful than more generic practices. They argue that talent management must consider employees with both, boundaryless and more traditional career orientations. *Agency and structure on demand* also introduces that not all employees strive for free choice, and that talent management can act as enabler offering flexibility. And second, Harsch and Festing (2020) come to a similar conclusion from an organizational perspective: they argue that organizations need flexibility and self-responsibility of the workforce to support an agile organizational climate. They emphasize the concepts of individualization and participation. Reflecting on the findings of both, the present work and Harsch and Festing's (2020) study, one potentially leads to the other: organizations that enable employees and offer flexibility to meet individual needs empower employees to act as agents. Empowered employees take over responsibility and in turn influence the organizational climate towards change, flexibility and agility.

2. Employee views in smaller organizations

The second part of this section presents sense-making mechanisms of employees in the context of smaller organizations and discusses the promise of inclusion in talent management. To begin with, existing work on talent management primarily focuses on organizational and managerial views in large organizations (Thunnissen, 2016; Thunnissen & Gallardo-Gallardo, 2019). Talent management is situated at the organizational level while the present research focuses on talent (management) at the individual level. By looking at talent (management) from an employee perspective in smaller organizations, the findings of this research add to and expand theory. Both, organizational and individual perspectives are legitimate and together provide a more comprehensive interpretation of talent management. Talent (management) meaning creation processes of the respondents consist of an interplay of individual and extra-individual forces. One of these external sense-making drivers is organizational discourses. The individuals draw on narratives about talent, talent reward, talent responsibility and talent power to get an idea of what talent (management) means to their organizations. They then negotiate talent (management) meanings with identity. It is interesting that perceived talent status, which is whether an employee perceives to be seen as talent by the organization or not, emerges as one possible discourse for identity construction.

At the beginning of the journey, my pre understanding included that employees mainly construct talent management meanings from the workplace. Although the findings indeed partly assert this view, a surprising variety of individual and other extra-individual factors besides organizational discourses arises from the work with the respondents. The understanding of talent (management) is not created independently of one's reality, but rather takes the inner realities, personal life-worlds and co-existence of truths into account. I also relate this finding to my philosophical starting point in Chapter 3: In knowing the social world, we create it (Blaikie, 2007).

In addition to organizational discourses, the personal sense-making of talent (management) is also developed from the self, own values, talent actions, reading work on talent and the family background, as previously shown in the final conceptual framework in Figure 29. The study adds to theory by pointing out the multifaceted landscape of meaning creation of talent (management). In doing so, it provides answers to the third research objective, which is *to explore how employees make sense of organizational discourses of inclusive talent (management)*. This adds to previous research that identifies talent practices (e.g. Arthur &

Boyles, 2007; De Boeck et al., 2018), or talent principles and philosophies (Meyers et al., 2020) to impact employee views and reactions to talent (management).

It is noticeable that the self and own values as individual factors play a pivotal role in the sense-making of talent (management). They appear as the starting point for meaning creation. This study therefore draws on and complements research on narrative identities (Giddens, 1991) which emerge through talent identity formation processes (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). This transforms the role of employees in talent management towards being meaning creators.

Having unpacked sense-making mechanisms of employees in the context of smaller organizations, I discuss the notion of inclusive talent management which is related to organization size. Previous work mainly explores exclusive talent management (Thunissen & Gallardo-Gallardo, 2019). In comparison, this study takes place in the context of inclusive talent management, which allows me to challenge prevalent elite talent practices, and build a more inclusive understanding of talent management (Al Ariss et al., 2014). However, most of the respondents of this study do not make sense of organizational talent (management) as inclusive. This contributes to theory because the regional and organizational context of the study (Festing et al., 2013; Meyers et al., 2020) as well as the talent philosophies of all respondents involved favor inclusion. In detail, smaller organizations in Germany, Austria and Switzerland lean towards inclusive talent management (Festing et al., 2013; Meyers et al., 2020), and all individuals share an inclusive definition of talent. Also, Meyers and van Woerkom (2014) attribute the talent practices that appear from the work with the respondents rather to inclusive talent management. In my position as a researcher, I also previously believed the inclusive nature of organizational talent (management) would appear quite prominently in the research.

And yet, as meaning creators of talent (management), the participants rarely make sense of talent (management) at their organization as inclusive, fair or ethical. Does inclusive talent management in organizations then exist at all? Leaning towards a postmodern ontology, I challenge the dominant understanding (Gephart et al., 1996) of inclusive talent management. Reflecting on who defines its existence, I suggest that usually organizations and organizational agents (Alvesson et al., 2008) do, within talent principles (Arthur & Boyles, 2007) and talent philosophies (Dries, 2013a; Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014; Meyers et al., 2020). Continuing along the employee-centered path, I find that employees rarely make sense of organizational talent (management) as inclusive. Does inclusive talent

(management) only exist through a certain lens? Is talent management situated at the organizational level different to talent (management) at the individual level?

This raises questions on the relevance of context, in particular on whether organization size or national and organizational characteristics really matter. But I regard this phenomenon in a different light. The absence of elite talent practices or an exclusive talent philosophy promises "inclusion" to employees, applicants and other stakeholders. This promise is not kept. Talent management cannot meet the expectations because there are still employee groups that are rarely included in the accepted conceptualization of talent management. Examples are contingent workers, people with boundaryless careers or blue-collar workers. Assuming that the promise of "inclusion" is not fulfilled by an organization, that expectations and experiences differ, psychological contract theory (Clarke & Scurry, 2020) suggests negative reactions of employees. This study finds various negative reactions to be explained by the "dark side" of talent management and by psychological contract breach. Because the perceived absence of "inclusion" for the respondents of this study leads to doubts on the existence of the same, I propose a different terminology. Instead of inclusive, I suggest describing talent management that does not adopt an elite approach as *people-centered*. The newly introduced wording of people-centered talent management is suggested to mitigate the risks of psychological contract breach.

What are the implications for the concept of talent management if inclusive talent management is in doubt from an employee perspective? The research shows that talent management is multi-layered. It includes organizational and personal perspectives, which differ but simultaneously complement each other and together provide a more comprehensive view of talent management. In contrast to exclusive talent management which unequally distributes resources among employees, inclusive talent management focuses on all or the majority of people employed (Swailes et al., 2014). While Human Resource Management also includes all employees, there is a differentiation between "hard" and "soft" Human Resource Management. The latter's emphasis is also on people and their development as the key to organizational success (Druker, White, Hegewisch & Mayne, 1996). With talent management as a sub function of Human Resources and its focus on assessing talent and person-job fit (Swailes et al., 2014), the "soft" part of Human Resources can be aligned with inclusive talent management.

3. A more independent view of talent status

Previous literature primarily focuses on employees with a talent status (De Boeck et al., 2018). Only little work focuses on non-talents alongside talents (De Boeck et al., 2018; e.g. Björkman et al., 2013; Malik & Singh, 2019) or solely on non-talents (e.g. Van Zelderen et al., 2019). This study therefore assumes a more independent view of talent status. The respondents of this study range from employees who perceive to be seen as talent to employees who perceive not to correspond to the talent understanding of the organization.

Despite a non-exclusive talent (management) environment, the respondents make sense of talent status. All of them have an idea of how others at their organization see them with regards to talent. This finding is surprising because talent status is connected to exclusive talent (management) (e.g. Collings & Melahi, 2009), as it works as a differentiator of employee talent and non-talent. Despite of talent status emerging from the work with the respondents, its role differs to how it is portrayed in existing literature in two ways: First, I contribute to theory by introducing the concepts of talent-identity (*a negotiated social-identity of the notion of whether one might be a talent*) and talent self-identity (*the own internal notion or awareness of individual talent*), based on Watson (2008). Perceived talent status appears as one possible discourse for talent-identity. More precisely, perceived talent status is a part of negotiating the own talent. The notion of whether one is a talent, or not, appears as discursively constructed as opposed to solely attributed by an organization.

And second, the own perception of power plays a more significant role in how employees make sense of talent (management) and construct identity than perceived talent status. While talent status has been previously conceptualized as an explanation to why employees react differently to talent (management), this research adds to previous work by pointing out the essential role of feeling powerful or powerless in talent (management). The own perception of power steers how employees create meanings of talent (management) and how they perceive the role of talent (management) in identity construction.

In conclusion, this section presents my contribution to theory along three pillars, which are the interplay of talent (management) and identity, employee views in smaller organizations and a more independent view of talent status.

6.3   My contribution to research practice

This section outlines my contribution to research practice. This study adopts a more novel approach to research talent management. The choice of hermeneutics and the in-depth nature of the study influence the findings of the work. In what follows, I reflect on the four fundamental issues of hermeneutics, which are hermeneutic autonomy, meaningful coherence, pre understanding and meaning equivalence (Gadamer, 1976). With regards to hermeneutic autonomy, I explore the sense-making of each individual, considering his or her own logic and rationality. Seeking coherence, I try to reach a holistic perspective on each participant. By including a person's background, character and subjective experience, I do not focus on talent (management) and identity only. Further, the pre understanding I develop at the beginning of the journey is clearly placed in doubt and changes along with the participants' sense-making. The research approach therefore mirrors the emerging understanding of the research area. Finally, adhering to meaning equivalence, I provide insights into the original intentions of the respondents. I for example do so by presenting the texts free from other dominant narratives.

As further contributions to research practice I discuss the researcher's level of reflection, the respondents' reflective development during the diary-interview process, the integration of the learnings into professional practice, and the rather practical issue of translations. First, one contribution is the level of reflection I engage with throughout the work. Using sequential studies in form of a "spiral" enables me to collect reflections on the work with the respondents. I then use them again to discuss and interpret what is happening.

Second, the rich findings of the study can be explained by the choice of hermeneutics and the diary-interview method, which enables self-reflective learning in the workplace. The research adds value by providing space to the individuals to develop and express their own understanding of the discussed phenomena. The research shows that the respondents' sense-making evolves during the three-step research process by questioning themselves and their environment. By explaining how I encouraged the individuals to participate in the research process, I can support other researchers to also engage in similar research methods.

Third, it is particularly interesting to look at how the research starts a process for the individuals and myself to rethink and negotiate prevalent discourses, own feelings and attributions. Besides the notion of reflection, some of the individuals point out that they draw implications from the research process for their own practice.

And fourth, I add to method by pointing out the challenges I faced during the long translation process from German to English. I explain the process I used and how I overcame challenges to preserve the original meanings of the texts.

In conclusion, the methodological choice of hermeneutics in combination with the diary-interview method enables reflexive research, focuses on the primary accounts of the respondents and regards them as co-researchers. The emergent format also allows them to steer the process and findings of the research.

6.4   Reflections on research objectives

Having presented practical, theoretical and methodological contributions of the work, this section reflects on the aim and objectives of the research. The aim of the study is to understand the meanings individuals attribute to talent and talent management, and their interplay with identity construction. Through uniquely combining the research area, the context of inclusive talent management and this work's methodological approach, I have successfully developed a deep understanding of identity issues in talent (management). My research provides insights into meaning creation and identity formation processes of employees in talent (management), and thereby adds to theory and Human Resource and management practice.

The research objectives have been achieved: I have explored how self and social-identities are interwoven with talent (management) and discussed the role of talent status. Also, I have shown that talent (management) provides space for individual agency and exercises identity control. Further, I have analyzed that employees make sense of talent (management) based on organizational discourses, and further individual and extra-individual factors. However, I have also found that they rarely make sense of organizational talent (management) as inclusive and therefore introduce doubts on the concept of inclusive talent management. As a final point, I have derived recommendations for Human Resource and management practice from the findings of the work.

The thesis is a rich account of how employees make sense of talent (management). The narratives of the respondents, collected in an in-depth study, provide insights into the inner realities of employees in smaller organizations in the German-speaking area. They present reason for debate, controversy and alignment, all of which is developed throughout the thesis.

6.5 Strengths and limitations of the research; future work

The previous sections discuss theoretical, practical and methodological contributions of the research. This section now introduces the strengths of the study, limitations of the work and directions for future research.

One of the strengths of the study is the role of the researcher. The achieved level of reflection and interpretation is only possible through participating in the research. However, these considerations also illustrate a potential limitation of the work. The interpretation of the texts is informed by my own beliefs in individual agency. I regard people to be able to purposefully act as agents and choose discourses for themselves (Goffman, 1959). Because I acknowledge that subjectivity exists in this study, I clearly separate the voices of the participants from my own pre understanding, interpretations and experiences throughout the work.

Additionally, a major strength of the study is that the respondents engage in reflection and participate in the research process until the end, albeit it asks much time and effort from them. The sample size of seven individuals enables me to do in-depth work with the respondents within the capacity limits of a doctoral study. However, I am aware that the sample size can be regarded as a limitation of the work. Because the sense-making of talent (management) depends on the individual, each additional participant would potentially have provided another personal perspective to the research area.

A further strength of the work is that it accompanies individuals for six weeks during the research process, which provides significant insights on how perspectives change over this period. Because talent identity work appears as an ongoing process, future work can look at how the individual sense-making of talent (management) and identity issues develops over different stages in a person's life.

The employee perspective adopted for this study is one of its main assets, thereby providing multiple contributions to theory and practice. However, it would also be interesting to compare the sense-making of talent (management) among different groups of stakeholders. Future studies on the interplay of talent (management) and identity in a multilevel construct are therefore recommended.

Further, the proposed concept of *agency and structure on demand* in talent (management) is an important issue for future research. Several questions remain unanswered. In future explorations, it might be possible to conceptualize *agency and structure on demand*, to look in more detail at the "right" balance of agency and structure, and to question on which factors it depends on and whether the "right" balance exists at all. There is abundant room for further progress in determining whether the amount of individual agency depends on the individual, or potentially also on other factors such as organizational culture or the role within the organization, such as employee, middle manager or top manager.

The work introduces doubts on the existence of inclusive talent management, as it is "known" from theory and practice. The respondents rarely make sense of talent (management) in organizations as inclusive. Further work is required to understand the findings of this study in relation to inclusive talent (management) meanings. The exact differences between talent management situated at the organizational level and talent (management) at the employee level can be explored. What do organizations have to do or communicate for employees to perceive talent management as inclusive? Additionally, the findings suggest that future research tackles the question of inclusion in inclusive talent management. Further studies will need to be undertaken which take the reasons for including certain employee groups, for example with regards to age and the nature of work, into account. And finally, further work is required to establish whether the talent practice of talent identification could be a means to strengthen the self-concept, as it is suggested from the work with the respondents.

6.6 Personal reflections and contributions to my own professional practice

In this final section of the thesis, I share experiences of the doctoral journey and contributions to my own professional practice. I start by exploring six key learnings, which might also be relevant for other employees at the receiving end of talent management. Then, I conclude the thesis with an account of how I have developed as a person and as a professional over the research journey.

My contribution to professional practice

The first notion that emerges from the research is that talent (management) is a personal activity. This work shows that each person acts in talent (management), and that we can take ourselves seriously. Personally, I put more importance on my own thoughts, values and motivations than I did prior to the research process. Each individual can decide to what extent extra-individual factors can influence the self. My emerging position is that each person chooses on his or her own which discourses to draw on, and which to internalize into self-identity. Each employee can reflect on his or her own active or rather passive role in organizational issues generally, and in talent (management) specifically. And finally, each person can closely evaluate the balance of structure and agency in organizational issues generally, and in talent (management) specifically. This view is connected to my own positive and optimist idea of identity formation (Alvesson, 2010), of which I know that it is not shared by everyone.

The second key learning is that personal sense-making of talent (management) guides organizational action. This implies for employees to explore the role of organizational issues like talent (management) in identity formation. Personally, I benefit from understanding myself as a rather active individual in the context of talent (management). A diary helps me to reflect on organizational life and to critically evaluate what is happening around us.

Third, storytelling is valuable. The research points out the importance of personal sense-making. From the doctoral journey, I learn that if I share something, others will share something, too. For me, sharing and listening to stories creates a feeling of belonging. Especially with my own history of social groups, I think that the activity of exchanging stories is one of the most valuable experiences in the research process. As I feel strongly about this, I hope that sharing the individuals' and my own stories and interpretations also provides value to the reader of the thesis.

Fourth, my personal key learning is the notion of reflective practice. I have constantly developed to become a reflective practitioner throughout my doctoral journey. At the beginning, I would rather consciously practice reflection-on-action (Schön, 1983; 1992) during nature walks and through diary writing. Then, the more natural and comfortable this became, the more I could engage in reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983; 1992). I assume different and more in-depth perspectives of the world as an observer and as an actor in the middle of everything. In doing so, my experiences become more vivid and richer in the effect on my senses. I often take a step back from a scene, breathe, and look at what is happening based on the skills I have acquired during this journey. In the introduction to the thesis, I write about how I would run at full speed through life and enjoy the excitement of diving into new experiences. Through the research journey, I can now appreciate silence and give space to thoughts, reflections and my surrounding. Upon experiencing situations, I quite often "change course" in the middle of something because I have become more aware of my environment in all parts of life. Maybe, I have developed to some extent towards a reflective, directing and controlling "me" (Mead, 1934). In hindsight, reflection-on-action has enabled me to engage in reflection-in-action; for me personally, one concept led to the other.

As a fifth learning, a person can consciously separate what is "real" from what is "on-stage" in talent (management) like in other organizational issues, or the act from backstage happenings. Therefore, we can look at our own attitudes towards talent (management) in the context of two layers (Goffman, 1956): front-stage selves where we embrace the roles we have, separated from hidden attitudes and feelings towards talent discourses and actions. This realization can make it easier to conceptualize the notion of authentic selves in organizations. It delivers an explanation to us, when we doubt the existence of our real selves. Personally, I benefit from this notion and have already applied it multiple times in different settings.

And finally, the sixth learning concerns a novel perspective on talent (management). The research contributes to my professional practice because I have gained different views on the topic of talent (management) over the last years and have fully embraced the joint sense-making of the participants and myself. I started the journey with a rather managerial and organizational understanding that regards inclusive talent management as positive and essential. In the workplace, I was seeking to find out "how it works". Upon reflection, many of the strategies and "how-tos" might have been based on hidden assumptions on what talent actually is. Now, my view has changed towards a more individual sense-making of talent (management). In my professional practice, I now include, next to organizational and

managerial sense-making, also the personal notion of talent where I try to grasp how employees, including myself, make sense of what is happening. My understanding has changed, which subsequently influences my own practice and my future work.

Reflections on my personal development

Regarding my professional development, I find that I feel comfortable in an academic context: conceptualizing, doing field research, thinking, interpreting, changing perspectives and writing. I still observe myself to be much more passionate when talking about my research after almost five years than with any other professional topic. This makes me question how I can integrate the learnings and the enjoyment of the doctoral journey into my job. In other words, I challenge the nature of my work and think about ways to reflect what I love about doing research. A contribution to my own professional practice is therefore that I re-evaluate what I do and come closer to what I am passionate about – integrating reflective practice, changes of perspectives and multilevel constructs into the workplace. I am glad that I am still in the early stages of my career and excited about what is to come.

As previously explored, I started the DBA program intending to continue my studies, but I find myself in a completely different place now. I have come to increasingly engage with my environment and take into account personal sense-making. Throughout the doctoral journey, I have questioned what is happening around me. I reflect, think and learn through exchanging ideas, conversing with others and changing perspectives. Reflection enables me to develop further and to think about how to act next time (Kolb, 1984). This is a fundamental learning that enriches my life as a whole.

Naturally, I have experienced challenges, but I mostly attribute them to the context in which I have been doing my research. Private matters, Covid-19, time concerns and other aspects have of course made the journey quite difficult at times. But going through the DBA program itself, I have very much enjoyed all activities with a positive attitude and have kept quite a high level of intrinsic motivation. I still regard the comparison of the DBA program to travelling as quite accurate: Each encounter in the journey adds value and widens horizons. Travelling along, I have gotten to know myself better, I have grown to become a more confident reflective practitioner, and I have acquired a new set of skills. Upon returning to work after parental leave, I find that the learnings of the research journey directly impact my professional practice. Instead of being passive, I act as an agent. I critically reflect on what is happening and speak up.

My practice as talent management consultant has begun to change in the light of my doctoral research. For example, I was asked to create a training and development concept at my organization. Instead of directly diving into the matter keeping organizational objectives in mind, we started the process with small group discussions at the employee level: together, we make sense of how we perceive work, where we see challenges ahead and how training could help us in the workplace. Another example is that I suggest multi-level constructs when designing new talent processes with our clients in order to integrate, appreciate and benefit from different perspectives.

Figure 41 shows an initial idea of personal development areas that I drafted a few years ago. Thinking about what I then specified, I conclude that the overview is still valid. It accurately describes how I have developed during the research journey. Reflecting on the decision process on the research area in Chapter 3, I have come to engage with a topic that personally affects me. Because I did not know what to expect or what outcome would appear, the research objectives have challenged me. Further, I now know what I am passionate about, and I have found my voice in the research area as well as in my professional practice.
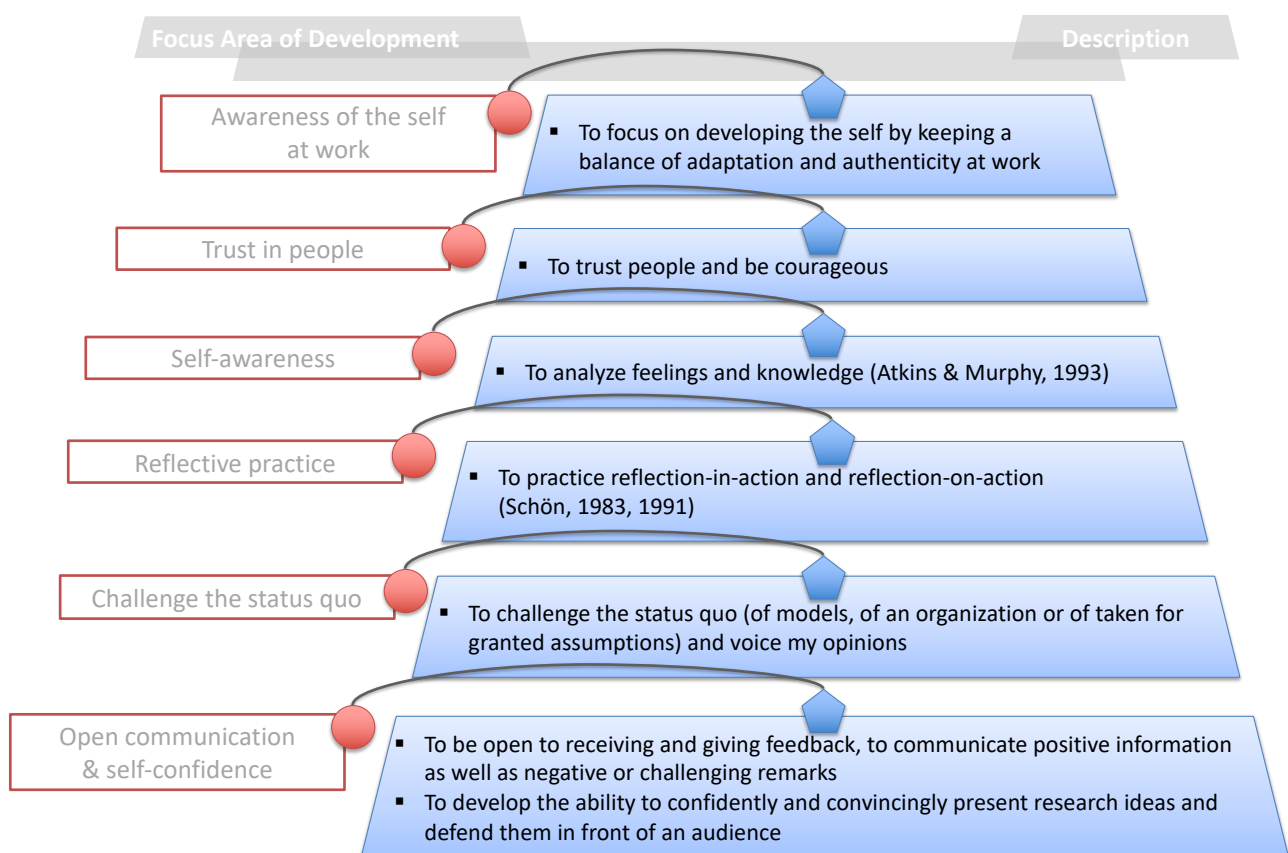

Figure 41: My personal development areas, created by author (2018)

I am grateful for how openly each respondent shared experiences and thoughts with me. I get many insights out of dealing with individual narratives. I sincerely thank all participants for their time and openness. Based on ontological, epistemological and methodological considerations, I give space to the respondents' subjective realities during the research process. I let them steer the discourse and go along with an open mind. Through that, I could develop my own thinking further and question hidden assumptions.

Through the dialogue with the participants, I reconsider what talent (management) actually means and how I personally engage in sense-making. Thereby, I critically evaluate the positive paradigm of talent (management) and look at the phenomenon from different angles. The experience with the participants in this research informs my interpretations and my further development. This reassures me of why I do this type of work and of why qualitative research is enriching and significant. I have developed to become a reflective practitioner that questions taken-for-granted "truths". I have started to approach topics at work in another way, counting in hidden assumptions and my own position as well. As detailed in Chapter 3, I have immersed myself in research philosophy. From the research, the importance of self-assurance, self-concept and self-worth becomes apparent. And I feel that the research journey has very personally contributed to strengthen all of this in me.

The context of the doctoral journey leads me to balance different needs and to set priorities. After completing the pilot work, my first child was born, and I found myself in a dual role. With a firm plan in mind for the rest of the field work, the little one naturally turned my life upside down. Although I somehow integrated the doctoral studies into the daily routine with the baby, I encountered various challenges that come with the early stages of being a mother. In comparison to the rather impassive person, that I used to be, I experienced becoming a mother as an emotional endeavor. Hence, this did not leave my doctoral journey untouched. Suddenly, I struggled with various strong emotions at the same time, such as love, a feeling of responsibility, dissatisfaction and impatience. For me, the role of a mother is an emotional, continuous and rewarding reality. In my role as a doctoral student, I am driven by passion and a quest for meaning creation. Through balancing different roles, needs and emotions I get to know myself in a different light and I develop further along this path. Now, I am proud that I have accomplished this work and that I am able to integrate the learnings from this experience into my life. Additionally, because I am on parental leave during a part of the research process, I am not directly involved in work for some time. I regard this situation as a unique opportunity to reflect on my professional life from a more

distant perspective. This offers me the chance to stand back from the situations I reflect on, and to re-arrange life.

In conclusion, I enjoyed the journey, the many conversations on a multitude of topics with my professors and colleagues, the work with the respondents and the rather solitary times of exploration, interpretation and reflection. Taking the learnings and possible directions for future work with me to the next stage in life, I am excited about what is to come. Instead of a closing chapter, this is therefore the introduction to something new.

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8   Appendix

A.   Interview schedule

Participant Nr.	Codename	Initial interview	Diary	Follow-up interview	Additional information
1 (pilot)	Ms. Appreciative	At her office, May 16, 2019	May 17 – June 13	By phone, June 27, 2019	Meeting on June 13, 2019, 11 am in her office to discuss diary entries
2 (pilot)	Ms. Passion	At her house, June 08, 2019	June 09 – July 12	By phone, July 23, 2019	
3	Mr. Excellence	At his house, Oct. 02, 2019	Oct. 03 – Oct. 31	At his house, Nov. 04, 2019	Phone call for clarification on Sept. 01, 2020
4	Mr. Mio	At my house, Nov. 05, 2019	Nov. 05 – Dec. 19	By phone, Jan. 23, 2020	Prolonged due to undisclosed reasons and Christmas holidays
5	Mr. Swimming	At his house, Dec. 03, 2019	Dec. 03 – Jan. 14	By phone, Feb. 6, 2020	Prolonged due to undisclosed reasons
6	Ms. It's-US	At my house, Jan. 04, 2020	Jan. 05- Feb. 25	By phone, March 5, 2020	Prolonged due to undisclosed reasons
7	Ms. Arrangeur	At her house, Jan. 13, 2020	Jan. 14 – Mar. 14	By phone, March 29, 2020	Prolonged due to limited time of respondent (personal reasons)

B.   Participant information sheet

Note: this is informal version, could be changed to formal version

German	English translation
Betreff: Forschungsprojekt – herzliche Einladung zur Teilnahme	**Subject Line: Research project – invitation to particpate**
Liebe/r <Name>,

ich lade dich herzlich dazu ein, an meiner Doktorarbeit mitzuwirken. Bevor du dich dafür oder dagegen entscheidest, möchte ich dir gerne aufzeigen, worum es geht und wie du teilnehmen kannst. Anbei findest du eine Einwilligungserklärung, die beim 1. Treffen unterzeichnet wird – Vertraulichkeit ist natürlich garantiert (dazu später mehr)!

Die Informationen sind wie folgt strukturiert: a) Zweck der Studie, b) Vorgehen und c) Datenschutz und Privatsphäre.

a) Zweck der Studie

Die Doktorarbeit (an der Munich Business School und Sheffield Hallam University) soll Erfahrungen von Menschen mit Talent management und die Eigenwahrnehmung im Rahmen dessen erforschen. Bisher wurde Talent management vor allem aus Sicht des Managements oder eines Unternehmens betrachtet – ich möchte die Mitarbeiterperspektive vertiefend mit | Dear <name>,

I would like to invite you to contribute to my doctoral thesis. Before you decide for or against it I would like to tell you what the research is about and how you could participate. Enclosed you find a participant consent form that will be signed at the first meeting – full confidentiality is guaranteed (I'll say more to this later on)!

The information is structured as follows: a) purpose of the research, b) approach and c) data privacy.

a) Purpose

The doctoral thesis (at Munich Business School and Sheffield Hallam University) shall explore experiences of people with Talent management and self-awareness. Up until now, Talent management has been mainly explored from management and organizational views – I would like to focus on the employee perspective. You would support me by telling me about your work experiences and your job role. The title of my thesis is "Who am I? A |

German	English translation
hineinbringen. Wenn du mir von deinem Arbeitsalltag und deiner Rolle im Job erzählst, würdest du mich unterstützen. Der Titel meiner Arbeit ist (aus dem Englischen übersetzt) "Wer bin ich? Eine hermeneutische Untersuchung von Talent management und Identitätsthemen".	hermeneutic exploration of talent management and identity issues".
b) Vorgehen	b) Approach
Ich werde zwei Interviews mit dir machen – an einem Ort, der für dich gut geeignet ist und mit einer Dauer von ungefähr je einer Stunde. Zwischen den Interviews würde ich dich bitten, vier kurze Tagebucheinträge, die rein die Arbeit betreffen, über einen Monat verteilt zu schreiben – wir besprechen das Vorgehen im ersten Interview aber im Detail.	I would like to go through two interviews with you – at a place that is convenient for you and with a duration of approximately one hour each. Between the interviews I would like to ask you to write four short diary entries over a month – however, we discuss the approach in detail during the first interview.
c) Datenschutz und Privatsphäre	c) Data privacy
Die Interviews werden aufgenommen und zusammen mit den Tagebucheinträgen von mir abgeschrieben. Alle Daten werden anonymisiert, das heißt, dass deine Antworten nicht auf dich schließen lassen. Basierend auf den Resultaten werde ich meine Doktorarbeit schreiben (die ich dir gerne zur Verfügung stelle) und ggf. veröffentlichen. Du kannst deine Teilnahme und die	The interviews will be digitally recorded and transcribed together with the diary entries by me. All data will be anonymized which means that your answers will not be connected to your person. Based on the results, I will write my doctoral thesis (that I'm happy to share with you) and the results might be published.

You can withdraw from the research and revoke the interview consent form without giving reasons later and you can decide not to answer a particular question. The study has been reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee at Sheffield Hallam University (please follow these links for further |

German	English translation
Einwilligungserklärung anbei jederzeit ohne Angabe von Gründen zurückziehen und du kannst dich auch dazu entscheiden, eine Interviewfrage nicht zu beantworten. Die Ethikkommission der Sheffield Hallam University hat die Studie genehmigt (unter diesen Links findest du weiterführende Informationen zu Datenschutz und ethischen Fragen: Link1 Link2).	information on data privacy and research ethics: Link1 Link2).
Ich hoffe, die Studie hat dein Interesse geweckt und ich würde mich sehr freuen, dich als Teilnehmer/in begrüßen zu dürfen. Bei Fragen komm gerne jederzeit auf mich zu. Ich freue mich auf deine Antwort!	I hope the study has caught your interest and I would be happy to welcome you as a participant to this research. Please don't hesitate to contact me in case of questions. I'm looking forward to your answer!
Viele Grüße, Judith	Many regards, Judith
Judith Widauer – Judith.Widauer@student.shu.ac.uk – [Telefonnummer]	Judith Widauer – Judith.Widauer@student.shu.ac.uk – [phone number]

C.   Participant consent form

Note: This is the sample form from SHU, translated to German.

Sheffield Hallam University

EINWILLIGUNGSERKLÄRUNG

TITEL DER FORSCHUNGSSTUDIE (aus dem Englischen übersetzt): Wer bin ich? Eine hermeneutische Untersuchung von Talent Management und Identitätsthemen.

Bitte beantworten Sie die folgenden Fragen:

	JA	NEIN
1) Ich habe das Informationsblatt zur Studie gelesen und habe diese erklärt bekommen.	☐	☐
2) Meine Fragen zur Studie wurden zu meiner Zufriedenheit beantwortet und mir ist bewusst, dass ich jederzeit weitere Fragen stellen kann.	☐	☐
3) Mir ist bewusst, dass ich meine Teilnahme ohne Angabe von Gründen zurückziehen kann. Ich kann auch die Antwort zu einer Frage in der Studie verweigern, ohne dass ich als Konsequenz anders von der Forscherin behandelt werde.	☐	☐
4) Ich bin damit einverstanden, Informationen vertraulich zur Verfügung zu stellen (wie im Informationsblatt detailliert).	☐	☐
5) Ich wünsche, an der Studie teilzunehmen (wie im Informationsblatt detailliert).	☐	☐
6) Ich bin damit einverstanden, dass die anonymisierten Informationen, die für diese Studie gesammelt werden, auch für weitere Forschungsprojekte genutzt werden können.	☐	☐

Unterschrift des/r Teilnehmers/in: _____ **Datum:** _____

Name des/r Teilnehmers/in (in Druckbuchstaben): _____

Kontaktdetails: _____

_____

Name der Forscherin (in Druckbuchstaben): _____

Unterschrift der Forscherin: _____

Kontaktdetails der Forscherin:
Judith Widauer, judith.widauer@student.shu.ac.uk, Telefon: ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮

Bitte behalten Sie Ihre Kopie der Einwilligungserklärung und des Informationsblatts.

D. Interview guide for initial interview

Question in German	English translation	Concepts that could appear
Talent management		
1.Wir sprechen heute über Talent Management – da gibt's viele verschiedene Meinungen und alles ist richtig. Was ist denn Talent Management für dich persönlich?	We are talking about Talent management today – there are many different opinions and everything is correct. What is Talent management for you, personally?	Talent management / Inclusion & diversity / self-management
2.Bitte erzähle mir von einer persönlichen Erfahrung mit Talent Management in deinem derzeitigen Job und wie du dich dabei fühlst oder gefühlt hast. - Und wie bewusst erlebst du Talent Management?	Please tell me about a personal experience with Talent management in your current role and about how you feel or felt about it. - And how aware are you of Talent management?	Inclusion & diversity / self-management / self-awareness
3.Wenn du das Wort "Talent" hörst, womit verbindest du das in der Arbeit? - Was zeichnet deiner Meinung nach Menschen aus, die Talente sind oder Talente haben? - Wie bist du zu dieser Definition gekommen? - Was denkst du – inwiefern teilt dein Arbeitgeber deine Meinung?	When you hear the word "talent", what do you associate it with at work? - What do you think are the characteristics of people who have talents or who are regarded as talent? - How have you come to form that definition? - What do you think – to what extent does your employer share your opinion?	Inclusive talent management
4.Basierend auf deiner Definition eines Talents, würdest du dich selbst als "Talent" bezeichnen?	Based on your definition, would you regard yourself as a talent? - What makes you proud at work?	Self-awareness / local-personal social identity

Question in German	English translation	Concepts that could appear
- Worauf bist du stolz in deiner Arbeit?		
5.Nimmst du Talent Management als eher positiv oder eher negativ wahr? - Mit welchem Tier würdest du Talent Management vergleichen?	Would you regard Talent management as rather positive or negative? - If you could choose an animal to compare it to Talent management, which one would that be?	Identity control vs. agency / inclusion & diversity
6.In welchen Situationen hast du das Gefühl, dass Talent Management beeinflusst, wie du deine Arbeit machst, wie du dich verhältst oder wie du auftrittst? - Würdest du sagen, dass du im Talent Management du selbst bist? - Was denkst du, dass deine Arbeitskollegen/innen über dich denken? - Inwiefern unterscheidet sich die Wahrnehmung deiner Arbeitskollegen/innen von der Wahrnehmung deiner Familie und Freunde/innen? - Denkst du, dass Talent Management oder auch eine Rückmeldung aus dem Talent Management beeinflusst, wie du über dich selbst denkst?	In which situations do you feel that Talent management influences how you do your work, how you behave or how you act? - Would you say you are yourself in Talent management practices? - What do you think that your work colleagues think about you? - In which way does the perception of work colleagues differ from your family and friends? - Do you think that Talent management or feedback from Talent management influences how you think about yourself? - How has the way in which you think about yourself developed / changed over the course of your work life?	Social identities / roles / self-awareness

Question in German	English translation	Concepts that could appear
- Inwiefern hat sich die Art, wie du über dich selbst denkst, während deines Arbeitslebens verändert?		
7.Was passt an deiner Rolle in der Arbeit gut zu dir? Welche Aufgaben genießt du und was macht dir Spaß? - Was würdest du gerne ändern?	What suits you well in your role at work? Which activities do you enjoy or perceive as fun? - What would you like to change?	Person-job fit / self-awareness / social identities / roles
8.Was denkst du – welche Erwartungen haben andere an deine Rolle in der Arbeit? - Woher weißt du von den Erwartungen an deine Rolle?	What expectations do you think people have for your role? - How do you know about expectations towards the role?	Roles / identity control vs. agency / social identities
9.Wer hat die Entscheidung für deine aktuelle Rolle für dich getroffen? Erzähle bitte von dieser Erfahrung.	Who has decided on this specific role for you? Please tell me about this experience.	(Self) talent management / person-job fit
10.Beim Thema Karriere übernimmt der Arbeitnehmer, also z.B. du oder ich, manchmal selbst eine gewisse Verantwortung und es übernimmt vielleicht auch der Arbeitgeber eine gewisse Verantwortung, das kann von Person und Person und Unternehmen zu Unternehmen variieren. Wie würdest du das denn bei dir persönlich einschätzen? Für welche Bereiche deiner Karriere fühlst du dich konkret verantwortlich und was erwartest du von deinem Arbeitgeber?	Sometimes, the individual employee, for example you or me, take over responsibility for the own career but sometimes also the employer takes over responsibility; this can vary from person to person and from organization to organization. How would you evaluate this in your case? For which areas do you feel responsible and what do you expect from your employer?	(Self) talent management

Question in German	English translation	Concepts that could appear
Wrap-up and goodbye		
Falls Fragen bzgl. Arbeitgebern und dem Übergang vom Uni-/Schul- zum Arbeitsleben noch nicht betrachtet wurden, werden nun Fragen über diese Themen gestellt.	In case first employers and the transition from school to work life have not been discussed in the course of the interview, questions about these topics will be asked at the end.	n.a.
Danke! Das ist das Ende meiner Fragen. Hast du Fragen für mich oder etwas, das du noch hinzufügen möchtest?	Thank you! This is the end of my questions. Do you have any questions for me or something you would like to add at the end of our interview?	n.a.

Question in German	*English translation*	*Concepts that could appear*

E. Reflections on the pilot research (initial interview)

Topic	Ms. Appreciative (Pilot I)	Ms. Passion (Pilot II)
Sequence of questions	I started with questions on Talent management and then continued with roles and expectations. This proved successful because the participant could define the terms Talent management or talent for herself right at the beginning and looked at all other topics that came up during the interview in the light of Talent management. However, I had the impression that the participant got more relaxed when we came to the second part on roles and expectations; one reason could be that this area is more familiar for her and therefore easier to answer.	I started with questions on roles, tasks and expectations at work which were answered rather in general. In contrast to the first pilot participant, it took some time to dive into the topic of identity and Talent management. I think that the reason was that the participant wanted to give me a complete overview of all activities of her role and her organization, based on the questions I asked. I learn that if I start with Talent management questions the whole interview is more focused.
Sequence of questions	The sequence of questions in general worked well as – by coincidence – I grouped general and specific questions which made it clear to the participant where to use general remarks and where to analyze a specific situation.	I find that if a question on general Talent management follows a question on a specific Talent management experience, the second question is more of a follow up question although it should be independent. This is something that happened to me with the question on whether the respondent perceives Talent management as positive or negative. Therefore, I have

Topic	Ms. Appreciative (Pilot I)	Ms. Passion (Pilot II)
		revised the sequence of questions accordingly.
Note taking	I took many notes and sometimes felt slightly distracted (i.e. had to finish one thought on paper before asking the next question).	I only took notes about issues that caught my attention (e.g. mood, body language). This way, I could be more focused on the respondent and the conversation. This is the way I will pursue in future interviews as well.
Interview questions	I used primarily open questions (e.g. Which aspects of Talent management do you perceive as rather positive or negative?) which was in general good and enabled storytelling. However, some questions seemed to be rather too difficult because first, it would be easier to give a yes/no answer and then go deeper or second, an introduction to the question was missing (while some questions, e.g. which parts of one's career the employer or employee take care of, are quite clear to me as the researcher, the reaction of the respondent showed a certain level of insecurity) or third, the question is simply unclear and needs rephrasing.	Based on the interview with the first participant, I adapted the interview questions. The following examples show the change of questions: • Q2: Shortened the sub questions to personal experience with Talent management as I find that both participants choose the direction of their talk with the main question. • Q5: Changed the open question on negative and positive aspects of Talent management to a closed question and find that the respondent answers at length on her own. • Q6: Rephrased the question on how Talent management influences the own behavior.

Topic	Ms. Appreciative (Pilot I)	Ms. Passion (Pilot II)
		• Q10: Added an introductory explanation to the question on careers.
Overall feedback from respondents	• The topic is very interesting • The sequence of questions is good, starting with introducing the concepts is valuable for the interviewee as well • Didn't feel intimidated • Felt the process was clearly explained to her • Is looking forward to the diary experience	• Was very nervous and felt unprepared at the start of the interview; I tried to calm her down and told her that I did not expect anything and that no preparation was needed • Does not really have time but is interested in the topic and wants to help me → how will I cope with time constraints with other respondents? I think that it is essential to clearly communicate the time effort and the nature of research from the very beginning and give the option to the participant to step back • To trust me was very important for her
Reflection	It was easy for me to put myself in her shoes and understand her way of thinking	• While pilot I is in a very stable environment, pilot II is in the middle of a role change and faces insecurity • The interviewee spoke a strong Austrian accent so

Topic	Ms. Appreciative (Pilot I)	Ms. Passion (Pilot II)
		that it took me much longer to transcribe

F. Diary instruction

German	English translation
Liebe/r <name>, herzlichen Dank, dass du an meiner Studie zu Talent management mitwirkst. Deine Gedanken und Erfahrungen sind sehr wertvoll! Bitte schreibe oder zeichne ein Monat lang wöchentlich in dieses Notizbuch – natürlich gerne auch öfter. Bitte führe Buch über Situationen, Gefühle oder Gedanken in der Arbeit, die du mit Talent management verbindest. Bitte fühl dich frei zu schreiben, was du möchtest – alles ist richtig! Deine Einträge werden vertraulich behandelt und nicht auf dich schließen lassen. Nochmals vielen Dank für deinen Input! Liebe Grüße, Judith Judith Widauer – Judith.Widauer@student.shu.ac.uk – [Telefonnummer]	Dear <name>, thank you very much for contributing to the research on Talent management and identity. Your thoughts and experiences are very valuable to this research, future readers and me. Please write or draw into the notebook for four weeks on a weekly basis. Of course, you can also insert more frequent entries. Please include any events, feelings or thoughts at work that you relate to Talent management. Feel free to write what you feel like. Anything is perfectly fine and there is no right or wrong. Your data will be treated confidentially; nobody will be able to relate what you wrote to your person. Thank you again for your contribution! Many regards, Judith Judith Widauer – Judith.Widauer@student.shu.ac.uk – [phone number]

G.   Reflections on the pilot research (diary)

Topic	Ms. Appreciative (Pilot I)	Ms. Passion (Pilot II)
Contact frequency	We had one short conversation during the four weeks of diary writing. The feedback was very positive, a translated part of the message: "I'm getting along fine with writing the diary, and I always carry your small notebook with me. Currently, it is with me in Wiesbaden and discovers the world".	I sometimes met the participant privately, but we did not talk about the research as we were always in a larger group. I asked after two weeks how it was going and unfortunately, she had not written any entries. I offered support but she told me that she just did not have time for this task and that she will definitely fulfill it until the date agreed.
Recommen-dations from respondent	- Carry notebook everywhere - Write down keywords (no special form)	n.a.
Number and character of diary entries	Over the course of four weeks the respondent wrote ten diary entries; she said she carried the light-weight notebook everywhere and made a short keyword note when something about Talent management came to her mind.	After not writing anything in the first two weeks the respondent wrote three entries in the last two weeks of the time frame. The entries are artistic and tell a story, I perceive that she put effort in the entries.
Reflection	The respondent perceived difficulty in assigning situations to Talent management, she was unsure about the scope of Talent management but she said her perception of it has changed through the diary process; I have the impression that this reflection	I wonder why the respondent did not write any entries in the first two weeks. She gave me the feedback that she perceived difficulty in reflecting on situations of Talent management. I think that this might have to do with a development course she

Topic	Ms. Appreciative (Pilot I)	Ms. Passion (Pilot II)
	is exactly what I aim at during the research. The self-selection of incidents for inclusion in the diary can provide additional insights.

Also, the mood / thinking of Talent management of the first and second interview widely differ (more positive in the first, more negative and disappointed in the second). And I wonder whether this is also a result of reflection. | currently attends; there, she is asked by her organization to reflect on situations and her personality. In reading her texts I perceive a certain level of uncertainty and unwillingness to "go deeper" because she sees herself as a self-critical and reflective human being that should work on being less self-critical and more easy going. I have the feeling that it is rather easy for her to open up but that she tries to limit this in order to protect herself. I appreciate that she participates in my study but perceive at the same time that the diary might further restrain her from reaching her goal of being less self-critical and reflective.

This is why I decide to limit the questions in the follow-up interview, as I do not wish to stir up any more frustration. |
| Handover of diary | Interestingly, the respondent wanted to explain the diary entries to me during the handover of the notebook; she wanted me to fully understand the keyword-style entries. I let her steer the process; I felt that through the | In this case, the handover was not accompanied by explanations. But it was totally fine because the character of the entries was different: Ms. Passion wrote long descriptive |

Topic	Ms. Appreciative (Pilot I)	Ms. Passion (Pilot II)
	short (8 minutes) description of the diary entries which I also transcribed afterwards, the entries were much easier to analyze, and I could create in-depth questions for the follow-up interview.	entries that did not require any additional information.
What additional insights did I get through diary?	- Examples for situations that didn't appear in interviews, e.g. a special meeting, example for TM measure, … - Idea about personality of respondent (I think she is very diligent, just writes key words and immerses herself in the task)	I learn that the freedom I grant my participants is shown in the character of diary entries: While Ms. Appreciative wrote about concrete examples of Talent management, Ms. Passion rather summarized what we discussed during the initial interview and wrote a story about one event.

H.   Interview guide for follow-up interview

Question in German	English translation	Concepts that could appear
1.Wie hast du das Tagebuchschreiben empfunden? - *Ggf. Fragen, die vom Tagebuch oder 1. Interview abgeleitet wurden*	How have you experienced writing the diary? *- Potential follow-up questions derived from the diary or initial interview*	Self-awareness
2.Was bedeutet Talent Management für dich heute? Hat sich deine Wahrnehmung von Talent Management über die letzten Wochen verändert? - *Fragen, die vom Tagebuch oder 1. Interview abgeleitet wurden*	What does talent management mean to you today? Has the way you perceive talent management changed over the past weeks? *- Follow-up questions derived from the diary or initial interview*	Talent management
~~Wie ist es dir in den letzten Wochen ergangen, hast du Talent Management bewusst erlebt bzw. hat sich das dein Bewusstsein dafür verändert?~~ ~~- *Ggf. Fragen, die vom Tagebuch oder 1. Interview abgeleitet wurden*~~	~~How have you been in the last weeks, have you consciously experienced Talent management practices or has your awareness changed?~~ ~~*- Potential follow-up questions derived from the diary or initial interview*~~	~~Self-awareness / control vs. agency~~
~~Hat sich generell die Art, wie du über dich selbst denkst, verändert?~~ ~~- *Ggf. Fragen, die vom Tagebuch oder 1. Interview abgeleitet wurden*~~	~~Has the way you think about yourself changed over the past weeks?~~ ~~*- Potential follow-up questions derived from the diary or initial interview*~~	~~Self-awareness~~

3.Würdest du der folgenden Aussage zustimmen: „Talent Management ist eine Belohnung für mich" ?

Falls ja:

- Wofür denkst du, bekommst du diese Belohnung? Ist die Belohnung grundsätzlich für alle erreichbar oder ist sie abhängig von bestimmten Konditionen?
- Was machen diese Gedanken mit dir? Was fühlst du, dass du leisten musst, um das (zB Feedback, Weiterbildung, Karrierechancen) zu bekommen?

Unabhängig von ja/nein Antwort:

- Hast du das Gefühl, dass erwartet wird, dass du Talent Management schätzt?
- Hast du das Gefühl, dass du „nein" sagen könntest? („can vs. must")
- Hast du das Gefühl, dass du dein Verhalten anpasst, um ggf. Talent Management Maßnahmen zu bekommen? (auch: Beobachtung durch andere) | Would you agree to the following statement: "Talent management is a reward for me"?

If yes:

- What do you think, what do you get this reward for? Is the reward accessible to all or does it depend on certain conditions?

- What do these thoughts do to you? What do you feel you have to achieve to get this reward (e.g. feedback, development, career chances)?

Independent from yes/no answer:

- Do you have the feeling that it is expected that you appreciate Talent management?

- Do you have the feeling you could say "no"? (can vs. must, self-management)

- Do you have the feeling that you adapt your behavior to get Talent management measures? (also: observation through others) | Different identity topics, behavior |
| *Wrap-up and goodbye* | | |
| Danke! Das ist das Ende meiner Fragen. Hast du Fragen für mich oder | Thank you! This is the end of my questions. Do you have any questions for me or something you would like to add at the end of our interview? | n.a. |

etwas, dass du noch hinzufügen möchtest?		
Um die Vertraulichkeit zu gewährleisten, werde ich Code-Namen in der Forschungsarbeit verwenden. Hast du einen Namen, den ich für dich verwenden soll?	To guarantee confidentiality I will use code names for the research. Do you have a preferred name that I could use for you?	n.a.
Wie hast du den Forschungsprozess insgesamt empfunden, die zwei Interviews und das Tagebuch? Hat sich dadurch etwas verändert bei dir?	How have you experienced the research process, the two interviews and the diary? Has something changed through that?	Reflection

I. Reflections on the pilot research (follow-up interview)

Topic	Ms. Appreciative (Pilot I)	Ms. Passion (Pilot II)
Reflection	- Interview took place by phone → challenging due to lack of face-to-face contact, difficult to see emotions for me - Respondent trusts me (as she told me about a very precarious situation) - I felt difficulty to be in the shoes of the researcher as we were talking about very emotional topics - Also, I did not want to intimidate her by in-depth questions - I coped with this by trying to stay as neutral as possible, letting her talk and only asking very specific questions, repeating that she did not have to answer all questions	- Interview took place by phone → the respondent highly appreciated the phone conversation, she said it has less of an official interview and more of an informal talk between friends → the respondent said she liked the mix of face-to-face and phone conversation during the two interviews - The situation was very similar as with the first respondent (level of trust, depth of conversation) - Also, with her I shared some of my own experiences and I learn that this helped to establish trust - The mood was very good during the interview, she was very energetic and happy; I learn that interviews in the evening are not as tiring (for her) as I thought
What additional	- Different emotions than in initial interview (reflection	- The ideas and perceptions were quite similar to the

Topic	Ms. Appreciative (Pilot I)	Ms. Passion (Pilot II)
insights did I get through the follow-up interview?	seemed to have had an impact) - Different (wider) definition of Talent management (reflection seemed to have had an impact) - Could test ideas derived from 1st interview and diary (e.g. TM as reward, reward-thinking to change behavior / how employees think about themselves) - Could dive deeper into incidents from diary (e.g. special meeting) - Some ideas from 1st interview were reassured (e.g. connection of hiring decision and responsibility for employee, Talent management as reward)	ones at the beginning of the research (this might show that the respondent continuously reflects on herself and her surrounding) - Could talk about ideas from the first respondent (TM as reward) - Some ideas from 1st interview were reassured - We also talked a lot about the research area before and after the "official" interview and I took notes about this; I can see that these notes are also very valuable and I include them in the transcript as well

J. Sample transcript of initial interview (pilot study)

Transcription of Ms. Appreciative (English translation; original language: German)	Notes of researcher (English)
J.W.: We are talking about Talent management today – there are many different opinions and everything is correct. What is Talent management for you, personally?	Have the impression that respondent feels like at an exam and is a little nervous
	Respondent has thought about this topic before
Ms. A.: (*Laughter*) There are actually different approaches, whether all are talents or some special target group are mainly talents and for me it really is like that, that really all are talents if a company decides for a person, just, because I believe that the company sees something in the person, when the person gets hired and then it's also very clear that this is a talent, that can be accordingly developed and challenged in the areas that might be relevant for the talent – thus, not everybody is offered development and challenged in every area, but I rather believe that the goal is that everybody is in the end, yes (--), supported, I'd say. And that he gets where he might want to develop towards or where he might have to, well, it depends.	Introduces TM as inclusive
	Does a company take over responsibility of Talent management for an employee upon taking the decision to employ him/her?
	Introduces decision and responsibility
	Regards oganization to see strengths of employee → TM as strength-based, focus on development
	Is TM individual? How is the decision taken? According to strengths or according to who shouts loudest?
	Can vs. Must → who decides?
What do you think are the characteristics of people who have talents or who are regarded as talent?	
As everybody is somehow individual, I believe that also talents are individual and that you can't say for sure what is a talent, what isn't a talent. Nevertheless, a talent might probably stand out somehow due to certain features such as some kind of capacity for enthusiasm, the possibility to put yourself in shoes of other people, which is rather social, do you say that?, intelligence (*Laughter*), I'm not quite sure now. But that you somehow, I'd say, can achieve a change of perspective through social intelligence (*Laughter*), but of course also through cognitive intelligence, I'd say, that you're of course also good at specialist topics, that is actually also a form of talent, that you can appropriately manage and purposefully support.	Inclusive / hybrid TM
	Is the interviewee describing herself?
	Note: in English translation I use instead of "oneself" rather "yourself", as it sounds more English
	Enthusiasm, cognitive (introduces „expert knowhow" for the first time) and emotional intelligence
	"Talent" characterized as to be able to develop (developable approach)
What do you think – to what extent does your employer share your opinion?	
(*Laughter*) YES, certainly, certainly in some, YES, all in all yes, my employer, I have to admit, I have never really placed the question just like that, until now, how talents are seen by [Name of employer]. Nevertheless, I rather believe, that also	Introduces transparency of TM as a concept

Transcription of Ms. Appreciative (English translation; original language: German)	Notes of researcher (English)
THERE everybody is supported in the end, according to his skills and also wishes and that it actually also is a comprehensive Talent management, I'd say, not only regarding the upper ten percent or something of a company.	Introduces trust (trusts employer to tell the truth → and to mean well) Developable, inclusive TM Is she introducing TM as positive at own organization?
Based on your definition, would you regard yourself as a talent? (*Laughter*) Based on my own definition? Oh, that's a very difficult question. Or it might not be really difficult, but awkward to answer, because you of course don't wanna praise yourself too much, or rather, this tends to be unpleasant for me. **In case it's awkard-** No, well, all good (*Laughter*). I think yes, because I do claim that everybody is a talent and therefore I'm also included. **What makes you proud at work?** (*Laughter*) What makes me proud at work? (--) I think that I don't convince with good words but with hopefully specialist competence and that others like to work with me. That is for me, well, the interpersonal topics within a company are also important for me and play a role. I don't only go there to do a nine to five job, but because I for one think the topics are exciting and I want to develop in this regard and of course to also contribute my share to it, but also because I, well, appreciate the folks I work with and I do this together with.	Respondent feels embarrassed, laughs but gives diplomatic answers afterwards I perceive she sees herself as „talent" → self-identity Diplomatic answer Compare the respondent's definition of talent: Expert knowhow, emotional intelligence, enthusiasm → defining herself, defining talent concept Might have taken over work morale from her dad (comes up later in the discussion) Social interaction is very important
Going back to Talent management. Please tell me about a personal experience with Talent management in your current role and about how you feel or felt about it. I'm thinking right now, actually it's, I think, when talking about my manager, she's I really think quite a good example, positive example of course, because I think, she does see, where we have strengths, where we have weaknesses and does also give us the freedom there, to develop them accordingly, a-, or rather also grow strengths and well, develop ourselves towards the direction where we of course also want to go, that means, she of course RATHER specifies it on the one side, but on the other side we can shape it and it's within our hands, what I very much	Positive association with TM Active role of employee (responsibility vs. freedom) Developable, inclusive TM

Transcription of Ms. Appreciative (English translation; original language: German)	Notes of researcher (English)
appreciate and where we, so to say, also have from the top, not top-DOWN, but from the manager, somehow really, there, I don't wanna say no borders, but certainly many freedoms, to, well, to develop into a direction where we wanna go, IF we want this. Well, everybody can do it at his own pace, everybody can do this in his area and I do appreciate it very much that we are somehow seen as individual there and are also individually supported.	(Non-) autonomous? Self-TM? Insecure, compare later examples Introduces hierarchy as a concept Who has power? Introduces time as a concept Individual development
And how aware are you of Talent management? Well, I don't think that there's a lot of talk about it, could-, well, it's actually not like that, that one says, one is a high potential and those are supported, well, at least I'm not aware of it (*Laughter*), maybe it's handled like that behind my back, I don't know. But at least it's not communicated like that to everybody and (-), now I've lost the thread- (*Laughter*) **How aware are-** Well, rather indirect, well, not at all that this always stands on the top of the list, but rather, that it's clear that, if you somehow want to develop in an area, you definitely have the chance, maybe not always immediately, but yes, certainly, if you really want it, I perceive it like that.	Transparency Trust (have the impression that respondent trusts employer) Note: in the English translation I use the second person singular instead of the third person singular in many cases; for example, instead of "one wants to develop" I rather use "you want to develop", as it sounds more "English" Transparency Time
May I dig deeper? Yes, with pleasure. **You said, and I find this very interesting, that you manage it yourself and that also your manager manages it respectively; and now you said that, if you really want it, it's possible. Do you have an example to tell, where you've been in such a situation?** Yes. We [name of activity] (*Laughter*) and as (*Laughter*), as I also do realize, that this is nice but that I'd also like to do something else somehow, I had mentioned it accordingly at some point and I have supported [different department], that means, [description cut out due to confidentiality], that was very nice. And then also the topic of [name of task], which concerns a whole different perspective [description] for	Self-management

Transcription of Ms. Appreciative (English translation; original language: German)	Notes of researcher (English)
once, which I do also find very exciting and which is actually also congruent for me and nothing now, which, well, has nothing to do with [name of task] or with what we do. And I have, I'd claim, brought this in on my own and I may also specialize further in the area and develop further (-) and, yes.	Does the responsibility lie with employee? „shouting out loud" TM as reward "may"
Talking about Talent management – which aspects do you experience as rather positive or rather negative? We've talked about it already but maybe you have some addition? Regarding talents- **Or Talent management?** Or regarding Talent management in general, now? Not at all regarding work or myself, but (-)? **As you want, feel free, you can also refer to yourself.** Negative aspects of Talent management (--). I gotta think about it now- **Or positive.** (*Laughter*) Okay, all good, I just have to somehow, I think I'm on the wrong way otherwise (*Laughter*). **Why?** No (-), I think, it sometimes happens that you're immersed in your own thoughts and then you somehow forget a bit what's going on around. Negative aspects (-), it depends, depending on, how you see Talent management, if you don't have the approach that everybody's a talent, but that really only somehow I think the upper ten, twenty, thirty per cent are talents, depending on how you specify it, then I think this is somehow also a statement, it's totally fine and the talents are then those, those that are especially supported, (-) but nevertheless you should, you should actually somehow, when you're a company, look out for everybody, when you decide for a person and there, I find it then (--), well, I simply don't like the approach, that only a few are talents who, in accordance with that, are then particularly developed. Of course, when you are somehow a big company now and	I realize I have to change the question (the transcript is from a pilot study): for future interviews, I changed the open question to a closed question Impression: perceives TM as very positive, has to look for negative aspects Until now, thoughts on TM have been very positive Exclusive TM is perceived as negative Respondent gets emotional (against excl. TM); excl. TM might be against her social understanding of the workplace Note: again using "you" instead of "one" Introduces „elites" as a concept Decision for individual

Transcription of Ms. Appreciative (English translation; original language: German)	Notes of researcher (English)
then you're in contact with succession management or something like that, then it's of course a significant aspect that you have to think who to place on which position and that not everybody fits to every position, this is out of question and there, it certainly makes sense, too. But I find, as said before, that in such medium sized smaller companies like ours now, I find, I find it nicer, well, it suits me personally more. Although only answered in part but- (*Laughter*)	Emotional (against excl. TM) Links exclusive TM to larger enterprises and processes It's interesting that the conceptualization of TM is important to her; that it is important for her to see an overlap of her and her organization's sense-making of talent; suddenly, the discussion becomes personal and emotional
That's fine, that's wonderful. I have a question that might be a bit strange, but I would ask anyways, to practice. Yes. **If you could choose an animal to compare it to Talent management, which one would that be?** (*Laughter*) Maybe to an ant. Well, I haven't quite thought about it now, but simply, because ants always do work in teams, what I find nice, and they simply achieve an incredible amount, although they are so small and use their talents, I believe, extremely well to achieve this, what they want to have (*Laughter*). **Nice! And-** Well, when I see them crawling the in the forest or also not in the forest, but somewhere, where it's not so nice, on a terrace or so, then I would portray it I think (-) just like that. **And what do the ants build then?** What do they build? It really depends, either they feed themselves, what is somehow also important the food intake for such an ant, to further, to further develop oneself and of course to further be able to reproduce and I think, ants also build nests or hole, hole?, oh God, that is embarrassing now (*Laughter*).	Note: this is my first pilot interview Interesting: she answers without hesitating / thinking for a moment! Emotional (for incl. TM), relates story to herself again; social, caring understanding Could assume that good TM (= use all available talents) leads to good performance I wonder about the individual aspect of ants, how to distinguish individuals? Is this a metaphor for work (sometimes it's a pleasant environment, sometimes not)? Focus on development, comparison might show urgency (how important her own development is for surviving)
In which situations does Talent management or such processes in a company influence the way you act at work?	This question is too difficult and is rephrased for future interviews (this is the pilot)

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Should I give an example?	I engage in the discussion by giving an example; I learn from the field work that it is beneficial to share stories about myself. However, I must take care not to influence the respondent's thinking; I am a little disappointed that she took over my example, won't do that in future interviews, better rephrase the question, or give very personal examples that cannot be taken over just like that.
Yes, I'd appreciate it.	
An example would be, that one participates in a training and applies the content again or one has a coaching session or something like that.	
Yes, yes, that is actually a very good example, I can take it just like that, too (*Laughter*). Yes, well, by all means, we do have trainings. Some [of the learnings] you can probably put into practice better than others, as it's always the case, but it's by all means good, when you, I think, are trained and it also creates sensitivity to what extent you can further cultivate your talent or also, to be especially careful, in a certain area, like for example, [examples of skills, cut out for confidentiality], which should be developed further, I know that I continue to pay attention to it and accordingly perfect it.	What / who creates sensitivity? Trainer vs. self The role of feedback Positive association with TM
And does it seem to you that you now, in the specific job, when you're [job description, taken out for data protection], that you apply something there or that you behave differently because you got something out of Talent management?	
(-) Yes, yes. I also think that especially regarding professionalism, that, and of course also experience, that you collect over time, that you're really able to apply the things you learn, of course also the whole expert knowhow, [description, cut out for confidentiality] (-) but then really something like communication with [description, cut out for confidentiality], the appearance, also, that one is actually perceived accordingly or taken seriously, such things ARE important aspects now I think.	Talent = Expert knowhow? I have the impression she attributes knowhow and experience gained in a very specific field to herself (this is interesting because later, she wants to break free from this attribution) Appearance
How have you developed to be taken seriously or to be perceived?	
Well, my approach is always to be taken seriously or to be perceived via competence and also, to be taken seriously [*use of synonyms in German*], simply, because I'm not a person who convinces I think with good words, that is simply not my strength and can't appear that well, and that's why	Does expert knowhow lead to good standing with client? "not-me" positions

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it's important for me, that I can simply convince through THIS there and I hope that I really manage to do so quite well.	
What do you think that your work colleagues think about you? (*Laughter*) Well, I think, that most of them quite like to work together with me, that I'm there, I think, yes, also, I hope (*Laughter*), also very nice and sociable. I think, if somebody wastes his opportunity, then it's not that easy at all, to re- (*Laughter*), that is also something, I got to work on, that I don't always immediately have an opinion which is then, probably, difficult to reverse, but I do really think that I'm not that kind of person, who clings to everything or who always has to be the center of attention [description, cut out for confidentiality], but that I LIKE to share this role – with whoever, yes, (-) and I challenge them.	Social-identity Social environment (to get on well) at work is important for her What is her role in TM? Does she see TM as a reward for colleagues that work together with her – or for herself as well? Is this reward accessible to everybody or does it depend on certain conditions (e.g. positive opinion of co-worker)? What does this thinking do to her/ what does she feel to deliver in order to be rewarded with e.g. feedback, TM measures, role sharing in projects?
Now you've told me about the perception of your colleagues – would you say that your friends and family have the same perception of you, perceive you similarly or does this differ? I think it's really quite similar. Reliability for example is very important to me, not only now in the company, but also especially with my friends and my family, that if somebody has agreed somehow to something, that he also adheres to it, except for when something comes in the way like sickness or something, but no, if somebody somehow carelessly agrees on an appointment and, yes, then we see whether we meet or not, that is NOT my approach and this is sometimes hard for me, when people are, well, a little bit more confused, I have to admit, I almost get a little nervous, because I'm someone, who likes to plan very much and really with a lot [of things], be it in private or also professional [life], always planning, (-) which also makes it of course sometimes inflexible, I also know [that]. (-) but I think, it is really similar.	Does she reward reliability in private life? What does this say about her understanding of performance and reward? Does this mean that she always adheres to the rules? What are the rules? She is a woman of principles (self & social-identity)
Do you think that Talent management or feedback from Talent management influences how you think about yourself?	

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YES, well, I think, feedback is indeed something very important and that's why I'm always open and think, that we actually get this way too rarely. I would even really wish it to be more frequent, simply, because I think, only through that you can somehow get something out of it and also give it some thought, how you wanna do it in the future, or rather, what you would like to do differently. And because of this it would be really important to me, OR IS actually really important to me, that you get it from time to time. Doesn't have to, can also be positive, doesn't have to be negative, but that you simply get some response, well, to different points, be it in the [description of task] or interpersonal or whatsoever.	Positive association with TM How could you get feedback more often? What do you think you would have to deliver? I remember the example of ants → she needs development (feedback) to grow, to nourish
I perceive that feedback is very important for you-	
Yes.	
That means, when we go back to the question again now: Talent management – does it rather have positive or negative aspects, how would you classify feedback?	
It depends how you give it (*Laughter*). Well, in general I find feedback always positive really, it of course mustn't (-) get somehow too personal, well, too hurtful. Yes.	
In general, how has the way in which you think about yourself changed over the course of your work life? Noo, well, I rather think, that you actually get to know yourself in a completely different way, also especially, because this is now somehow my first job after university and you also get to know again very different compo-, or, well, perspectives of yourself: for one thing, what is important to you, how the own mode of work is, how structured you might be or also might NOT be, whether a lot of things slip through your fingers (*Laughter*), well, I don't think this is me, I do have most things on my radar. But nevertheless I somehow think that you rather learn a lot again and also make more intense experiences (-), every person rather has his own personality and that is also nice in the company, that somehow so many personalities come together and these are then harmonized appropriately, or, not harmonized, but these of course have to work together and get on and I think it's nice, because you simply get to know so many different perspectives and also modes of	Engages in reflection Sees herself as a good performer (talent) Individualism, positive emotions Passive – no influence on harmonization of personalities? Can employees keep their personalities?

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work and you can actually also copy something from time to time and use something for yourself, that's a fine thing, because you didn't have this at university.	Focus on development through peer learning, positive emotions Positive to keep personality
(Smalltalk about time, next appointment, we see that we have more than enough time left to finish our conversation) **Do you feel fine until now?** Yes yes, I only have somehow a sore throat, this has nothing to do with this at all (*Clears her throat*). **Yes, have a sip of water.** Nooo, it's ok (*Clears her throat*). I think, this is simply still the morning (*Laughter*). *(Smalltalk)*	
Talking about your role at work now – what suits you well in your role at work? Which activities do you enjoy or perceive as fun? I am a [name of area] consultant, that means, we have, or I, I'm talking only simply about myself now (-), we, or I, [description of work], and I think, the mix is good for me, because I don't ALWAYS HAVE to talk, I also can from time to time, [describes task], and that's I think actually somehow quite a nice harmony of these two points, that you don't only, I'd say now, [describes task], but also, that you of course somehow share your knowledge for one thing through [close description of work] through that, well, getting to know processes, getting to know [description, cut out for confidentiality], how is it done elsewhere, that I find a big added value, which I enjoy very much and which is for me really somehow, well, a, simply a nice interplay of these different points, aspects and through that it also never gets boring, because in the end no day is the same, but I always have the feeling, despite of [length of service] years, that I'm there, that I still somehow develop, sometimes faster, sometimes less fast, but that's also not bad, because sometimes a recovery phase is also good, where you simply strengthen your knowhow and not directly create new knowhow, I'd say. And I think that is actually a very varied and comprehensive job.	From here, I have the impression that she is more relaxed (might be because of the topic of roles or because we're midway through the interview) → that's why I try different sequence of questioning with the second pilot participant Identifies strongly with the organization Expert knowhow – respondent enjoys it Detailed descriptions of work are taken out of this transcript in the Appendix of the thesis for confidentiality reasons Time as a concept Notion of development appears again

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And what would you like to change if you could?	Introduces expert knowhow as negative for the first time
I have the feeling, I'm a little bit of a Fachidiot [*note: Fachidiot consists of two words, „subject" and „idiot". Fachidiot is an expert in a certain field who is not able to see beyond its limits.*] (*Laughter*), this is mean, but it is- you wanted to know what I want to change. Simply because I've been working in [work area] forever, which I consider a very nice area because [detailed description on reasons why the work area appeals to her], but especially [specialization] is not my type of thing, I have to honestly say, it doesn't interest me, I'm not [description of role], I realize that, it simply isn't one of my strengths. I can do [description, cut out for confidentiality], no problem, but it's not my passion. And I would prefer to go deeper into [other specialization], I simply find this considerably more exciting and, but there I realize that my hands are partly tied, simply because [name of employer] does not have the core competency there now and yes, this isn't the objective either of course, but the objective is of course, that you do the [specialization] projects and those are as said before also nice, because this is something you know, you're familiar with, but sometimes it's also good, to get input that's a little different.	I question whether other people in her organization see her like that as well? Or do they see her as somebody to call for other topics? Does this role transfer to her personal environment?

Introduces wish for different direction of career

Introduces time as negative concept

Enthusiasm/Passion (one of key concepts of talents for respondent) seems to be missing for current role

Talks about her personal dreams and uses the third person when explaining the direction of the company (third person in German corresponds to second person in English in the translation) → the organization seems to influence the individual role at work and her work-related social-identity |
| But I must not complain at all, I mean, I do get this through the [name of task], and I also very much enjoy this, but I would also find even more [describes desired task/specialization] not unspecta-, well, would also find this nice, let's put it like this. But, everything fine (*Laughter*). | Focus on development

Double-comparative → emotions involved |
| **What do you think – what expectations do people have for your role at work?** | |
| That I'm the expert [*note: masculine form in German*] for [work area]. That I'm the one so to speak, that now has been there the longest time and through this is automatically pushed in this role. (--) But which's also fine, because the work is not new to me (-), I only realize, that it doesn't draw me to this role much at all, sometimes, that I would not necessarily need it at all. | Influence on identity? How does this shape the image of self?

Others take decision (passive voice)

Push vs. pull |
| **And how do you know about expectations towards your role, or this expert role?** | Employee talk (Performance management) is introduced as part of TM |

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We always have employee talks once a year, or twice a year, and there this is clearly defined, what is expected from me, but also what I expect from the company, on the other side. And there it was clearly communicated, that this is my role, which I already have, towards which I do not necessarily have to develop therefore, because actually I do have it already, I would say. And this is GOOD (-), but I then somehow miss a little bit the further development there. Well now, specifically, concerning the [work area] expert, I mean, I still do other things as well, therefore, yes (*Laughter*).	Passive voice The most important aspect of TM for respondent is missing (development) Does she try to comfort / explain to herself?
Who has decided on this specific role for you? I can tell you that: my manager.	Self-management of TM?
Now, there's an interesting question regarding the topic of careers. To what extent do you or your employer or your manager steer your career or which aspects of your career? How would you consider this? (-) I think, we both steer a little bit, it isn't, that only me or only my manager are in charge there, especially, because here the line or the hierarchies also become, I think, blurred a little bit and you don't only have your manager as contact person or you COULD also always generally place it, what of course wouldn't be the proper way to go I think, but one could, and sometimes it does also come to it. (-) And, well, as said before, I have to clearly communicate, where I want to go and also what I expect from my employer and I also do that, that's the reason for the compromise with [name of task], but it's of course also clearly communicated by the employer, that because there's simply nobody else in [name of department], clear-, or not many experts, that it's clear, that I stay in this field by all means and continue to develop further.	Possibly characteristic for this organization size Proper way – woman of principles (part of self-identity, social-identity) Introduces as task as compromise that she has introduced as a positive example for self-management previously Can it be justified to force somebody into a role at work? Focus on development, which is not there anymore; misses the reward of development
And in general regarding career: Career as a concept can be seen in an organization or also simply in general regarding the plan for life or the next five years- Well, THIS I have on the r- (-) (*Laughter*). **Yes?**	Responsibility for own career

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This I have- well, of course, nobody else can have this for me. **No?** Of course, yes, well, I'd say, there are many people, who of course also have expectations, also within a family, I'd say, one sometimes does have to think about it, too. But this is now I think a, simply a step too far, it sometimes does also depend on, how you grew up, I'd say. But, nooo, otherwise I'd say, that I feel, that I can actually steer it on my own and when I feel, I need somehow some other input, then I can mention it appropriately. Well, I do also see MYSELF in the lead.	Introduces expectations as a concept How strong is the family?
I'm interested in what you said with the family. What did you mean? (Laughter) No, but I'd say, one does have- well, that is now I think off-topic. **Should I turn the voice recorder off?** Noo, noo, all good, it's nothing super-personal now, but, well, I actually do think, well, I also don't mean this in a mean way, because I love my family, but I think, that of course there are expectations within a family, that sometimes aren't communicated at all, but they are simply there, indirectly, without ever being expressed I think, that is for example, I'd say, in my case it was clear, that I'll have to do my a-level by all means. That was not up for discussion AT ALL- now it's also- it was not up for discussion for ME either or for my siblings, but I rather think, that somehow it was always indirectly there, because both of my parents did their a-levels, both studied at university and also did it well and it was somehow, that was expected, yes, I'd say, that was always expected a little bit, it was actually out of question, that I don't do it, I'd say. Or I had, before I had started to study [at university], I had even once thought, to do an apprenticeship, I had actually applied for a [name of work area] apprenticeship, because I thought well, that is a solid education, you can't do anything wrong about it, you already collect professional experience and then you can actually add a university education afterwards, just like that, this only takes two years in the end, if you have [your] a-level. There	reflection Family expectations

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I thought, well, that's a good idea, I'll just do it now. I had even my apprenticeship and EVERYTHING, and I still think, that I somehow indirectly felt from my parents, that it's completely fine and I can do it, if I want it, but I think, they would prefer me to study at university. And you're actually just aware of it, that this is somehow an expectation regarding also of course career and career [*use of two synonyms in German*] and so on, and in the end I actually did after all- I didn't begin my apprenticeship and I did my [name of specialization] studies. And they didn't butt in at all now or so, that was actually also my decision of course and there they would- I think, they would have completely accepted it if I had done this [name of work area] apprenticeship, but I think, they preferred that I didn't do it, I'd say. That, well, they have never told me anything, what I do, what I study, where I study, I was really always allowed and free to choose, and I fully appreciated it but nevertheless I think there are always indirectly these expectations, that you- that are never expressed, but you simply feel it, well, what one should do, or could, or what would be good for oneself. And in hindsight I am also thankful, that I've done it just like that, how it went, but nevertheless I rather think, that it probably wasn't somehow steered by me, but also somehow a bit by the expectations, that are simply there. Well, as said before, I'm happy, that I studied [at university] and didn't do this apprenticeship, because I wouldn't have seen me there at all in hindsight, but it's actually quite funny (*Laughter*). (-) Well, I think, that this really somehow your way somehow, there are people, that are completely rebellious, who completely decide against it then, but I think, when one is a bit the type, that one doesn't want to put [people's] backs up- or doesn't like it so much to put [people's] backs up, then one sometimes follows this way then, which is in the end already from others a bit, well, I don't know (-), it was like that for me.	How to handle expectations (active / passive): see expert role Does it depend on who you are in how far one is influenced by expectations? Own active or rather passive behavior → how does it influence the role of TM in your life?
Yes, I also know this very well.	
(*Laughter*) It's not the worst at all, I think, they know one (-) best, I'd say, the parents and thus, it's actually also something nice, but, well, sometimes it's funny.	Justification
That means, regarding the topic of career your parents-	

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Not necessarily, but I think, it's most important for my parents as a general rule, that I'm happy, and how, that's completely all the same to them, that's- I also find that nice and I appreciate it very much and that at first it's most important, that you're happy and that you're satisfied and that you're healthy, that this is the most important at first and (--) then (-) it's actually all the same to them now, if I make a great career or not, whereas (--) I would actually say now, that my Dad was actually very successful in his job and I think you always bear this in mind a bit and (-) there you saw of course, he worked somehow a whole lot and you have- you also notice a bit, that you gotta work a lot, to be successful, I'd say that now. He didn't have a nice to five job and worked, I'd say now, worked more, therefore, it's not unfamiliar for me at all, that one somehow (--), that you somehow also have days, that are longer, or that somehow you also gotta open the laptop on the weekend once if all else fails, but what I don't do (*Laughter*), but what of course also has happened once, ONCE and that this is not terrible or that I don't directly say, it isn't possible or I don't do it or something like that. But that I'm actually I think quite open and also do it then or that [further example of activity] or something like that. I usually don't do it, but (*Laughter*) it has also happened and it's not bad for me now. And I think, this is simply that, what one also knows from the family, the attitude towards work. Yes. Completely off-topic now (*Laughter*). **No, honestly, it's not off-topic.** Okay. Not that your whole questionnaire- (*Laugher*)	Influence of parents on career choice Influence of role model (father) Does the father's work understanding and behavior influence her attitude towards work?
Thank you! This is the end of my questions. Do you have any questions for me or something you would like to add at the end of our interview? Nope, not at the moment. **Good. Thank you very much.**	