



## STEM selves: Women's identity projects and their assessment of future employers in technical fields

Kaitlin Appleby<sup>a,1</sup>, Bernadette Bullinger<sup>b,\*,1</sup>, Anna Schneider<sup>a,1</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Innsbruck, Austria

<sup>b</sup> IE University, Spain



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### ABSTRACT

In this paper, we take an identity project perspective on careers to explore how job seekers assess potential employers. Identity projects are individuals' self-definitions in the light of their career development and personal aspirations and have the potential to further our understanding of careers. Drawing on focus group discussions of women seeking employment in STEM, we find four identity positioning strategies through which the women assess future employers. Our analysis illustrates the role of organizational images for shaping and realizing individuals' identity projects. We contribute to research on identity projects by extending the concept's focus to include job seekers as external organizational stakeholders and provide insight into their identity positioning. Furthermore, our study enhances the understanding of organizational image in the context of employee recruitment by outlining how individuals position themselves in relation to the organizational images they construct when reflecting on their identity projects and on the institutional context. Overall, we develop a more nuanced approach to understanding women's interpretations of organizational identity claims (e.g., gender diversity claims) and thus extend current theorizing on recruiting women to STEM.

Women continue to be dramatically underrepresented (Beede et al., 2011; Eurostat, 2015) in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) occupations today despite the efforts of governments and organizations to target their recruitment (Avery & McKay, 2006; Casper, Wayne, & Manegold, 2013). Often referred to as the leaky pipeline phenomenon (Holmes & O'Connell, 2007), women are continuing to leave STEM in various career stages. Understanding women's career aspirations and the professional aspects of their identities in technical fields could provide insight into this continuing trend. An emerging stream of research on careers as individual identity projects captures the connection between career aspirations and individual identity and in light of this work, we explore how women seeking jobs in STEM assess the suitability of potential employers to further develop their identity projects.

Identity projects are the self-definitions of individuals based on their continuing personal development and future aspirations, and are therefore closely linked to individuals' careers (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; Lok, 2010; Meyer & Hammerschmid, 2006). Considering identity and identity projects is crucial for research aiming to understand careers that include role transitions (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Ibarra, 1999) and adjustment to organizational change and constraints (Beech,

Gilmore, Cochrane, & Greig, 2012; Mallett & Wapshott, 2012) as well as choices between career paths and professional orientations (Meyer & Hammerschmid, 2006) and self-understandings (Lok, 2010). Modern careers are being conceptualized not as linear series of stages, but as comprising multiple transitions, choices and constraints. They are increasingly platforms for individual self-expression and "obvious sites for realizing the project of the self" (Grey, 1994, p. 482). Besides taken-for-granted values, norms, and beliefs from the institutional context (Kraatz & Block, 2017), organizations, as vehicles for careers, play a powerful role in shaping and realizing individuals' identity projects and have therefore been considered as cultural resources for individuals (Dejordi & Creed, 2016). Identity projects, careers, and organizations are thus understood as interdependent concepts through which individuals craft who they are and what they aspire to be. Concerning careers in STEM, studies have investigated the identity projects of women working in the field who, due to their marginalized status (Hatmaker, 2013), understand the professional aspects of their identity differently than men (Cech, 2015; Dryburgh, 1999; Ely, 1994; Faulkner, 2000; Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2017).

However, the focus of research on identity projects has so far been on organizational members' identity projects, neglecting the identity

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [bernadette.bullinger@ie.edu](mailto:bernadette.bullinger@ie.edu) (B. Bullinger).

<sup>1</sup> All authors contributed equally and are listed in alphabetical order.

projects of external stakeholders inhabiting the same institutional context (Dejordy & Creed, 2016). As potential employees and organizational members, job seekers constitute an important group of organizations' external stakeholders (Lievens, 2007; Martin, Gollan, & Grigg, 2011). Our limited understanding of job seekers' identity projects presents a problem because it restricts the explanatory power of identity projects to only *current employees* of an organization. In order to understand modern careers that include multiple transitions and decision making in ambiguous plural environments (Lok, 2010; Meyer & Hammerschmid, 2006), it is vital to explore job seekers' identity projects. By doing so, we can learn more about how and why job seekers pursue employment in particular jobs, careers paths, and organizations, and how their decisions are informed by as well as reproduce institutional and organizational level norms, values, and beliefs (Dejordy & Creed, 2016). Organizations, particularly those attempting to attract talent, are especially interested in how potential applicants evaluate perspective employers in order to better tailor their recruitment efforts. We therefore utilize the case of women searching for employment in STEM fields to investigate how individuals' identity projects relate to their assessment of potential employers.

Addressing this question, we complement the concept of identity projects with research on organizational images (Gatewood, Gowan, & Lautenschlager, 1993; Hatch & Schultz, 1997). Organizational images play an important role in individuals' assessment of employers (Carter & Highhouse, 2013; Lievens, Van Hoye, & Anseel, 2007) and employer branding material is one medium job seekers engage with to construct an image of the employing organization. Organizational images – based on interpretations of identity claims communicated by organizations in employer branding material (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006; Whetten & Mackey, 2002) – serve as cultural resources for job seekers' identity projects (Dejordy & Creed, 2016; Rindova, Dalpiaz, & Ravasi, 2011). Empirically, we explore job seekers' identity projects by utilizing qualitative data from focus groups with 27 early-career women in the fields of STEM. In addition to an open discussion of career identity projects, we used employer branding material in the form of three company descriptions from actual job advertisements (job ads) to stimulate discussions about potential employers.

Within our participants' identity projects, we find three career-related identity project orientations that we refer to as *career-centered*, *family-centered*, and *flexibility-centered* orientations. These orientations relate to the women's use of four different identity positioning strategies that aid in their assessment of the suitability of organizations as cultural resources for their identity project development. For this assessment, our results show that participants constructed organizational images based on organizational identity claims in job ads. Given a certain identity project orientation and whether they constructed the organizational image as in line or challenging the dominant career model in the field, our participants used different identity positioning strategies (i.e., *finding an ally*, *embracing the status quo*, *defying monopolization*, and *rejecting the game*).

With this study, we contribute to research on identity projects by extending its focus to include job seekers as an important group of organizations' external stakeholders and their identity positioning (Czarniawska, 2013; Ossenkop, Vinkenburg, Jansen, & Ghorashi, 2015). Specifically, we discuss how women, by drawing on their identity project orientations, position themselves in relation to constructed organizational images. We conclude that identity positioning in the assessment of future employers is more complex than previously conceptualized (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001). Furthermore, our study enhances the understanding of organizational image in the context of employee recruitment by highlighting that individuals construct organizational images based on claims in employer branding material and that these constructions are linked to the institutional context in which organizations operate.

Our discussion of the importance of job seekers' perceptions affirms that companies' employer branding activities need to take the identity projects of their targeted audience into account. We also extend current theorizing on recruiting women to STEM as we develop a more precise approach to understanding women's interpretations of gender diversity claims that were previously thought to attract women to male-dominated fields (Avery & McKay, 2006). By demonstrating the variation of women's identity projects, this study is a potential springboard for future research on how employers could better capture the heterogeneous aspirations of women pursuing careers in STEM in order to more effectively recruit them and lessen the effects of the leaky pipeline.

## 1. Identity projects of women in STEM

Within the broader academic interest in identity (Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008; Cornelissen, Haslam, & Balmer, 2007; Pratt et al., 2016), current research increasingly discusses identity projects as "individuals' definitions of their selves in the light of their ongoing development and imagined future" (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007, p. 713). This line of research stresses that identity is a temporary outcome of individuals' efforts to position themselves thus making identity an ongoing reflexive project of people rather than a static quality. Identity in this sense is understood as an on-going, life-long project and not an achievement (Mallett & Wapshott, 2012; Watson, 2008). Building on this perspective, careers can also be understood as individual identity projects (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; Grey, 1994). Career in this perspective is oriented towards meeting long-term, self-fulfillment goals of individuals (Grey, 1994). This longitudinal orientation links the individuals' past, present, and future through the concept of career as "a vehicle for the self to 'become'" (Grey, 1994, p. 481). The concept of identity projects it is crucial for understanding careers because work is a central aspect of people's lives and this concept aims to capture how individuals make sense of their past and future.

As identity projects unfold in ever more changing and ambiguous environments that provide plural, often equally legitimate motives for actors (also referred to as plural institutional logics or institutional pluralism, see Lok, 2010; Meyer & Hammerschmid, 2006), a multitude of cultural resources, or taken-for-granted values, norms, and beliefs, might serve as a toolkit for individuals to draw on in their identity projects (Rindova et al., 2011). This means that when individuals are answering the question "who am I?", they consider and build on pre-established "social or 'discursive personas'" (Watson, 2008, p. 123). Which resources actors use and how they use them depends on their past experiences and their present context (Rindova et al., 2011).

Individuals' identity projects are impacted if they belong to a group that is underrepresented and marginalized such as women in STEM (i.e., the professional and technical support occupations in computer science, mathematics, engineering, and the life and physical sciences, see also Langdon, McKittrick, Beede, Khan, & Doms, 2011). In the gendered environment of STEM, the masculine norms and continued dominance of men lead to unique ways in which women negotiate the professional aspects of their identities (Ely, 1994; Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2017). Kvande (1999) finds that women in engineering position themselves in reference to men and male norms in order to assimilate into the taken-for-granted values, norms, and beliefs of this institutional environment. Because STEM organizations are male dominated, she argues that women must "negotiate whether the meaning of gender should be sameness or difference from men", thus, many women adopt a "sameness strategy" to be considered similar to their male coworkers (Kvande, 1999, p. 306).

This dichotomous and gendered nature of the professional aspects of women's identities in STEM is further explored by Faulkner (2000, 2007) who finds that in engineering and software development, the identities of "technical" and "social" are associated and valued along

gender lines with a technical identity associated with men and being more highly valued than a social identity associated with women. In a similar study, Cech (2015) shows that women and men in engineering develop professional aspects of their identities differently with women valuing technical leadership less and social consciousness more than men. These studies underscore the importance of cultural resources in women's identity projects within STEM by highlighting that due to taken-for-granted values, norms, and beliefs in this specific institutional context the professional aspects of their identities are not valued in the same way that men's are. However, belonging to a marginalized group is not the only influencing factor in individuals' identity projects.

According to Alvesson and Kärreman (2007); Lok (2010), and Meyer and Hammerschmid (2006), the organizations one works for also impact individuals' identity projects. Haas, Keinert-Kisin, Koeszegi, and Zedlacher (2012) and Hatmaker (2013) illustrate how organizations integrate and reproduce the taken-for-granted values, norms, beliefs from the institutional context of STEM in a way that challenges the professional aspects of women's identity and leads them to enacting strategies in order to cope with workplace interactions. As this research illustrates, organizations embody a set of values (i.e., equality or top-performance) and take certain positions on social issues (e.g., for or against the advancement of women) and define what kind of person it takes to be successful there. In this way, organizations inform individuals' identity project goals and expectations for careers as they reduce the complexity of the plural environment they themselves are a part of. Therefore organizations serve as a cultural resource for individuals to advance their identity projects Dejorjy and Creed (2016).

Describing organizations as cultural resources for individual identity projects does not imply that all organizations benefit all groups equally, as studies in the context of STEM illustrate, or that identity projects are deliberate choices. Watson (2008), p. 129), for instance, describes identity projects as a "struggle to come to terms with and, within limits, to influence the various social identities which pertain to [actors] in the various milieus in which they live their lives". Relatedly, Grey (1994), in his study of accountants' careers in a highly reputed company, is interested in exploring the boundary between a company providing resources for their employees' identity projects and controlling their identity projects. According to his results, the career structures that companies prescribe in the form of promotions, incentives and dismissals can serve as "a vehicle or vessel for [career] aspirations" (Grey, 1994, p. 494) and thereby subtly control employees' priorities and commitment to the company. Alvesson and Kärreman (2007) for instance find that employees of a management consultancy firm used an organization's human resource management (HRM) systems and practices as an orientation for developing employees' identity projects with the company. They pointed out that the organizational identity that HRM expresses in its activities provides "a facilitating and controlling structure for these projects" (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007, p. 721).

Due to these studies, we have rich insight into the role organizations play as a cultural resource when individuals construct their identity projects in environments characterized by institutional pluralism. However, individuals' careers also – and increasingly – involve transitions, not only within organizations (Ibarra, 1999) but also between organizations (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010) and from education to their first employment in the field after their studies (Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006). Looking for employment is an especially critical step in STEM women's identity projects as studies indicate that many women do not pursue, do not continue to pursue, or struggle to pursue careers in STEM. While the growing literature on employer branding illustrates that applicants are a crucial, non-member stakeholder group for organizations (Lievens, 2007; Martin et al., 2011), research on identity projects usually focus on individuals after they enter a specific organization. However, in order to gain a more complete picture of

careers in modern societies, the concept of identity projects requires a better understanding of the cultural resources that job seekers draw on to develop their identity projects. We address the so far neglected group of job seekers by asking how individuals' identity projects relate to their assessment of potential future employers in the case of women looking for employment in STEM fields.

## 2. Organizational identities and images as resources in job seekers' identity projects

The previous section argues that organizations are an important cultural resource for employees' identity projects. As organizational members, employees may draw on organizational identities as central, distinctive, and enduring characteristics of an organization (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Dejorjy & Creed, 2016). For example, HRM practices such as feedback, promotions, and training activities can reinforce how employees perceive organizational identity and also impact their identity projects (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). Being interested in job seekers' identity projects, we also see organizations as an essential cultural resource for individuals, however, not in the form of a shared understanding of the "personality" of an organization through its members (i.e., organizational identity), but in the form of an object of external assessment of organizations as potential employers. This latter perspective on organizations as "(external) stakeholders' perceptions" (Ravasi, 2016, p. 65) has been termed organizational image (Balmer & Greyser, 2003; Hatch & Schultz, 1997, 2000; Ravasi, 2016).

Studies on recruitment have highlighted the important role of organizational images for individuals' assessment of organizations as attractive and to subsequently apply for employment in their chosen company (Carter & Highhouse, 2013; Gatewood et al., 1993; Lievens et al., 2007; Rynes, Bretz, & Gerhart, 1991). This research tradition so far focuses on quantitatively determining the attractiveness of organizational image dimensions, for instance, the specific instrumental or symbolic dimensions of an employers' image such as the structure of work or the emotions related to doing work (Lievens et al., 2007). Treating organizational image as an objective signal that organizations send and not as a perception of job seekers neglects the importance of organizational images for job seekers' own identity projects. As Dejorjy and Creed (2016) illustrate with the example of a newly graduated PhD with job offers from a Jesuit university and a secular and wealthy private university, job seekers' assessment of the attractiveness of an organizational image crucially depend on their own identity projects as, for instance as either a practicing catholic or as a purely career-driven atheist. In order to develop a career, job seekers likely choose to embrace organizational images that they assume would "serve their personal identity projects better than others" (Dejorjy & Creed, 2016, p. 375).

As is implied in the above example, the image of the organization that external stakeholders such as job seekers perceive is likely to be influenced by what organizations communicate about themselves, e.g., slogans, images, and rhetoric on websites or from employer branding information such as job ads. Organizations have a strong interest in influencing external audiences' sensemaking about who they are. Organizational identity claims are such attempts of sensegiving (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006; Whetten & Mackey, 2002). Organizational identity claims are expressed by organizational spokespersons such as founders, leaders, or public relations experts (Bullinger, 2018) and act as sets of values and characteristics that position organizations as distinct from one another (Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000), yet also as legitimate inhabitants of their institutional context (Dejorjy & Creed, 2016; Phillips, Tracey, & Kraatz, 2016; Whetten & Mackey, 2002). In this paper, we use the term "constructing organizational images" to refer to the way job seekers interpret and perceive organizational identity

claims of future employers. In line with the social constructionist perspective we take, we would argue that the same organizational identity claims can lead to very different constructions of organizational images based on the individual and different social and institutional contexts. For instance, a male engineer might be unaware of stereotypes in STEM and therefore construct a specific company's organizational image as professional, while a female engineer might see it as discriminating. We are consequently not interested in uncovering how *companies* use identity claims to influence what audiences perceive as their organizational image, but in how *job seekers* subjectively construct organizational images by interpreting organizational identity claims and how they use those images for their own identity projects (Ainsworth & Grant, 2012).

In light of this research and based on Dejordy and Creed (2016) call for additional research on the non-member inhabitants of institutional contexts, we seek to better understand the identity projects of job seekers within a specific context, namely early-career women in STEM. In the following, we explore how these women's identity projects influence their assessment of an organization to meet their identity project needs.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Data sources

To explore STEM women's identity projects and their assessment of future employers, we draw on qualitative data. For our study, we conducted six focus groups with a total of 27 women from three different Austrian universities. For the universities, we use the pseudonyms University, Technical University, and University of Applied Sciences. All of the women were enrolled in or had graduated from technical study programs such as engineering, chemistry, physics, or information systems. Table 1 provides an overview of focus groups and information on focus group participants. We focused on study participants in their early career stages because, due to their limited experience in the field and their typically small professional networks, job ads were crucial sources of information for them about potential employers and organizational images (Collins & Stevens, 2002).

We targeted universities and university departments with specialized STEM study programs. At two universities, the career centers endorsed our study and helped us to contact current female students and at one university, the head of the center for gender competence helped us with this task. The career and gender competence centers sent out emails to female STEM students informing them about the general topic of our study and asked them to sign up for focus groups. At one university, we were additionally able to draw on our own network of women in STEM study programs and we invited these women to

participate in the focus groups. We also asked women in our network to inform other women who might be interested in joining the focus group, similar to the commonly used snowball sampling technique (Patton, 2002). While we made it clear that we were only looking for women studying in STEM programs, we described the focus group topic merely as related to employer branding and are therefore confident that we kept any selection bias small. We offered free drinks and snacks and included a brief input at the end of each focus group, where two of the authors provided general information and tips for applications.

These techniques resulted in study participants from a broad range of STEM study programs and with experience in different sectors. All of the participants had completed or were in the late stages of completing their degrees and all of the women already had previous working experience, e.g., through internships, in their fields. The data were collected in 2015 and because of the Austrian context of our study, the participants were primarily European.

#### 3.2. Method and data collection

We chose focus groups as a method of data collection because the method explicitly centers on collective talk and “presupposes that sensemaking is produced *collectively*, in the course of *social interaction* between people” (Wilkinson, 1998, p. 186, emphasis in original). Due to the interactive nature of focus groups, participants define together what important topics and problems are and may discuss possible solutions (Hutt, 1979). Focus groups are particularly effective for generating theory that is relevant to understanding the specific shared realities that are constructed by the group participants and communicated through their interaction (Morgan, 1993). Grounded in social interaction, focus group accounts highlight how opinions are “derived by social, rather than personal processes” similar to normal, everyday life (Morgan, 1993, p. 54). We considered focus groups to be especially insightful for our research endeavor as we witnessed “exactly how views are constructed, expressed, defended and (sometimes) modified” (Wilkinson, 1998, p. 193). As we are interested particularly in how individuals' opinions and experiences are influenced or shaped by their social contexts, focus groups provide a high degree of credibility, i.e. confidence in the “truth” of findings (Guba, 1981; Bansal & Corley, 2012). Research findings, e.g. regarding the institutionalized beliefs and norms in STEM, are derived from interactions between participants and therefore already include a “member check”, i.e. focus group participants as members of the same group immediately “test” the truthfulness of statements (Guba, 1981).

All participants had similar backgrounds and therefore interacted with each other as equals, resulting in the homogeneous nature of our focus groups. This also informed the number of groups we conducted and the group sizes. According to Hennink (2007), p. 147, focus groups

**Table 1**  
Overview of focus groups and information on focus group participants.

Number of focus group	Number of participants	Location	Participants' fields of study and experience	Career stages	Nationalities of participants
1	9	University	Pharmaceutics, physics, electrical engineering, civil engineering, biology, chemistry	PhD studies, master and bachelor programs	8 Austrian, 1 Brazilian
2	3	University	Biology, information systems	Master programs	2 Austrian, 1 Italian
3	4	Technical University	Physics, architecture, pharmaceutics, mechanical engineering	PhD studies, master programs	2 Austrian, 1 Polish, 1 Iranian
4	4	Technical University	Biology, computer science, physics	Master and bachelor programs	4 Austrian
5	4	Technical University	Information systems, electrical engineering, chemistry	Master programs	3 Austrian, 1 German
6	3	University of Applied Sciences	Environmental engineering, biochemistry, computer science	Bachelor program	2 Austrian, 1 Swiss

that are segmented to concentrate on specific populations (such as women in the early stages of their careers) are more likely to “encourage effective discussion” as well as foster trust and self-disclosure due to the compatibility of the participants. We determined the number of focus groups we conducted based on when the data collected reached theoretical saturation or the point in which no new information was being generated within the focus groups (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This typically occurs after three to five focus groups are conducted (Morgan, Krueger, & Scannell, 1998). While we already noticed patterns and few completely new topics emerged after conducting four focus groups, we conducted two more focus groups to ensure theoretical saturation. In order to allow the participants ample time to relate their personal experiences and express their opinions regarding being women working in STEM, we choose to limit the number of participants in each focus group to no more than nine individuals. While focus groups commonly consist of six to ten participants (Morgan et al., 1998), we found after conducting the first focus group that the women were highly involved in the topic and often shared personal experiences of discrimination or harassment. In line with the recommendations of Morgan et al. (1998) and Hennink (2007), the sensitive nature of our research questions and the responses received from the first focus group led us to limit the size of the following focus groups to four or less participants.

The focus groups lasted between 85 and 120 min and were audio and video recorded and transcribed verbatim. We aimed for a low level of moderator involvement in order to encourage discussion. We only roughly structured each focus group by scheduling two parts of approximately 30 to 60 min length, separated by a short break. The first part was designed as the most open one as we asked about participants’ general expectations regarding employment and employers in STEM (i.e., “What is important to you regarding your job or your employer?”). In the second part, we presented three different job ads to the focus groups (each focus group received the same three job ads) as a stimulus for discussion.

In this second part of each focus group, we were interested in the participants’ thinking aloud when reading through the job ads and company descriptions. We initiated discussions with questions like, “what catches your attention in the job ad?”, or “which company would you like to work for?” The discussions revealed the participants’ reading, interpretation, and implicit sense-making of the job ads. As our focus was not on the specific job ads, we used the ads as triggers to explore how participants reflected on working in STEM and how they imagined working in the employing organizations. In order to ensure a great variety, we chose the job ads from different industries, with different company sizes, and for different positions but all were current job openings at the time of data collection. The companies in the job ads are referred to in the following as Company A, Company B, and Company C. We only provided the participants with the job ads’ company descriptions, leaving out details on job tasks and application procedures. While these descriptions contained the original design, wording, color, and pictures, we concealed the company names to reduce the influence of familiarity with the company (see Appendix for the text of the company descriptions used in the focus groups). During the discussion, participants were interpreting and comparing the job ads by referring to the pictures, the slogans, and text in the ads.

### 3.3. Data analysis

The transcriptions were uploaded into NVivo for data analysis. Because the focus groups were conducted in German, the transcriptions and analysis were also done in German and the quotes used in the following were translated into English by the authors. Data analysis was an inductive process (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in that we did not have a pre-defined set of codes when beginning. Instead, we

let the codes develop out of the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994) with the exception of the initial codes (i.e., the question what should your ideal employer be like?) that were used for triggering discussion in the focus groups (Pratt, 2009).

Our analysis aimed at identifying participants’ identity projects as they expressed them in their focus group interactions about employment in STEM, which were embedded in the social context that all the participants shared. We were interested in how each of our participants viewed herself and companies’ employer branding material in relation to having a career in STEM. Therefore, our unit of analysis is not the focus groups but the participants’ individual – yet embedded – accounts of their identity projects. To assure the quality standard of our interpretation and coding, two of the authors coded the material separately and then consistently compared their coding with each other to discuss the codes’ respective meanings and to finally agree on a shared list of codes. These discussions helped to further clarify our understanding of the material. Comparing the assigned codes by moving back and forth iteratively between levels of abstraction and between data and theory, we proceeded in three stages that Fig. 1 also illustrates:

#### 3.3.1. Stage 1: Identifying first order concepts

We worked through the material to create a first structure and thus separated the data from the first and second parts of the focus groups. For instance, we saw that in the first part, in addition to describing the ideal employer, participants referenced their own experiences in work settings or drew on the experiences of others they knew. These stories were central to the participants’ identity projects. In the next step, we sorted the interview transcripts by each participant to get a better understanding who they are and then sought to organize these stories around key themes and categories (Corley & Gioia, 2004; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). We did this by going over the entire transcription again to identify common topics in the statements of all focus group participants. This resulted in a list of emerging first-order concepts (orientations in individual’s identity projects) that the two researchers discussed and revised over the process of coding. We added new first-order concepts when we noticed that a quote from participants expressed ideas that could not be summarized under our existing list. We merged first-order concepts when, in our discussions, we noticed that the differences between what the two concepts captures are minimal and not relevant for our research question. For example, some participants talked about their aim to have a job where their technical abilities were recognized. Others specifically addressed their concern of not having been perceived as experts by colleagues. While one expresses a wish for the future and the other a past experience, the two concepts were merged to the concept “expert” as both aspiration and experience hint to a very similar idea.

#### 3.3.2. Stage 2: Integrating first order concepts and creating theoretically informed second order themes of identity project orientations

Although we analyzed our data inductively, we found striking similarities with two key themes from the literature, which informed how we consolidated first-order concepts into “career-centered” and “family-centered” identity orientations as theoretically informed second-order themes. Much of the existing research on women’s careers in STEM has focused on the dichotomous norms associated with women and men and the occupations in which they work (Ashcraft, 2013). Because STEM occupations are heavily male-dominated and masculine norms (for example mathematic ability, physical strength, or complete dedication to one’s job) are highly valued, women often feel immense pressure to conform to these norms when pursuing a career in STEM (Cech, 2015; Kvande, 1999). At the same time, feminine norms (such as an ability to nurture, social skills, and dedication to one’s family) are not highly valued in a STEM context, however, remain strong social

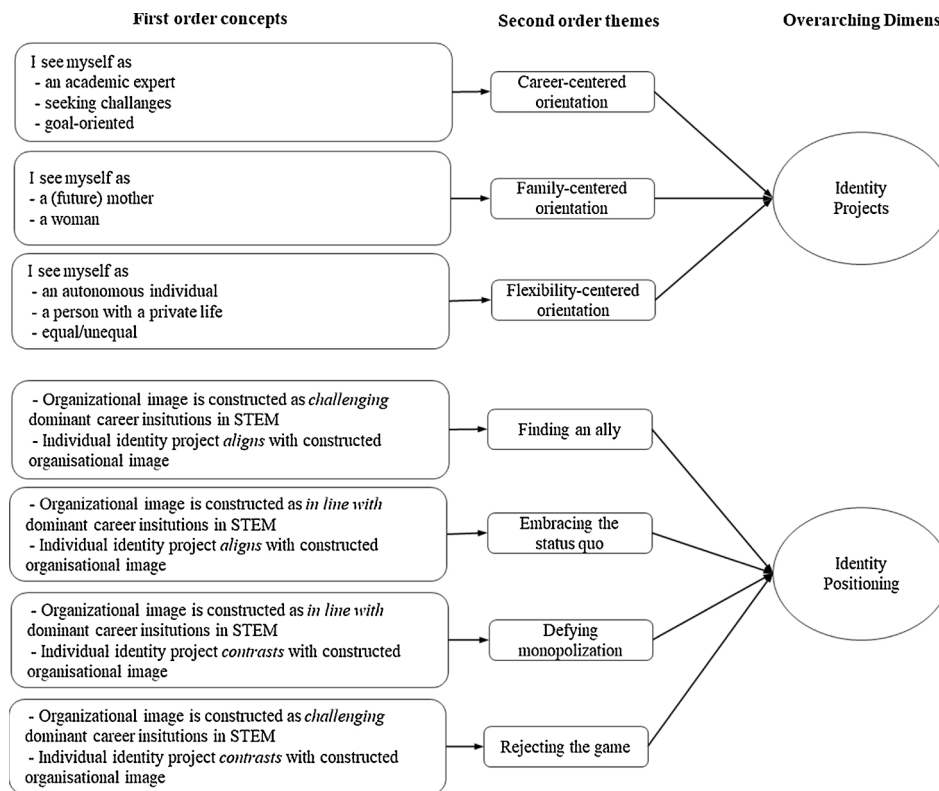


Fig. 1. Data structure.

norms for women, regardless of their occupational context (Faulkner, 2000). Through the process of comparing the first-order concepts with these insights from the literature, we identified career-centered and family-centered identity project orientations. However, we inductively developed a third second-order theme that we refer to as the “flexibility-centered” orientation. The flexibility-centered orientation is based on accounts about participants’ wish to work less and have more leisure time, or the ability to reconcile work demands with personal working time preferences that were clearly present in our first-order concepts, but did not fall into any of the themes defined in the literature. We consequently defined the flexibility-centered orientation as the notion of employees who seek to gain more control over work boundaries, e.g., through flexible work arrangements, beyond gendered care responsibilities as justification. Instead, they ask employers to treat them equal to men and to recognize their full identity project complexity.

3.3.3. Stage 3: Abstracting from first order concepts to develop theory on identity positioning

Finally, we sought to explore how these individuals’ identity projects relate to the way the women discussed the job ads and the employing organizations. Within this step, we began to think of the various ways in which individuals positioned themselves in relation to their construction of the organizational images. First, we saw that the organizational image was constructed in relation to what we coded as broader industry norms. More precisely, we coded the organizational images constructed by our participants as either being in line with or challenging industry norms. Second, delving deeper into the individuals’ positioning in relation to the organizational image, which we coded as either aligning or contrasting with the organizational image, we inductively developed four identity positioning strategies that the

participants engaged with when assessing job ads. We labeled these strategies finding an ally, embracing the status quo, defying monopolization and rejecting the game.

4. Results

In the following section, we first describe each of the three career-related identity project orientations in the individuals’ identity projects. Next, we describe how our participants constructed the organizational images of Company A, B, and C. Building on this, we illustrate the role of individuals’ identity project orientations in positioning themselves in relation to the constructed organizational images. Lastly, we describe the four identity positioning strategies that the individuals used to assess the suitability of organizations to further develop their identity projects.

4.1. STEM women’s identity projects

In order to gain a better understanding of STEM women’s identity projects, we analyzed how focus group participants talked about their career and life goals, how they imagined their future in the STEM field, and what conditions they would prefer to work under. For identifying their identity projects, we also drew on literature discussing the dichotomous norms that influence women’s identity negotiation in STEM occupations to develop our coding of the participants’ identity projects and the career- and family- centered identity orientations (Cech, 2015; Faulkner, 2000; Kvande, 1999). Our participants’ identity projects drew on similar orientations but were individual stories that often connected what participants imagined themselves to be with concrete past experiences. While all participants have and expressed identity projects in more or less detail, for the following presentation of the identity projects orientations, we focus on three examples to provide more detailed

**Table 2**  
Examples of the three main themes in further participants' identity projects.<sup>a</sup>

Main themes	Identity projects: further examples from the focus group participants
Career-centered orientation	<p>"Maybe because we are academics, we can just do our work faster, more efficient, sound, and qualified than others." (P2/FG3)</p> <p>"And I find it's also important to have and face challenges" (P6/FG1)</p> <p>"In particular, I want to learn a lot from my employer and get support. 'Results, that's what counts,' that really should be it. I just want to be treated like a male employee, and not somehow... different." (P3/FG2)</p> <p>"I like companies that are demanding, while family is not so important to me at all. I also don't mind if there is a tough work environment with long hours – as long as it means that I can proceed and travel the world." (P1/FG4)</p>
Family-centered orientation	<p>"Family shouldn't be a negative point for the company. That is, when I need to stay home to care for sick children on nursing leave, I don't want weird looks. Also, if I can't do overtime because I have a family, then the company should understand this." (P3/FG4)</p> <p>"I also don't want to be seen as less valuable, as a woman, just because I want to have a family and a normal life, and don't want to work from 7am to 7 pm." (P2/FG6)</p> <p>„But actually, I think, it should be... I think there should be an employee day care center... Yeah, an employee day care center would be just great, I think. It's actually kind of sad that this still is a topic at all. Because actually it should not matter, whether you want to have children or not. It should be fundamentally clear that you'll have children. [...]"</p>
Flexibility-centered orientation	<p>"Nowadays, this one-third-scheme (one third work, one third sleep, one third rest) does not work any longer. I think work-life goes more towards the direction of work-eat-sleep, work-eat-sleep...; but I rather prefer to have time for myself. [...]" (P3/FG3)</p> <p>"... also, one has friends and hobbies. It is important to find a balance here. Now it's common that you work 9 h a day, but it shouldn't be more. More important is to compensate long hours with free time, where you can have off more days in a row." (P3/FG3)</p> <p>"Yes, I also think that flexible work time is extremely important." (P4/FG5)</p> <p>P3: "Hmhm. It needs to be flexible, on the whole. It needs to be adjusted to the individual. Not like... [employers saying] 'All are the same, all are robots, all work for us.' That can't end well."</p> <p>P1: "I'm actually surprised, when I watch my male colleagues, I'm really wondering, how much... how willingly they adjust [to long work hours] [laughs]. So many. Because... I think that... there are some who would like to do other things [i.e. hobbies] and then because of this... kind of because of a group pressure they are sucked in. And then they also change. I mean because of it."</p> <p>P2: "Yeah, but I also have the impression that, specially at my age now, that many say that they don't want to work a 40-hour week anymore, because you spend so much time at work, and they prefer to earn less and in exchange have leisure time. [General agreement expressed by "hmhm".] And, well, I think, this is a new trend [P1: Yes] and, well, I actually find it good, and I think it makes a lot of sense." (P3, P1, &amp; P2/FG4)</p>

<sup>a</sup> All quotations from the data are cited by the participant number (designated by P) and the focus group number (designated by FG).

accounts. This allows us to show profound and robust accounts of identity projects from participants into the participants' sense of self and how career was an ongoing organizing principle they employed to become themselves (Grey, 1994). In addition to the three examples, quotes from other participants in Table 2 also illustrate the variety of STEM women's individual identity projects.

#### 4.1.1. Katharine – having a career in STEM

As she was close to finishing her master's degree in engineering, Katharine had already gained work experience through several internships. She appeared self-confident when she described her goals for the future, mainly in terms of the importance of having a successful career in STEM. Katharine valued competitiveness and while she was also looking for positive relationships with her colleagues, she prioritized her use of skills in order to achieve outcomes:

"The company I want to work for should know me as a person and should be interested in me as a person, in my abilities and skills, so that they can employ those skills perfectly in the company and in a way that also has meaning for me as employee. That means, what I do should make sense for me and make me somehow satisfied and happy. My ideal workplace... I think that includes the whole company, the whole context, that you can work flexibly, that you like your colleagues, can be on the same page as them, and just everything that encourages you to create outcomes."

Career was for Katharine clearly about more than earning sums of money or having a secure job. She stressed that she liked to be challenged and to be constantly gaining knowledge and learning from experience. She wanted a job that "play[s] to my strengths and where I have a chance to develop myself, develop the company, and to develop something together with the company."

Katharine also wanted to have flexibility in terms of where and when she is working, even mentioning that she could imagine working

abroad. As she wanted to develop throughout her career, routine or repetitive jobs did not appeal to her:

"I think having challenges is also pretty important because routine... yeah... I might be able to do it for some time, but long-term... I think there are only very few people that would like to do [routine jobs] for years. That's why diversified and challenging jobs [are important]."

When she discussed the importance of transparency regarding organizational practices and policies, it was interesting how Katharine interpreted transparency within organizations because she argued that it was important for the development of teamwork that everyone has access to the same information. While other participants phrased transparency in terms of avoiding an old-fashioned, directive leadership style that is based on hiding information from employees in order to "direct" them more easily (FG3/P3), Katharine saw transparency not only as a way to achieve equality and fair treatment but as facilitating better work outcomes: "I'm also a great friend of transparency in the company because when I do something meaningful and I can explain it so that it also makes sense to others, then we are hopefully all act in concert."

Remarkably, Katharine hardly mentioned anything related to being a woman. Even when other focus group participants discussed stereotypes that they as women had to face in STEM jobs, she did not comment on any gender discriminatory topics but stayed focused on topics that closely connected to her career and its progression.

#### 4.1.2. Leila – flipping roles

Leila was about to finish her bachelor's degree in computer science and she often referred to her mother as a role model when it came to discussing her preferred career trajectory. To Leila, it was essential that her employer considers female employees as breadwinners and capable of breaking traditional gender roles: "It is important to me that my

future employer takes the idea seriously that women can also earn a family's living, not just men [making the money] and women needing to stay at home."

Leila valued support from her employing organization in terms of continuing to offer career opportunities to her once she had children or in the event she became ill. Leila's goal was to pursue a career that builds on performance, engagement, and merit, and allows to have a family. She described herself and her career preferences very much in light of her mother's career:

"My mother earns our family's living, but she had to fight hard for that. She had to be persistent and convince her supervisors that she had talent and needed to be promoted in order to get a better job. Because otherwise, we [the family] couldn't survive. Only then was she taken seriously."

Leila further illustrates her career focus when she refers to her mother's career when she became ill:

"She [Leila's mother] was really scared that she might lose her job. But because her supervisor took her career aspirations seriously by that time, they made sure that she got her own office on the first floor with a special elevator and a closer parking lot."

Relating to these experiences, Leila would like to have a similar career model as her mother, despite the difficulties this might entail:

"She [Leila's mother] was always working full time. Even when we kids entered adolescence. She would always face skepticism [from others] saying like 'this is a mother that works full time...'. People would even say that we kids were 'weird'. But I don't think it's harmful [to children for the mother] to work full time."

Leila identified with such a non-traditional career model, but she also expected that employers be more open towards women in bread-winning roles, including by offering accommodation for having children or becoming ill. However, she accepted that this role is not the norm in society and that she may encounter prejudices and stereotypes from this "flipped" role.

#### 4.1.3. Florence – addressing stereotypes in women's STEM careers

Florence had already acquired some work experience and was about to finish her bachelor's degree in biochemistry. Unlike Leila, Florence addressed several stereotypes women are confronted with during their careers, especially in the field of STEM. To her, it was imperative that gender stereotypes did not play a role in women's career decisions:

"To me it's important that you don't have to prove your abilities every day anew, like, 'despite the fact I'm a woman, I can do it'. Your employer should just know that we [women] can do it, and they should trust us in the same way as they trust men."

Florence saw the need to explicitly define herself as equally capable, especially since she had bad experiences during an internship:

"And then there is this thing with the women's quota. During my internship, a male co-worker always called me the 'quota woman'. He said that I am just here because of the quota [requiring the organization to hire women]. This was really tough. I didn't like it. I was afraid to tell my supervisor, afraid of that he wouldn't take me seriously. But when I did tell him, he was really upset and encouraged me to report these things immediately."

Florence's goal was to have a career in STEM that is not only free from gender prejudices, but that also allowed her to dedicate time to other activities beside work. This career aspiration was informed by her mother's career, which was not a path she wanted to follow:

"I mean, I observed this with my parents. My mother, for example, is

a physicist and she works 120% or even 130% [working time] sometimes. She regularly works between 60 and 70 h a week. And she is done. She turns 50 next year, and she is really just done."

For Florence, her career path of choice combined a working career with an enhanced private life, and the opportunity to have and spend time with her children in the future was a priority for her. The following dialogue between Leila and Florence (taken from Focus Group 6) nicely illustrated the differences in their individual career projects:

Leila: "Well having an employer that addresses family values can be good and bad."

Florence: "I agree. I mean it's good because if I get pregnant some time in future then I would hope that my supervisor takes that seriously and says 'Ok, your children are also important for now' but you don't lose your job, and you can come back later. I think for the first years of my career, I want to pursue my career seriously. But then later, once I have children, I want it to be less tough. I find careers important, but only up to a certain point."

Leila: "I don't understand. Having the possibility to have a career is exactly what I like."

Florence: "But why? I mean, once I have the feeling, like when I turn 35 maybe, I've worked hard enough now, I think then there will be a time where I will want to take it easy and have time for my family. I don't want to die of a heart attack at the age of 60 because of stress."

Leila: "So what are you going to do then? Work part-time?"

Florence: "Well, part-time... I don't know. But maybe less hours and work load. I mean, I want to have a chance to take my children to school and be home to cook and have dinner together. ... I mean ... having time for my family."

Leila: "Well, your husband can cook."

Analyzing the identity projects of all our focus group participants, we noticed that – while being individual-specific stories and projects – three orientations were present in the individuals' identity projects. At times, women drew more on one orientation while they neglected the other two. However, there was a combination of the orientations in many of the individuals' identity projects.

The *career-centered* orientation was based on the assumption that work and career were essential parts of life, not only as significant time commitments but also as demanding significant attention and effort from the individual. For instance, this orientation often emerged in connection with a strong interest in the STEM work itself, to the outcomes (products or services) produced, to how (management) processes in companies were organized, and to traditional ideas of a linear career path. This was seen in some of the women's desire to reach high, well-paid positions with decision-making authority. The career-centered orientation implied that, at least in the short-term, the women may need to make sacrifices, for instance, in terms of time spent at work, in order to further their careers. Most importantly, being a woman did not play a role at all. Rather, the career-centered orientation downplayed the role of gender in STEM careers and put professionalism and knowledge center stage.

Similar to the career-centered orientation, the *family-centered* orientation implied an anticipated conflict between women's careers and other personal life responsibilities. However, when women's identity projects centered on family, their priority was clearly on maintaining a family life, even if it came at a cost for their careers. In the family-centered orientation, there was generally a strong interest in being able to combine work and family, therefore, the participants were particularly concerned with whether companies would be willing to support (future) parents. For example, employers that offered company-run, day-care centers or part-time work were appreciated by women who had this identity project orientation. Women who featured the family-centered orientation prominently in their identity projects were also



aware of and critical about stereotypes and discrimination in connection with being (future) mothers.

The third orientation that emerged out of our data, a *flexibility-centered* orientation, had a different focus from the other two orientations, but its boundaries were sometimes less clear-cut, especially compared with the family-centered orientation. The participants that elicited this orientation refused to give their private lives less priority. Alternatively, they instead focused on balance and stressed that work was but one expression of themselves, beside many others. This focus was reflected in some women's demands for being simultaneously successful and working fewer hours, having flexibility regarding their work time and location, and having meaningful work. This flexibility-centered orientation was often connected with the participants' desire for equality. Thus, the women who drew on this orientation were acutely aware of the problems women face in STEM, particularly when women's professionalism is called into question due to their gender. The underlying assumption of this orientation was that people and careers should not be separate entities. Instead of treatment based on one of two dichotomous categories (e.g., man or woman, career woman or mother), the participants who drew on this orientation wanted employers to take their whole personal identity project in its full complexity into account.

In line with individual STEM women's identity projects, these orientations played a vital role in participants' assessment of job opportunities in job ads. More specifically, our analysis of their assessments yielded four different identity-positioning strategies. Identity-positioning strategies entail a positioning of the individual identity project in relation to the constructed organizational image of the employer. The organizational image was constructed as either being in line with or challenging the dominant career model in STEM. Hence, before illustrating the four identity-positioning strategies, we briefly describe how our focus group participants constructed the organizational image of Company A, B, and C.

#### 4.2. Constructing the organizational image for identity positioning

Overall, when describing their ideal employer and ideal job or when talking about job ads, we observed that participants referred to several stereotypes they attributed to the field of STEM from a female employee perspective. They believed that long working hours, full-time commitment, and dedication to the job were still the dominant career model in STEM companies. Such a traditional career model was seen as normal, i.e., taken-for-granted in STEM, and entailed a specific view on gender and family. In this respect, the norm of women in caring roles could be described, as one participant put it, as following the "classic stereotype 'woman with children'". In STEM, a male-dominated field, women were normally viewed as the ones with caring duties for children, while men pursued their careers.

"I think that employers have different expectations towards men and women. They presume that we women take care of the children when they are sick, whereas they'd never expect men to do so. And that's also the reason why they have better chances to get the job, despite if they have a child." (P4/FG4)

Similarly, in our participants' view, women were seen as less capable ("Well, somehow you have to prove every day that you can do it because of the fact that you are a woman." [P 3/FG 6]). Furthermore, the traditional career model was also viewed as putting careers center stage and having no room for personal interests or needs besides working life ("... they expect a lot from you, that you outperform others and that you work really a lot" [P 3/FG 6]).

In this way, we observed that the participants constructed the organizational image in relation to what they regarded as the taken-for-

granted values, norms, and beliefs from the institutional context of STEM when talking about the job ads from employers. More precisely, they either constructed the organizational image as being *in line with* one of these norms, ("Company A sounds as if career is the focus there - they want you to put all your energy into your career and then you focus entirely on this" [P 2/FG 4]; "Company C is a traditional career-first, private-life second company" [P 3/FG 4]) or they constructed the organizational image as *challenging* the prevalent assumptions about careers in STEM ("It seems that this company [Company B] knows about their people's non-work lives, like if you have family, they would adapt" [P 2/FG 2]).

#### 4.3. Identity positioning in relation to organizational images of possible employers

We empirically observed four different strategies of how our participants positioned themselves by drawing on their identity project, and in relation to the constructed organizational image of the employing company. This positioning allowed them to assess the suitability of the organization as a future employer and to serve as a cultural resource that would support the development of their identity projects.

##### 4.3.1. Finding an ally

In this strategy, participants built on the organizational identity claims that were presented in job ads to construct an organizational image of finding an ally in the employing organization. The finding an ally strategy entails the alignment of the individuals' identity project with the organizational image that opposes the taken-for-granted values, norms, and beliefs from the institutional context of STEM.

To better illustrate this strategy, we identified vignettes that share a common career-related identity project orientation, in this case, the family-centered orientation. Some women connected their identity project goals with having a career in STEM that allowed them to have children and care duties outside of work and they accordingly assessed job ads based on this identity project orientation. These women were especially perceptive of elements in the job ads that referred to family and diversity. For instance, the job ad of Company B featured a picture of a man, apparently one of the company's employees, sitting at his office desk, and a smaller overlying picture with the same man pictured with three young children on a playground. The slogan (in the biggest font) reads "When children meet career."

"There is this father in the picture, he sits in his office, but at the same time you see that he is in the playground with his children. So they tell you, 'You can have both with us. We want you as a person, your talent and your character, and we enable you to have a family and a career.'" (P 9/FG 1)

"I like the picture from [Company B]. They focus on families and family values. I think it says a lot about a company if it introduces itself like this. It might have a certain importance for them." (P 4/FG 4)

When participants drew on the family-centered orientation, the job ad of Company B apparently provided possibilities for alignment between the individuals' identity projects and the constructed organizational image. The company's focus on family values and the combination of work life and family life was recognized as positive by women who drew on the family-centered orientation in their identity projects. Additionally, these family-focused organizational identity claims were also considered to be unique and perhaps unusual compared to other organizational identity claims in STEM fields. In this way, the organization became an ally in the women's pursuit of identity project development that revolves around a family-centered orientation of career. This may be especially attractive to the participants because family-

friendliness is not yet established as a norm among STEM employers. The following participant stated this even more explicitly:

“What caught my attention in the picture of Company B is that there is a man with his children. Maybe they intentionally chose a man for the picture [instead of a woman] in order to avoid the classic stereotype ‘woman with children’. What I like even more is the fact that he doesn’t look like a super-model type, but looks like as if these were really his children.” (P 4/FG 5)

Looking at all three statements together, the organizational image apparently was constructed as addressing two stereotypes women encounter when working in STEM. Whereas the first two statements put the (new) idea of combining a career with having a family in the foreground, the third statement highlighted the idea that not only women can have aspirations to combine careers with families, but men can as well.

#### 4.3.2. Embracing the status quo

This strategy describes how women assessed an organizational image as in line with their identity project when the image was constructed as not communicating any innovative or unexpected organizational identity claims. Therefore, it was the status quo, or taken-for-granted values, norms, and beliefs from the institutional context of STEM, which participants perceived as attractive when viewing the job ad. As an illustration of this strategy, we present examples of participants whose identity projects dominantly featured a career-centered orientation.

Participants with strong career-centered orientations considered work as crucial for their identity. They aspired to be emotionally invested in their jobs and to be committed to putting in long hours in return for personal development by learning and reaching positions of authority quickly. While assessing the identity claims that companies communicated through their job ads, these participants responded to organizational identity claims such as mentioning career opportunities or in the prominently placed slogan “Where your strengths meet opportunities” in the job ad of Company C (see Appendix). As these statements about career development within one company were not unusual in job ads, the organizational image that participants constructed was not that of an innovative employer or a “rule changer” for the STEM industry. However, women with the career-centered orientation prominently featured in their identity projects found this company image attractive as they could connect their identity project with these images:

“I’d be for [applying] at company C, in that case, because it actually talks about challenges. And... they... they seem to have high expectations of their applicants, of their employees, and yes, and of family issues... that’s not important at the moment for me. A full-time job there sounds like tough working hours, long ones, but I don’t mind. Even if there’s not a lot of spare time... But I don’t mind at the moment. And yes, it also seems to be international, that’s another reason why I would decide for company C.” (P 5/ FG 1).  
 “The claims [of Company C], for example “Where your strengths meet opportunities”, seem to be a value I consider desirable. That’s where I have the chance to develop myself and to develop something together with and for the company. I like that kind of outlook, therefore I feel emotionally attracted.” (P 2/FG 3)

Indications of company success were also viewed positively by women that elicited a career-centered identity project orientation. Referring to the job ad of Company A (see Appendix), which presented a great deal of information about the company such as the number of employees and subsidiaries in different countries, one participant underlined that this is an “obviously successful” company and working there would enable you “to visit foreign branch offices and to see

something of the world” (P 3/FG 1). An organizational image that promised opportunities for the women to develop their strengths, to grow professionally through challenges and international experience, and to be successful with the help of a successful employer resonated well with the career-oriented orientation and were consequently fully embraced by women whose identity projects featured this orientation dominantly.

#### 4.3.3. Defying monopolization

In this strategy, participants constructed the organizational image as if it was representing the prevalent expectations towards careers in STEM. These employers did not show their potential to support the development of some individuals’ identity projects and these individuals accordingly defied such monopolization of their career models. Defying monopolization thus entailed contrasting the individuals’ identity project with the organizational image.

To illustrate this strategy, we chose vignettes that share a flexibility-centered orientation in the participants’ identity projects. The women connected their identity project goals with having a career that enabled them to see work as one part of their lives. In this orientation, meaningful work and freedom to balance work and private lives were central to an overall feeling of well-being both at work and at home. Based on the flexibility-centered orientation, the job ad of Company C provoked much discussion in the focus groups. The picture featured an office scene with people (male and female) standing together with a laptop and the slogan reads “Where strengths meet opportunities”.

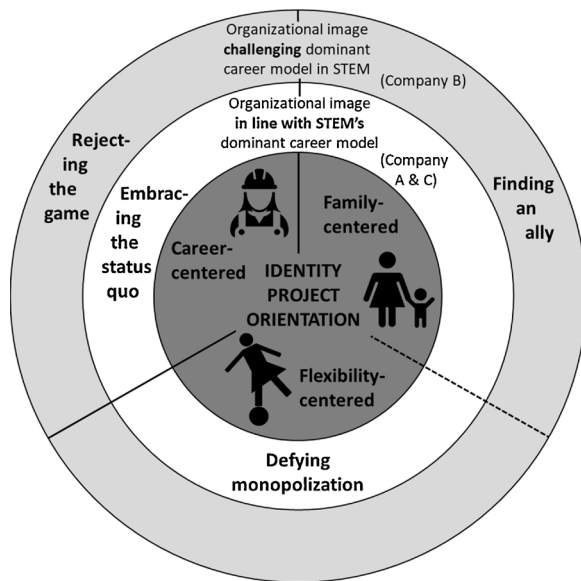
Some participants depicted the future employees of this company as “able and willing to invest a lot of time, where you travel a lot and where you give everything to push your career forward” or as providing employment that “sounds like a turbo career you have to fight for” (P 4/FG 5). In several statements, potential applicants at Company C were described as very ambitious, self-confident, and career-oriented individuals by the focus group participants. These career-focused organizational identity claims were considered as the most normative way of talking about careers, however, these identity claims were met with suspicion by some of the women. In the pursuit of identity project development that revolves around a flexibility-centered orientation of career, participants contrasted themselves with the constructed organizational image as they defied the monopolistic norm of a career focus that is strongly established among STEM employers. For example, when a participant noticed the text below the Company C slogan that described the ideal applicant as someone who had completed their study program “above average”, she stated,

“Well, I do have good grades but when I read ‘above average’... I would never call myself ‘above average’ thus, I wouldn’t apply there. There are people who have nothing in their life except for their careers. Perhaps they like travelling so that they don’t sit at home alone. I find it kind of fair that the company is so explicit here. But when I think of my future, as I want to have more time for myself, I don’t see any opportunities for myself there.” (P 4/FG 5)

Participants with the flexibility-centered orientation in their identity projects accepted the company’s career-centered focus and acknowledged the company’s efforts to make that very explicit. However, coming from the flexibility-centered orientation of career, this organization was not an appropriate cultural resource for the women drawing on this orientation to develop their own identity projects. As they contrasted themselves from such organizational images, women used these organizational identity claims from job ads as a basis to illustrate their own identity project.

#### 4.3.4. Rejecting the game

While the participants assessed the organizational identity claims in the job ads for whether the claims were able to advance their individual



**Fig. 2.** Interrelation between identity project orientations, the constructed organizational image, and the respective identity positioning strategies (including graphics “worker” by Wilson Joseph and “mother” by Kid A from the Noun Project).

identity projects or not, our analysis revealed that some women showed an attitude that can only be described as rejecting the game that companies were perceived as playing. This means that the women saw the benefits behind why a company made specific claims (e.g., being a diverse or family-friendly company) but some of the women did not want to be addressed by organizations in this way. Their reflections went further than statements about the authenticity of claims in job ads because several participants mentioned personal past experiences and contrasted their own career goals with their view of the organizational image. Based on these observations, we identified “rejecting the game” as a fourth strategy that the women used to position their own identity projects in relation to their construction of organizational images.

For illustrating this strategy, we drew on examples in which the dominant identity project orientation is career-centered. Women with a career-centered orientation connected their identity goals to pursuing a successful career as a STEM professional and they accordingly assessed job ads. These focus group participants especially picked up on elements in the job ads that referred to family and diversity. Most of the focus group participants thought that diversity, valuing family, and supporting parents were timely claims for companies to make given the pressure of government programs and diversity management initiatives in STEM. However, when participants with a dominant career-centered identity project orientation discussed the job ad of Company B (see Appendix), they constructed the company’s image as overly emphasizing its family-friendliness. “What irritates me the most here is that Company B so prominently features children. If this is what should attract me to the job, then I have to question the professionalism [of the company].” (P 2/FG 3) Similarly, another focus group participant stated:

“With B [Company B] I somehow have the feeling that this is too much. I guess I don’t want to be enticed with such a message that doesn’t address my professional skill. But I do find it important that companies send messages like these...” (P 1/FG 4)

As the two quotes illustrate, women with a career-centered orientation identified that the focus on families in the job ad of Company

B came at the cost of professionalism. This implied that participants constructed the organizational image as lacking professionalism or as downplaying the professionalism of the viewer as a potential applicant. Participants with career-centered identity projects distanced themselves from these organizational images because having a successful professional career was a top priority for them.

We also found that participants with a strong career-centered orientation in their identity projects were using this positioning strategy when talking about diversity that featured prominently in the form of a picture in Company A’s organizational identity claims. The photo showed seven people in business attire standing in a row, apparently intended to depict employees of the company. This led some of the participants to construct the company’s image as less authentic and prone to window-dressing: “Well, the picture [in the job ad of Company A] seems false in its reasoning; that there’s always man-woman-man standing next to each other... that’s quite dislikable actually.” (P 2/FG 3) In addition to the construction of an unattractive organizational image that used diversity for window-dressing reasons, the same participant contrasted her own identity project from the image. While she expressed that she understood why the company may find it beneficial to use a picture like this, she also made it clear that she found this unconvincing and a presumed game or gimmick of the company. In her suspicion, she stressed that she would not fall for this tactic because she preferred to be addressed as a professional, career-oriented person and not specifically as a woman.

To sum up, Fig. 2 illustrates the interrelation between the three career-related identity project orientations, the constructed organizational image, and the respective identity positioning strategies. The two identity positioning strategies “embracing the status quo” and “defying monopolization” referred to the construction of an organizational image that is in line with the STEM norm of a traditional career model. Our data shows that following a particular career-related identity project orientation led to a quite different self-positioning towards organizational images that were in line with the norms of the field. Whereas “embracing the status quo” spoke to a career-centered orientation and aligned the individual with such an image, “defying monopolization” was reminiscent of an established traditional career model and viewed as overtly monopolizing from a family and flexibility-centered orientation, thus these participants contrasted themselves from such image.

In contrast, the two identity positioning strategies “finding an ally” and “rejecting the game” referred to the construction of an organizational image that challenged the norm of the traditional career model in STEM. When our participants were finding an ally, they aligned with organizational images that resonated with their flexibility and family-centered orientations. Drawing on a career-centered orientation, these participants doubted the authenticity of an organizational image that challenged the career norms of STEM. They regarded it as “dubious” and did not want to be a pawn in the company’s diversity game. They thus rejected to play that game as they contrast themselves from such an organizational identity.

## 5. Discussion

Our objective in this study was to understand how women seeking careers in STEM fields assess the suitability of an organization for the development of their identity projects. We studied the identity projects of STEM women and showed how women position themselves in relation to the organizational image as they drew on primarily three identity project orientations. These organizational images were constructed based on the taken-for-granted values, norms, and beliefs of the STEM institutional context. We found that through the use of four different identity positioning strategies, the women assessed the

suitability of organizations as a cultural resource for their identity project development. We believe that our findings allow us to make three distinct theoretical contributions to three streams of literature: identity projects, organizational identity claims and image, and the recruitment of women to STEM careers.

### 5.1. Identity positioning strategies in the context of assessing potential employers

Literature on identity projects argues that in order to understand individuals' perception of employment, organizational practices and themselves in the workplace (Ibarra, 1999; Watson, 2008), their ongoing identity projects play a crucial role. To this point, studies have focused on the identity projects of organizational members and stress that organizations crucially influence their employees' identity projects. Specifically, HRM systems and practices such as career ladders are highlighted (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; Grey, 1994) as cultural resources (Rindova et al., 2011) for individuals' identity projects. While these studies hint at the importance of recruitment, existing research is focused solely on the identity projects of those who have already joined the company and non-members' choice to work for a company as part of their identity project development has not yet been empirically explored. Neglecting non-member organizational stakeholders such as job seekers' identity projects is problematic because it limits the scope of explanations that the identity project concept can provide for understanding individuals' identity in the context of employment and careers.

In this study, we have sought to address this gap and extend the literature by investigating the identity projects of job seekers as an important group of non-member organizational stakeholders. We explored the ways in which job seekers position themselves in relation to hiring organizations based on the extent to which those organizations were perceived as facilitating their own identity projects. Our analysis of focus group discussions on job seekers' future employment and careers illustrates that the participants drew on their identity projects in order to position themselves in relation to the constructed organizational images of the hiring organization. These images were constructed by the participants from employer branding material. We identify four different identity positioning strategies – *finding an ally*, *embracing the status quo*, *defying monopolization*, and *rejecting the game* – which job seekers used to assist them in aligning or contrasting themselves with specific organizational images. Job seekers positioned themselves depending on the orientation of their identity projects. In our empirical setting, the three most prevalent orientations – of which one or more are present in each participants' individual identity project – can be summarized as career-centered, family-centered, and flexibility-centered. The women's identity projects informed the positioning strategies they used and influenced their assessment of an organizations' suitability as a cultural resource for their identity project development.

For example in the “finding an ally” positioning strategy, women with flexibility- and family-centered identity project orientations were found to align with organizational images that they viewed as challenging the masculine norms of STEM careers. These images contained identity claims such as the statement “When children meet career” and a picture of a man with children. Contrarily, in the “rejecting the game” positioning strategy women with a career-centered identity project orientation did not align with the same job ad because they contrasted their identity projects from an organizational image that was perceived as unauthentic and contradicted their career aspirations. Women with a career-centered identity project orientation aligned themselves instead with organizational images that reinforced masculine norms of STEM

careers such as a challenging work environment when they utilized the “embracing the status quo” positioning strategy. Women with flexibility- and family- centered identity project orientations, on the other hand, contrasted themselves with these images in the “defying monopolization” strategy because they perceived them as in line with masculine norms (see Fig. 2).

Research suggests that individuals perform and negotiate their selves in social interactions and this involves positioning themselves in reference to others as well as social and occupational norms (Czarniawska, 2013; Davies & Harré, 1990; Goffman, 1959). In their study of minority group members in a specific professional and organizational context, Ossenkop et al. (2015) find that the minorities' career experiences are crucially influenced by their identity positioning. Our study adds to this literature by identifying strategies of self-positioning in the context of assessing future employers as can be seen when the individuals contrast or align their individual identity projects with employers' organizational images. We find that the job seekers' construction of an organizational image, based on organizational identity claims in employer branding material, is a meaningful way to conceptualize possible employers and understand the assessment of their suitability for advancing the individuals' identity projects. Resonating with Elsbach and Bhattacharya (2001) study of non-organizational members disidentification from organizational images that are perceived as threatening to their own identity projects, we show that in aligning or contrasting their self-concepts with employing organizations, job seekers define themselves not only by what they associate with but also what they choose to separate themselves from.

Our study shows that because job seekers construct organizational images in relation to the organizations' institutional context (Dejordy & Creed, 2016) the concept of identity positioning helps us to understand individuals' negotiations concerning how their own identity projects relate to shared meanings and beliefs from an institutional context (Kraatz & Block, 2017). Modern pluralist contexts suggest that individuals need to choose from different legitimate, professional self-understandings (Lok, 2010; Meyer & Hammerschmid, 2006; Reay, Goodrick, Waldorff, & Casebeer, 2017), or “discursive personas” (Watson, 2008). Developing the concept of identity projects to capture positioning strategies for their “possible selves” (Ibarra, 1999) in a specific company is crucial for understanding current career projects.

### 5.2. Organizational image as a cultural resource for identity positioning

Our findings also provide novel insights for the discussion of organizational image as perceived organizational identity in the context of job choice and recruitment. In the focus groups, participants drew on organizational identity claims in employer branding material to construct the organizational image that served as a cultural resource to assess potential employers.

Research on organizational identity and image in the context of recruitment finds a relationship between the amount of information that companies provide about themselves, the image that job seekers consequently hold of an employer, and their likelihood to apply there (Gatewood et al., 1993; Rynes & Bretz, 1991). Further explorations mainly focus on the specific dimensions of an employers' image that job seekers find attractive (Lievens et al., 2007). As most research on organizational image in the context of attracting future employees gives priority to organizations' recruitment related activities and applicants' perceptions, the values and identities of organizations remain a neglected issue (Breugh, 2013). Recently, more differentiated studies consider whether people could be attracted to different image dimensions depending on their own social identity needs (Banks, Kepes, Joshi, & Seers, 2016). However, these studies continue to perceive

organizational image as a characteristic of the company that is independent of employees' perceptions. Due to the predominantly quantitative nature of studies, this literature is unable to account for how job seekers construct organizational images that crucially influence their assessment of future employers.

We contribute to this literature by using a qualitative research design to explore how individuals construct organizational images from the organizational identity claims in job ads. We conceptualize attraction as based on the individuals' assessment of whether organizations are able to enhance or develop their own identity projects. Our analysis shows that job seekers construct the organizational image as ranging between being in line with the taken-for-granted values, norms, and beliefs from the institutional context of STEM to challenging the prevalent assumptions about careers in the field. Therefore, our study shows that organizational image is more than just individuals' perception of idiosyncratic organizational attributes; we find that job seekers construct the organizational image in relation to the institutional context in which the company is embedded (Dejordy & Creed, 2016).

Our findings highlight that the assessments of job seekers are crucial, and therefore conceptualizing organizational image in the context of employee recruitment as a static, objective attribute of organizations limits our understanding of how job seekers assess potential employers. We suggest that constructing organizational images is linked to the institutional context in which organizations operate as well as individuals' own identity projects. Based on these projects, job seekers pick up certain elements more than others, which is conceptually hinted at by Breugh (2013). We show, however, that individuals employ a range of identity positioning strategies that draw on organizational images as cultural resources. While job seekers might also draw on organizational images that are not in line with their identity project, attraction and the intention to apply at a company are based on the suitability of an organizational image to advance their own identity project. By illustrating this, our study enhances the understanding of organizational image in the context of employee recruitment, and suggests that companies' employer branding activities need to take the identity projects of their targeted audience into account.

### 5.3. Attracting women to STEM careers

Lastly, we contribute to literature concerning attracting women to STEM careers by providing insight into why diversity messages are potentially unsuccessful in attracting more women to the field. Literature on recruiting women to STEM has long lamented the difficulty many organizations have recruiting women to jobs in the field (Byars-Winston, 2014; Evans, 2012) and numerous diversity initiatives have not drastically altered the demographics of STEM occupations (Beede et al., 2011). Current research on the continued gender segregation in STEM argues that the nature of work in STEM is associated with gender norms that define men as the most suitable candidates for jobs (Ashcraft, 2013). This line of research commonly focuses on how occupational traits and norms commonly associated with men, such as the perception of possessing technological ability, impact women in the field (Cech, Rubineau, Silbey, & Seron, 2011; Cech, 2015). However, diversity recruitment literature maintains that if organizations project images that they are diverse or family-friendly, they are making a conscious attempt to challenge the masculine occupational identity of STEM and attract women (Avery & McKay, 2006; Casper et al., 2013).

Surprisingly, our results show that not all STEM women are attracted to diversity identity claims. In our study, job ads that featured photographs of children and statements in support of work-life balance were unsuccessful in attracting women with a career-centered identity project orientation. These women were suspicious of identity claims that challenged the masculine career model in STEM and thus positioned themselves through the "rejecting the game" strategy. Because

these women found the organizations to be unhelpful in developing their career identity project, they were not attracted to apply. The complexity of women's interpretation of organizational images is therefore not as straightforward as the existing literature on recruiting women to STEM is presenting it to be. This finding calls attention to the variety of women's identity project orientations and positioning strategies in relation to organizations, and extends current theorizing on why diversity claims in employer branding material could be failing to attract more women to STEM.

### 5.4. Future research and limitations

Based on the findings of our study, there remains many possibilities for future research to explore this topic further. We would speculate, building on our findings, that women with a more family-centered identity project perspective on careers in STEM would also position themselves in relation to organizational images in line with dominant career norms through defying monopolization (Glass & Minnotte, 2010). However, this was less explicit in our data – and therefore the blank field in Fig. 2 – and further research could focus on whether this is the case, or if not, elicit reasons why. Similarly, our findings also raise questions on how women with flexibility-centered identity project orientations relate to diversity claims or explicit family-friendly messages (like in Company B, see blank field in Fig. 2). Future research could address if women with a flexibility-centered identity project orientation in STEM are also finding an ally in organizational images constructed from such claims or whether this is not relevant to them at all.

Given the importance of women's constructions of organizational images, a potentially fruitful area for future research would be to investigate how organizations could alter their employer branding material and thus their image as an employer to attract women with career-, flexibility-, and family-centered identity orientations. Research in this vein would be of particular interest to companies seeking to recruit more STEM women and may be an important step towards improving women's representation in the field. The importance of organizational image in job seekers' identity projects could also be drawn on for studies in other fields in which specific groups are marginalized and in demand. Research encompassing a broader range of minority groups and occupational fields is needed to expand the perspective we developed here.

A common concern with focus groups is that the shared nature of the focus group setting might create socially desirable statements and possibly constrain the participants' answers (Morgan, 1993). While we were careful to minimize (power) differences between participants and moderator involvement that are likely to increase social desirability, future research on STEM women's identity projects might consider using qualitative interviews with individual participants. Especially, narrative interviews and analysis (e.g., Esin, Fathi, & Squire, 2014) with their focus on contextual interrelations, might be useful to explore the specific context of STEM and its influence on women's identity projects from a constructionist perspective.

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## Appendix A

Job advertisements used in focus groups<sup>2</sup>

## Company A

I am always one step ahead.

Always one step ahead:  
A is one of Austria's most successful technology corporations to specialize in the future-oriented market segments of intelligent transport systems (ITS) and information and communications technology (ICT). A is organized as a group of companies with the key entities A TrafficCom, A CarrierCom, and A BusinessCom. As a family-owned company headquartered in Vienna, A has been dedicated to the continuous development and implementation of new technologies for the benefit of its customers since 1892. With a wide range of innovative solutions and services, A makes a valuable contribution toward responsible approaches to a mobile and networked world. The companies of the A Group employ more than 5.000 people at subsidiaries and branch offices around the world. A. Always one step ahead.

## Company B

WHEN  
CHILDREN  
MEET  
CAREER  
B- effective together

Remarkable developments occur at B due to the combination of individual characteristics, personal interests and professional qualification. This is why we are seeking employees with a passion for all that they do and who will work together with us to achieve the common goal: to provide patients in Austria and all over the world with high-quality, affordable pharmaceutical products. We, B, are one of the largest pharmaceutical companies in Austria with over 4.000 employees at four sites. As a member of the global XY Group, we develop, produce and market generic pharmaceuticals – above all antibiotics, injectable cancer drugs and innovative biosimilars. Come and work with us as... [job title].

## Company C

C Your career at C  
Where your strengths meet opportunities.

C offers excellent perspectives for your career in one of the globally most successful companies in the construction industry.

You have graduated from your business or technical studies with above-average grades and are now looking for a challenging start at an innovative and dynamic company, in which you can quickly assume responsibility and where you can develop internationally?

About C

Global market leader, present in 120 countries, 20.000 team members, direct marketing, 200.000 customer contacts daily, more than 30 innovations annually – this is C.

We excite construction experts with technologically leading products, systems and services, which convince due to their performance and reliability.

Discover a successful company, where you can fully realize your potential!

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<sup>2</sup> All three job advertisements were taken from the online job platform [www.karriere.at](http://www.karriere.at). In the focus groups the anonymized job advertisements were used with their original design and pictures. Due to copyright reasons these were excluded from this publication.

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**Kaitlin Appleby** recently finished her PhD in management from the University of Innsbruck and is currently working in human resources at General Electric in Austria. Kaitlin's research interests include exploring the (re)production of inequality in organizations and especially the impact of human resource management practices on women.

**Bernadette Bullinger** is an assistant professor of human resources and organizational behavior at IE University Madrid. She received her doctoral degree from the University of Mannheim. Her current research focuses on institutional questions of legitimacy and valuation in the context of recruitment, and on visual and multimodal methods of studying organizations and human resource management.

**Anna Schneider** is an assistant professor of human resource management and employment relations at the University of Innsbruck, Austria. Her current research interests focus on justifications and equality in managing careers and employment. Anna has a long-standing interest in managing the workforce in international settings as she previously worked in several human resource management positions in a multi-national retail company.