

# We Are Standing Together in Front: How Scientists and Research Groups Form Identities in the Life Sciences

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## Abstract

Reputation building and visibility represent pressing requirements for living and working in academia today. These demands have been key to the corporate world and are acted upon through 'branding' practices. 'Branding' has further been shown to impact on employees and workplace identities. In academia, researching identity work is especially important because of a competitive funding climate that requires research groups to resemble an outstanding image and reputation. At the same time, stable jobs are scarce, bringing forth insecure and volatile environments characterized for example by temporary limited contracts and required internationalisation in scientific careers. Based on ethnographic work in globally recognized life science departments, I explore how individual and departmental identities relate. Thereby, I propose the concept of 'enrolling', that conveys how a research unit acts as a 'brand', and show how 'enrolling practices' produces stability through coherence and distinctiveness in individual and collective identities. My analysis thus allows a critical reflection on academia and the re-orderings in today's universities that create pervasive demands for living and working.

**Keywords:** academia, branding, identity work, life sciences, research groups, scientist

## Introduction

Today's laboratories need to possess reputation, visibility and productiveness, in order to succeed in attaining funds, attracting international scientists and publishing successfully (Ylijoki, 2014; Fochler et al., 2016)<sup>1</sup>. These demands are further entwined with the necessity of evaluation and scientific performance that permeate today's science landscape and invoke selective processes as a central force in academia (Hammarfelt and de Rijcke, 2015; Dahler-Larsen, 2012).

The need for reputation and visibility was tangible in my first visit in one of the research departments in which I did my ethnographic work - what I refer to here as the Random Austrian Science Department (RASD). I discussed my project with its director and one of his PhD students. We talked about the research project of the PhD student that I would be joining and agreed that I would be part of all lab-related activities, talks and meetings over the upcoming weeks. During this meeting, the director and

his student also debated the work plan of the research project. When we started to talk about my stay, the director proposed that we could extend its length.

Director: Would you like to get a degree from RASD?

Me: Well, I already have a master's degree in biology.

Director: But not from *here*. You will get it in six months and a promise for endless interviews.

The meeting continued with laughter and jokes for a while before we went on to discuss how I could get involved into the PhD student's work as a 'helping hand'. So, what does this anecdote illustrate? By suggesting an additional degree from the research department to be gained during my stay, the director delineated RASD as being special. A degree there is supposedly worth more and clearly distinct from programs at other universities, such as my former research degree from a medical biochemistry laboratory. The distinctiveness of this department in contrast to others was brought forth in a joking mood. This continued throughout the period of the ethnography, when for example the director stated the need for *getting the genes* of RASD or when members continuously referred to themselves as "RASDies". These joking remarks made clear to me that references towards the 'specialness' of the place represent an integral part of departmental life and are worth investigating further, as they are relevant for the way in which both scientists and groups form an identity in academia today. So, as the director emphasizes the 'specialness' of RASD, he hints towards the importance of the research department's name and quality by proposing a specific reputation and visibility.

Several studies have already attended to the increasing need for the creation of a 'good image' and a distinguishable or 'special' place for research (e.g. Wæraas and Solbakk, 2009; Steiner et al., 2013). Building reputation and visibility - known within organisation and management studies as 'branding' - is however mainly directed to a research unit's exterior, for example to reach out to international scientists and funding agencies (e.g. Rindova et al., 2005). Steiner and colleagues too conceive of reputation as external dimension

for building up the identity of a university, yet extend this conception and propose a model of "interconnectedness between organizational identity, symbolic identity, image and reputation" (Steiner et al., 2013: 411). Thereby, they convincingly show how organizational identity relates to the external perception of a university, and claim that researching identity formation is core for understanding underlying intentions and strategies in universities.

Moreover, building a collective and an individual identity as scientists in and of a particular place is challenging as research groups in the life sciences are described as increasingly volatile, "more-or-less stable and continually changing" in their composition of researchers (Hackett, 2005: 793). Scientists repeatedly join and leave a group due to project-related work and its temporary limited contracts, but also due to the need to progress their careers by moving from one lab to another, also internationally. As such, a constant struggle for research groups is to create intellectual and social coherence in scientific knowledge production processes. Moreover, as frequent re-assembly of research groups poses challenges for a group's internal relationships as well as its external perception, the formation of individual and collective identities is the main interest of this paper.

Since the academic world is intricately related to broader societal challenges, a lack of coherence has been prominently debated as a part of general societal transformations in Western cultures. This transformation is characterized by increased individualization due to the deconstruction of traditional formats of work and intensified demands of mobility and internationality (e.g. Beck, 1986; Giddens, 1991; Keupp, 1994). Furthermore, the lack of group coherence is in line with Bauman's argument (2004) that in today's society, with its changes and challenges, identities are characterized by a lack of stability in their local embedding. Thus, it is crucial to understand the identity work of researchers and their groups and departments, and reflect on how this identity work is acted upon. Thereby, I focus on the micro-processes by which scientists create their identities and establish group belonging in times of prevalent need for reputation and visibility in academia.

At the core of this paper is the argument that creating coherence and distinctiveness is central for research groups and departments and the ways in which scientists belong to them. In this piece, I specifically focus on the dynamics in one research department that was part of my study. It consisted of 6 research groups in which the boundaries between the department and the groups were constantly blurred. Hence, while RASD - which I conceive of as a conglomerate of groups - is at the centre of my analysis, the blurring boundaries between group and department allow a multifaceted gaze: *How do identities of scientists and their research groups/department relate to one another?*

This question is subdivided into a set of questions: *How do scientists inscribe to the collective of a research group/department? How, in turn, does this collective incorporate these scientists? And how does the relationship between scientists and their research group/department have an impact on the building of individual and collective identities especially in today's competitive academic landscapes (for instance through branding)?*

In order to analyse this process, I propose a new perspective on the concept of 'enrolling' - that shows how the scientists are incorporated in their groups and departments. This process also shows how the scientists inscribe to the collective of their groups and departments. Studies on research groups analyse, for example, enculturation practices of novices into their groups (Delamont and Atkinson, 2001; Traweek, 1988) or how social processes are enmeshed in building and maintaining a group (Davies and Horst, 2016; Hackett, 2005). I, however, argue that 'enrolling' serves the group's outside image and is simultaneously related to internal practices, showing how scientists are part of an academic culture that reveals characteristics of a 'brand'. Thus, I claim that understanding 'enrolling practices' sheds light on how scientists perceive of themselves and their groups and provides further understanding of how 'branding' takes on essential roles in academia. In that sense, 'enrolling' allows a critical reflection of the implicit assumptions and values present in academia today regarding how scientists should be and act as part of a research community, and at the same time offers insight into how scientists

engage with today's demands of being visible and having a reputation.

In what follows, I first discuss in more depth the broader context of transformations in academia that have taken place. I then explain how I conceive of scientists and identity work, how research on 'branding' and identification relates to my work and how I use the concept of 'enrolling'. In the empirical part I demonstrate how and through which practices the researchers are being and becoming part of RASD. On the basis of this analysis, I argue that the concept of 'enrolling' helps us to understand how individual and collective identity work is entangled and enables a critical reflection on this relationship and its tensions.

## Transforming universities

The need for a recognisable and visible identity that I have made central in this paper emerges out of broader trends in academia. In this section, I discuss a number of relevant aspects of living and working in science in the context of institutional transitions, such as the implementation of management practices in academia, the emergence of evaluation processes, the dependence on third-party funds and increasingly insecure working environments.

In light of larger cultural and economic shifts in which managerial approaches become ever more important, Maasen and Weingart (2008) show how practices from business science, management and corporate advisories are increasingly implemented in academic landscapes. Similarly, Chandler and colleagues describe how corporate management practices have found their way into academic institutions, bringing managerial restructurings in the wake of New Public Management (NPM) (Chandler et al., 2002). This transition is described as fostering an integration of a managerial logic inclined to incorporate innovation, market concerns and commercialisation into a more traditional logic of universities and their higher education values (Shore, 2008). The implementation of such principles then accounts for a reorganization of research according to requirements for performance and competition (Fochler, 2016). This accordingly impacts research practices

and “our lives, our relationships, our professional identities and the manner in which we conduct ourselves” (Shore, 2008: 281). Consequently, there is a need to understand both the narrative as well as day-to-day practices that guide researchers’ identity work - for which these transitions are of the utmost importance.

Further studies on transitions in academia point out how scientists are involved in evaluation processes and how competition and visibility are intricately related to these (e.g. Fochler and de Rijcke, 2017). Hammarfelt and colleagues (2016) for example analysed researchers’ online profiles in social networks and their relation to how they quantify themselves as part of such structures. Connected to the demands of being reputable and visible - the scientists are immersed in a game of representation that at the same time evaluates their market value. Other studies show that there is an increasing stress on evaluative devices to measure scientific performance standards as part of quality assessment and evaluation criteria (Chandler et al., 2002; Felt et al., 2013; Fochler et al., 2016). This is for example mirrored in what Power calls the “audit society” (Power, 1997) in which evaluation procedures as part of a so called “evaluation machine” (Dahler-Larsen, 2012) are described to affect scientific research practices. Power (1997) claims that audit changes how people are perceived and how they position themselves for instance towards evaluation and performance indicators. Yet policy rules are not simply being implemented by force but draw on academic institutions as “actors of these policies” as they implement and translate them into institutional processes (Stöckelová, 2014: 437). While these studies show that distinctiveness is a common benchmark in universities evaluation regimes, there is a need for explicitly drawing attention to how today’s demands are acted upon within everyday lab contexts and within the relationship of researchers to their groups and departments.

Another point of contention is how the decrease in direct state-funded research has fuelled competition for third-party funding and resources (Hornbostel, 2001) and how this relates to temporary limitations in funding possibilities and employment contracts for scientists. In this context, the

notion of ‘academic capitalism’ - furthering market as well as market-like behaviour due to competitive funding from external resource providers - has become a prominent neoliberal practice (Hackett, 2014; Slaughter and Leslie, 1997; Kleinman and Vallas, 2001; Linková and Stöckelová, 2012). These changes can be seen in the implementation of a new university law in Austria in 2002 and government-induced austerity measures. Due to a subsequent re-shaping of universities, this law led to an intensification of universities’ autonomy (Felt and Glanz, 2003). This also had an impact on e.g. the implementation of quality criteria (Fochler, 2016), the availability of funding in relation to short time contracts and an increase of externally funded scientists up to eighty per cent (Sigl, 2016). Moreover, temporary restrictions on contracts manifest themselves in uncertainties for researchers within a ‘regime of uncertainty’ - linking social as well as epistemic insecurities - leaving scientists in need of deploying coping strategies (Sigl, 2016).

Hence, individual career prospects are intricately related to institutional changes and substantial reformulations of what it means to pursue a career in science. In this context, third-party funding, visibility and “attaining a good image” form key currencies for university departments in order to attract funding, highly skilled personnel or to secure high-impact publications (Ylijoki, 2014: 70). These key currencies contribute to the requirements for gaining or keeping a job in science. Yet aside of institutional re-orderings, we need to understand the practices that not only affect the production of knowledge but how scientists relate to and identify with their groups and departments. Thereby, we can understand further how orderings (Law, 1994) have a profound impact on the norms and values against which identities are being built. In this vein, I argue that re-orderings of universities foster re-orderings in scientists’ accommodation to their place of work, and their identification and sense of belonging within research groups.

## Scientists and identity work

Taking into account these vast changes in academia, some studies focus on the different roles

scientists inhabit, such as shifts from traditional 'ivory tower' researchers to 'entrepreneurial' scientists (e.g. Shapin, 2008; Henkel, 2005; Lam, 2010). For example, Owen-Smith and Powell (2002) conclude that identities are influenced by the "economic, institutional, and scientific transformations" as these "are changing the meanings that academics attach to scientific careers" (p.24). In a similar vein, Hakala (2009: 186) focuses on the moral framework of young scientists under permanent change and concludes that a more stable environment would "create possibilities for more coherent identities". It is also argued that coherence has been further disrupted by a "filter feeder" phenomenon with research groups (Hackett, 2005: 793), wherein researchers arrive and drop out constantly, impacting for example on publication practices and authorship distribution. But while Hackett makes a profound analysis of the tensions that underlie the researcher-group relationship, I instead focus on how the researcher-group relation counteracts the "filter feeding" process by bringing forth temporary stability for the researchers.

I further take stability as a concept deeply entangled with coherence and distinctiveness. Coherence refers to "a sense of continuity and recognizability over time and situation" relating experiences and minimising fragmentation, and distinctiveness refers to the unique definition of somebody, sometimes "shared with others" but still distinguished as 'one' (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002: 625). Coherence and distinctiveness thus constitute central elements of identity work. In line with this, research groups have been shown to rely on coherence for recruiting and motivating scientists to work for a common goal (Griffith and Mullins, 1972) but also on distinctiveness in order to create a distinguishable independent image (Hackett, 2005). Hence, creating a stable reference frame and perception of the group is key for the individual and collective identity work of scientists and their research groups.

### ***Identity work and 'branding'***

The need for coherence and distinctiveness is further mirrored in management and organization studies that have made identification and identity work of employees a core interest of their work

(e.g. Brannan et al., 2015; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Vallas and Cummins, 2015; Rodrigues and Child, 2008). They show that 'branding' informs the identity work of employees' and thereby the authors reinforce questions regarding identity work. Balmer (2001) for example indicates, that in order for a company to be successful, it must create a brand that is distinctive and emotionally meaningful for users. It must also create a corporate image, culture and a reputation employees can relate and commit to. This formulation is an extension of 'brand' definition solely based on a product to a framing that includes all people who are important for a company, such as managers or stakeholders (Hatch and Schultz, 2008; Balmer, 2001) and employees - who become shareholders of the brand (Schultz et al., 2002). Another prominent example is Kunda's study (2006) of a technology company in the United States, which emphasises the coherent framework that stands for the ideology of a company. This framework serves to internally control and reproduce a specific culture with "rules for thoughts and feelings", "mindsets" and "gut reactions" as well as a strong commitment to the company and its goals (Kunda, 2006: 7). These studies have however explicitly focussed on companies, missing out on other realms of work and how the formation of a brand might look like outside of the world of business, such as in academia.

Keeping both 'branding' and identity work in mind, I understand identities in the context of today's science regime as essential "objects, goals and resources" that are subject to "strategies, tactics and regulating procedures" (Rose, 1998: 9). In this vein, identity work means to work for one's 'self' as a project, a corporate identity, with the aim to excel and create self-fulfilment (Rose, 1998; Bröckling, 2007) while being at the same time highly regulated and controlled (e.g. Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Against this, I analyse how identity becomes established when scientists 'enrol' to RASD. I also ask what happens when they purposefully connect and manage their social and self-identity as part of the department (Watson, 2008) but also when they have to fulfil standards of an ideal type scientist. Accordingly, I regard identity work as the construction of coherence and distinctiveness (Sveningsson and Alvesson,

2003) that are being done in practices that are characterized by 'branding'.

### **Identity formation between individuals and research groups: 'Enrolling'**

To open up *how* scientists and their research department interact, this paper draws on a long-term engagement with the life science field. It is mainly based on - but not limited to - a three-year research project, which included fieldwork dispersed over two research sites in Europe and the US, respectively. Aside of the daily lab work and numerous informal conversations during and after lab work, I have conducted 17 scheduled interviews.

For this paper I mainly draw on participant observations and interviews at RASD - a "research department" consisting of 6 research groups. RASD comprised about 50-60 scientists of all levels during the time of this study. The total number depended on a variable number of rotation/intern students, as well as doctoral candidates in different stages of writing up their thesis or experimental work. All research groups featured distinct projects while collaborating with each other on a daily basis and working in the same sub-discipline. As part of the observation, I was following two doctoral students and took part in their daily lab routines, such as working side by side, helping with cleaning and attending weekly lab and social meetings. In addition, I was invited to join a PhD retreat in the countryside, observed a visit of the minister of science, a scientific workshop with international guests and the opening ceremony for a newly founded research platform.

By participating in the group's daily research endeavours, I aimed to observe commonly shared understandings and interactions within the research groups and relate individual experiences to stories of the group. Capturing impressions and experiences in the role of a participant observer (Bryman, 2004) and grasping an ensemble of "local practices whose ways and workings are only accessible through a competent practitioner's in-depth experience and familiarity" (Pollner and Emerson, 2001: 123) were at the forefront of my concern. Due to my former background as a

microbiologist, critically engaging with my role as participant observer was crucial and helped to reflect on what kinds of stories I was being told and searched for (Schönbauer, 2017). In the formal and informal interviews I engaged with senior scientists (postdocs, group leaders and directors), as well as junior scientists (PhD students, master students), and technicians<sup>3</sup>. As a result, the analytical material consists of extensive fieldnotes and interview transcripts that provided a key source for creating codes and memos (Charmaz, 2006).

Following the creation of initial codes and intense memo-writing, a key matter of concern turned out to be the relationship between the researchers and their workplace as well as the proposed 'specialness' of RASD. Considering this, I was mainly interested in how the scientists would make sense about their stay at RASD, such as reasons for applying, the specificities of the department, daily life experiences and how they would contrast former experiences to their current life at RASD. In subsequent steps, I focused on the respective everyday practices and narrations that inform this relationship, guiding how identity work at RASD is accomplished and how scientists accordingly 'enrol to' and 'are enrolled' to their workplace.

In this paper, I take 'enrolling' as a process through which scientists and their research groups relate and produce stable configurations following the building of alliances and the definition of common interests and concerns. 'Enrolment' has commonly been used in Actor Network Theory (ANT) to understand how scientists produce knowledge and "enlist people and objects behind their banner", thereby assigning particular roles in this process (Epstein, 2008: 803; Latour, 1987; Callon, 1986). Hence, 'enrolling' speaks about anchorage and durability and about the manifold negotiations - including "trials of strength and tricks" - that determine identity (Callon, 1986: 206). More recently, 'enrolling' has further been represented as a mission of the scientists themselves, for example when they recruit or accrue research subjects for their studies (Epstein, 2008: 803). The concept has for instance been used in the case of genetic DNA testing to understand how different articulations of indigenous people and scientists are part of identity-making processes and how

these articulations are used for the ‘enrollment’ of the tribal members (TallBear, 2013).

In line with Latour (1987), my understanding of ‘enrolling’ unfolds in two modes: first, ‘enrolling’ depicts how actors are enrolled to make them believers and responsible for dissemination “across time and space” (Latour, 1987: 121); second, ‘enrolling’ controls behaviour in order to create coherence. Accordingly, new allies are recruited and form a resource that is “made to act as one unbreakable whole” (Latour, 1987: 132). Consequently, I attend in this paper to the on-going enculturation practices at RASD with a focus on identity work at all stages of a scientific career that are continuously part of ‘enrolling’. I conceptualize ‘enrolling’ as having an impact on the outside perception and reputation of a group and its name, on how scientists relate to its mission statement and how they belong to the group within everyday collective work.

Hence, ‘enrolling’ shows that the interconnectedness between scientists and the research department characterizes a profound dependency and orderliness for how identity work is done and might not be done otherwise, meaning that it is controlled in order to ensure coherence (see also Latour, 1987). I show how the process of ‘enrolling’ creates mutual dependencies between researchers and the department as it fosters a climate of commitment, persuasion and control. This allows me to trace how scientists “participate in the way they are governed” (Lorey, 2011: 4) as they ‘enrol’ to RASD and become ‘enrolled’. ‘Enrolling’ in this sense opens up the relationship between scientists and their local environment, but also exposes the pressure on scientists to conform to the demands of today’s cultures of scientific work.

In the following sections, I will show how ‘enrolling’ provides ground for the identity work of scientists at RASD. In doing so, I will focus on how the scientists relate to the department and its famous name, analysing how the researchers merge with its collective representation, how a mission statement is framed and how everyday tasks are operated to create an engaged collective. Thereby, I will open up how ‘enrolling’ guides the relationship of the scientists with the department in ways that benefits researchers and the

department, but also how ‘enrolling’ is used as a “tool for management, (and) control” (Stöckelová, 2014: 445) and thus is characterized by tensions.

## Relating to a famous name

In order to be successful, a research unit or laboratory in the life sciences has to define its territory and be renowned within a certain community of scientists, as an important place and name in the landscape of research (e.g. Knorr-Cetina, 1999; Vermeulen, 2017). In the following, I will show how the scientists relate to RASD and its perception as special and famous department. In doing so, I will refer to how the name was referenced in different ways, for example when scientists talked about publishing, recruiting students, advancing in their career, when mobilizing impressions of outside visitors for their own relationship with the place, or even when voicing critique about the department.

When asked about why they decided to join RASD, the scientists gave similar answers concerning the reputation of the department. They told me about the international standing of the group leaders, about the extraordinary technological equipment that “resembles the equipment of a Max Planck institute” (Marie, group leader), how RASD is at the “cutting edge of the field” (Noah, PhD student) and that it represents a challenging environment (Matthew, PhD student). These characteristics are perceived as being important for a career in science, while also creating a particular reputation and a place with a recognisable name.

One scientist told me about her experiences of publishing a paper and how RASD impacted on the publication process:

Well personally to be honest I also think I will profit from being here, since people want to join my group because of the name, RASD. This is also quite funny. Of course you do have, so you do have a name for yourself, I have been reading this right now in the review comments, that, so that the name, that they know who I am.

(Marie, group leader, translated from German original)

Marie is recounting her experiences as a newly employed group leader at RASD. Since starting, she has tried to publish papers and attract students for her evolving research group. As part of the publication process, she experiences acknowledgment for her affiliation within the reviewers' comments on her submission. The reviewers Marie talks about wrote statements such as "we expect something from her", while reacting positively to the development of her career, her CV and her future career "in this environment" (quotes from interview). In that sense, the reviewers are acknowledging her individual name as a scientist by relating it back to the department and by attributing credit to her future developments as a scientist at RASD.

Marie was amazed when realising how these reviewers related her name to the research department and subsequently expected an increase in attractiveness of her profile in upcoming recruiting efforts of new employees. New members of her group would not only see her name but also the label of the department she is working at. Since her name is already part of the wider RASD-cosmos, students want to join her group because of it. In doing so, they reinforce something similar to the reviewer comments: an appreciation of the place and its reputation. Her self-identity as scientist is thus intricately connected to the department for progressing in a professional career. This relationship formulates a "brand narrative as promise" (Brannan et al., 2015) connecting her career-related anticipation to disciplinary visibility and a trustworthy reputation. This is especially visible when Marie explains: "you are the product that you wanna sell. And this is not going to change. Because in every grant proposal you will be the product again". Accordingly, RASD has intriguing effects for her career, as she continuously needs to sell herself as a 'product' for third-party funding and for advancing in her career.

Another example of RASD's well-known name and how it helps scientists to establish a career and identity, is tangible in a lunch break conversation I had with PhD students about its 'image':

Ben was interested in what people from the outside think about the department. He told me that there were some visitors who mentioned their impression of RASD. The visitors imagined RASD

as very competitive department where everyone seemed to be stressed and under pressure because of numerous meetings and lectures within the department that members have to attend. The guests declared RASD as unique but probably exhausting to work at. Ben said that it was really interesting for him to hear and kept on referring to the department as "different" in terms of everything. (...) Later in the same lunch break, Ben stated that the group looks homogenous from the "outside" and Julian added that it would make a "good" image. Matthew followed up on that: "well, that is actually the reason why I came here". (fieldnote day 23)

In this lunch discussion, the PhD students mobilize impressions of visitors from outside as resources for their own evaluation of the place. The visitors comment on the specificity of RASD as well as its competitive character by stressing that it would be an exhausting place to work at. This assessment of its competitiveness is not only based on a list of publications or third-party funded projects, but on perceptions of exhausting work schedules and a busy departmental life. When recounting tales of visitors, the PhD students also draw on their own image of RASD and attribute an essential role to its appearance. The department accordingly becomes a symbol to which the members belong to as "the best and the brightest" resembling a competitive elite of a successful entity (Kärreman and Rylander, 2008: 117). This promotion is simultaneously done by insiders and outsiders that confirm the ambitious perception and accredit the members a status as part of a competitive elite.

The relation between insiders and outsiders to RASD and how the scientists are relating to a famous name also manifested itself, for example, when a guest scientist presented his work as part of a job application at the department. In an invited talk, he introduced himself referring to the reputation of the department: "I am happy to be here not only because of the famous RASD but also because of the lovely weather" (fieldnote day 16). In other instances, the self-identity of insiders and the collective 'brand' was related in informal encounters, such as within meetings, presentations, or when joking in daily lab life when the scientists call themselves "RASDies". In a progress report meeting, in which students and



postdocs of the research department presented the state of the art of their work, an undergraduate student working on his master's thesis made explicit "thank you" notes to the scientists of the department: the "RASDies" had served as helping hands during his stay, spent breaks together with him, and shared his passion for playing the video game "Starcraft" (fieldnote day 5). Through these acknowledgements, the insiders - who show their dedication to colleagues - simultaneously appreciate the research department as a whole, just like outsiders do.

In contrast to this appreciation of RASD, department members also referred to their colleagues as "RASDies" through jokes that allowed the voicing of critique. For instance, one PhD student joked about being sick with "RASD-itis", which was "the illness of being at RASD" (fieldnote day 20). Through making fun of the name in a joking mood of being sick with it, the researcher inter-relates illness and the department signifying a tension in the relationship between him and the place (Mulkay and Gilbert, 1982), pointing out that RASD is not necessarily an idyllic place. Yet this joke is not only a sign of the relationship between individuals in the lab (Knorr-Cetina, 1999); this ridicule also indicates subversion (Michael, 1986) and the building of a 'resistant self' (Collinson, 2003) as the scientists express their discontent with the department. This critique however happens without alienation from the collective identity as they relate their self-identity as "RASDies" to the place and in so doing reinforce the imagination of a competitive or exhausting workplace. Consequently, such jokes offer insights into how the scientists criticize RASD and its rules but also how its image is performed.

Accordingly, the scientists perceive RASD as a 'special' and exclusive department resembling a distinct 'brand' that has a promissory function for their career. The name of RASD establishes a reputation and visibility that helps to create a 'brand' for the department but also fulfils the need to be visible for individual scientists, such as when the name serves to establish a career and an identity as researcher. Furthermore, the collective 'brand' and the self-identity of members are connected, for instance when members explicitly draw on the department's reputation for their own valuation of the place. 'Enrolling' then means that scien-

tists 'enrol' to RASD because of its competitive and strong image. At the same time, 'enrolling' also opens up a contradiction: the researchers form small resistances through jokes, signifying a tension that points towards RASD as a demanding environment.

### **Merging into a collective representation and mission statement**

In line with the making of an internationally recognisable name, RASD is actively merging its researchers behind a common mission statement and outside representation. The department is presented as a "motivating and internationally competitive scientific environment", and it is explicitly mentioned that it has "it all", a mixture of young and experienced scientists as well as a scientific network for collaborations that offers ample opportunities for future scientists (quotes from homepage). RASD's collective representation and - connected to that - its overarching mission statement is built for example by the use of metaphors and through its online representation. The common representation is also criticized, such as when individual members oppose the collective framing.

To further understand RASD and its underlying mission statement and outside representation, the director and his authority is key. This is exemplified by an instance in which the director told me that he had originally metaphorically conceived of the department as a kind of "pirate ship", even before it relocated to Austria. As metaphors conceptualize our everyday social realities and structure how and what we argue (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980), the pirate ship metaphor of the director guides his imagination of an autonomous and untamed workplace that distinguishes itself from everybody else in an exceptional way, namely in how it represents itself in the first place. The ship metaphor is however still mobilized for present conceptualizations of the department:

This is actually a well-functioning ship that is finding its way through. Unperturbed. Breaking the ice (laughs).

(Jonas, director of RASD, translated from German original)

In this quote, using a similar nautical metaphor, RASD is imagined as an icebreaker that holds its course regardless of disturbances and turbulence. An icebreaker is a stable and powerful ship that continuously breaks the ice as it moves. When the director understands RASD as a pirate ship at the beginning and an icebreaker later on, steadily manoeuvring uncertain terrain, he makes an argument about continuity and stability counteracting the fast pacing ephemeral science regime. Using this metaphor for a scientific research department not only makes it a consistently floating entity, an enterprise that follows a course and transmits a particular vision, but also represents the need for being different to others.

The distinctiveness of the ship is brought forth further when the director said about a new member: “it took her a while to get that RASD gene”. This was in reference to a new female group leader who needed to develop an understanding for jokes, which was an integral component of how the scientists interacted. The new member came “from outside” and “knew different cultures” since she was working abroad before (quotes from interview with director). By using the gene metaphor, the director imagines a specific collective identity, namely that of a ‘family’ that lets him feel “more secure, less alone” (quote from interview with director). What could be more essential than becoming part of the laboratory’s genome and metaphorical ‘family’ by *getting the gene*? The family-collective has been further referenced as providing a backup when its members e.g. collaboratively think about research projects or if someone is “in state of a crisis” and family-members help each other (quote from interview with director). While this creates stability, it is also associated with an exclusive membership, as the ‘family’ mostly refers to an epistemic and social community on the group leader level.

Aside of the metaphorical references, the strong collective representation of the department can also be found on its website. It shows a range of scientific topics and notifications, such as the “news feed” mentioning successfully granted research funds, celebrations of honorary titles, or published papers. It also includes announcements of new members, PhD exam celebrations with self-crafted costumes or even when scientists

became parents. More informal gatherings are highlighted too, such as a poker tournament, the RASD football team, barbecue evenings or leisure time excursions of the department to nearby places. As Lorenz-Meyer (2012) argues in her study on the performance of excellence, I find that the displayed get-togethers on the homepage enforce a specific collectivity that creates an imagination of an excellent international location and a pleasurable place to stay.

This collective representation is also performed on the member section of the homepage, which does not split up the researchers according to their group memberships but rather by their hierarchical position, such as “scientists and postdocs”, “PhD students” or “faculty and staff”. The director remembers the decision of group leaders and professors to represent RASD together on the homepage:

We always said: “we are standing together above”. And we show that (note: individual research groups and respective affiliations) only far down at the homepage. (...) Of course we have “news” (note: on the homepage) where special achievements can be celebrated. So this is what we are emphasizing anyway. And we are also allowed to sell ourselves to the press individually. You don’t have to say RASD there. But somehow it should be clear. It is an enterprise. (...) Although not in research. (...) But in principle there is this idea that we are standing together in front. (...) We have a group of 56. (...) So, as RASD we are clearly distinguishing ourselves (note: from other research groups/research departments).  
(Jonas, director of RASD, translated from German original)

*Standing together above* or *standing together in front* accordingly means to work side by side as strong collective that has a common external recognition and as entity that would help each other in creating a safe and sound space. This musketeer-like attitude mostly refers to group leaders and creates an imagined community that is “communist-like” (quote from interview with director) with all leaders helping each other regarding concerns with funding or employees. In this sense, being ahead of something generates a collective vision of the department as “we”. While the

research groups at RASD follow their interests in slightly different directions, their collective framing serves as an overarching scaffold for being together through social gatherings and news on the homepage. Thereby, outsiders should first and foremost recognize RASD as an “enterprise”. This conceptualization produces a common imagination, for outsiders, of an entity that is capable of persuasion. Following this imagination, the research department resembles an environment in which the individual scientists have to merge with its collective framing.

The coherent collective representation on the homepage is also disrupted when, for example, one of the professors featured his group as distinct part of the department by uploading a group picture and announcing the groups’ members on his personal university homepage. In the decision to feature an individual profile aside of exclusively following the departmental frame, he configures his own vision of a group. The group leader acted upon the contradictory demands of becoming an independent individual while working in the means of an overarching frame. When asked about this group leaders’ decision, the RASD director mentioned that this would be a sign of “small egoism” and showing one’s possessions, but also that everybody would have the possibility of “selling oneself individually” while remaining part of RASD. As establishing an individual profile is, however, essential for maintaining a career in science (Müller, 2014b; Felt et al., 2017), the group leader challenged the collective representation and constructed a generative choice for his career, while using RASD as a resource for his professional career.

Hence, RASD exerts a collective representation as an enterprise to the outside and invokes the metaphor of a ‘family’ for some of its members inside. The depiction of RASD as ‘enterprise’ relates to it being an entity capable of persuasion and competition that conforms to current needs in academia. The ‘family’ instead can be understood as tied to an imaginative repertoire of care, safety and responsibility (Davies and Horst, 2015; Fochler et al., 2016) or a way of escaping loneliness in academia (Felt et al., 2010). Thereby, the members are expected to ‘enrol’ their self-identity to its collective, and adapt to its culture and mission

statement. This opens up how scientists conform to and perform a collective framing. However, this is also problematic, especially if there is little room for an outside representation of its members, who are in need of creating an individual portfolio when progressing their career.

### **Operating everyday tasks through collective engagement**

Similar to the RASD collective that is being built in a common representation and as part of the director’s mission statement, the scientists at RASD also experience a collective everyday life. Life science research groups are characterized by the need to commonly organize the laboratory, such as when collectively caring for daily chores in housekeeping work (Garforth and Kerr, 2010). In the following, I will show how scientists relate to the RASD collective in the spatial distribution of lab spaces, through being involved in housekeeping work, when voicing critique on the daily and weekly schedules or on the implementation of standard operating procedures.

A collective everyday experience at RASD was intentionally created through the common internal spatial structure of the department: at RASD, the distribution of bench spaces was an explicit matter of concern<sup>4</sup>. For instance, all scientists (postdocs, PhD students) were assigned to lab spaces not according to their research group affiliations in order to enhance “interaction” among the “RASDies” (Felix, professor). Aside from distinguishing between undergraduates and more experienced researchers, such as PhD students and postdocs, there was no other criterion determining one’s bench location. Although the distinct research groups materialized in time and space - when, for example, team meetings or social events were organized - the visibility of each group was non-existent in office spaces. This commingling was destined to dissolve boundaries between research groups by providing opportunities for communication regardless of one’s belonging to a lab. Similarly to Kunda’s (2006) study on the collective experience and behaviour in a Tech company, I find that dissolving clear group affiliations provided a common ground for a collective and coherent experience among RASD members.

Another example of how the scientists collectively experience everyday work relates to the expectation of their commitment in doing chores. Felix, a professor at RASD, reflects on what it would take to be working in science and states, that aside of scientific efforts, working together and learning how to interact with a variety of people would be a main matter of concern. He explains that engagement in shared tasks, such as house-keeping work (e.g. cleaning, defrosting, storing), is key for the organization of the department and is a compulsory part of working as a researcher. So students have to learn to fulfil chore responsibilities that are not explicitly related to their thesis but that instead help to operate organizational or even social efforts at RASD.

(...) the engagement for the bigger picture. So, the realization that one is an individual in this department, but that this (is) what the department stands for as a whole to the outside. That this is important for one's own career sort of too. And that this is why you maybe also do stuff, and take part in stuff that doesn't provide you with a lot of benefits for the PhD, diploma thesis, not as a clear-cut advantage. That means you have to get involved in the lab, you also have to involve yourself in topics concerning the department. (Felix, professor, translated from German original)

Reflecting back on his former side jobs during his own studies, Felix remembers that everyone has duties to fulfil, regardless of the hierarchical position. "Feeling responsible for everything" appears as main criterion for working in his group and at RASD. He further relates the dedication of individual scientists to collectively shared tasks with the representation of the department "as a whole to the outside". In this sense, participation in mundane tasks of the department becomes entwined with both a passionate and trustworthy "everyone is on the same boat" metaphor (Law, 1994: 179), as well as a dedication for a research department that in return directly impacts on one's success in science. Hence, all scientists (except for group leaders) had to engage in common collective care work. This is especially important due to the prevalent individualized work mode that widely affects postdocs and their career-related pressures (Müller, 2014a). I find that the collective responsibility

at RASD counteracts these individualization procedures and creates room for collective care and engagement.

Another example of collective engagement is the scientists' commitment in doing chores: cleaning commonly shared instruments and lab spaces - called "doing the labslave" - followed a weekly schedule. All employees (postdocs, PhD students) had to take part and care for waste management (when included in this procedure I was referred to as the "labslave assistant"), such as autoclaving waste, and collecting dirty glasses and washing them. The "labslave" role was outlined according to a rotating schedule. As "this system is keeping one person responsible for an entire week every few months" (fieldnote day 2), these duties are not done by choice but by obligation. The "labslave" builds a setting in which scientists become metaphorical part-time slaves, doing waste management for the common good. This joke draws on the unexpected congruence of being a scientist and being a slave (Mulkay and Gilbert, 1982). It also provides a reference towards the formal discrepancy between scientists as competitive and visible (as demonstrated in the former sections) and scientists as resources. Yet no matter if done voluntarily or not, the scientists at RASD are contributing to the common good by dedicating time to housekeeping work.

At the same time, the scientists are critical about weekly schedules that structure their days through meetings, presentations, lab cleaning dates and other obligatory participatory actions. This can be best exemplified within an encounter I had while receiving an explanation of a statistical program, "wordle", a tool for demonstrating the most commonly used words in a text, by two PhD students talking about mandatory tasks and time schedules:

PhD student 1: I would really like to do that (note: using wordle) with the RASD e-mails and see which words pop up the most.

PhD student 2: I already have a prediction. Maybe: "attendance is mandatory"; "Cleaning is mandatory". (fieldnote day 19)

This encounter refers to the daily and weekly temporal schedules the scientists had to follow. The

PhD students were not only bemoaning the regulation of their days but the lack of control over their own temporal schedules. While I do not think this conversation contradicts the necessity of meetings for scientists, it exemplifies the department members' engagement as well as their physical attendance in meetings to be a formal requirement for their work. This talk also shows that few organizational issues are left to chance as "there is a lot of eyes and ears always making sure you are doing the right thing" (interview quote, PhD student). In line with Collinson's (2003) study on how workers conform to their authorities, my argument is similar: the scientists have to conform as dedicated members of a department while subordinating their selves to the organizational authority.

A final example of how the RASD-collective is structured for collective engagement and how the scientists were criticizing rules, is the implementation of "standard operating procedures" (SOPs). These procedures were intended to regulate scientific protocols and standardize *how* these should be written, from bench to kitchen rules. Implementing SOPs aimed to normalize all lab-relevant protocols in format and length in order to provide coherence in subsequent steps of writing, collecting and storage even when scientists leave RASD. In an organizational meeting, the researchers discussed which SOPs should be written, how and by whom, and delegated responsibilities for their making. While all standards would be stored on the department's server, some of them featured explicit instructions and were taped onto the respective technical devices. Through this, scientists were provided with a clear overview of what to do where (such as how to work at the DNA staining and detection place). However, many scientists did not regard the SOPs as particularly useful. The standardization efforts were perceived controversially in that they were not accredited to be "scientific work" or in compliance with academic researchers as "free" individuals. Thus, a 'go and ask' practice was the most common way of getting to know a research method, without needing to read a manual, follow a chain of command or rely on SOPs as written instructions of how to handle lab equipment. Accordingly, the lab members would rather go to

their colleagues in person and ask about specifics of the actual method instead of looking up an SOP on the department's database. In this case, scientists relate by resisting rules and regulations of the department and simultaneously creating an alternative form of interaction through opposing rules.

In conclusion, the organization of everyday life and work provides insights into the relationship between the scientists and RASD. Everyday tasks, such as lab housekeeping or engagement in chores, are operated conjointly. Participation in daily tasks, or the spatial distribution of work places regardless of research groups, can thus be understood as tied to the need to counteract prevalent individualization practices in academia today (Müller, 2014a, 2014b). At the same time, RASD forms an environment that is built along clear rules and regulations of how to engage, such as when members are controlled by tight schedules. Hence, the scientists - mostly PhD students and postdocs - are 'enrolled to' and 'enrol' as engaged and dedicated members of a common entity. This further opens up how identity work is oscillating between conformity and resistance, building a self that has to perform well in an orchestrated environment while also forming careful relationships that stabilize the collective in its everyday work.

### **Relating through enrolling: identity work in between stability and control**

The need for reputation-building and visibility has been described as crucial for scientists in order to enhance attractiveness and gain money or equipment (see for example Ylijoki, 2014; Wæraas and Solbakk, 2009). This is even more important since funding possibilities have increasingly shifted from state-subsidized to third-party based, thus intensifying competition and the importance of a distinct well-known image. At the same time, research groups are continually changing their composition of researchers (Hackett, 2005) making it crucial to establish internal coherence. While many studies have carefully paid attention to critically reflect on how academia is constantly changing in response to these demands, I have further shown how a research department resembles

important characteristics of a 'brand' and thereby acts on today's requirements in academia. Accordingly, re-orderings in academia that are oriented towards a regime of selection and competition provide a baseline for 'enrolling', which partially counteracts but also conforms to these demands.

In this paper, I have shown how scientists and a research department relate in a state of crucial dependence, and how this dependence is acted upon in 'enrolling' and the respective identity work it produces. In short, I have demonstrated that scientists 'enrol' their self-identity to RASD as it represents a promising repository for their future career. The department's exclusive identity as a competitive and 'special' place is brought forth through internal and external references of scientists towards its name. The 'specialness' is also traded in its coherent collective outside representation and within the internal mission statement of the director, who imagines RASD to be an enterprise and a 'family' (for some of its members). RASD's collective structure is further tangible in day-to-day experiences as scientists are expected to 'enrol' through engaging in cleaning and care work. Hence, 'enrolling' demarcates a relationship that produces alliances between scientists and their research department and configures a mutual dependence.

Yet 'enrolling' also indicates tensions. In line with perceiving 'enrolling' as a way to inscribe and control actors (Latour, 1987), I argue that RASD exerts control while scientists become part of it. As in Kunda's (1995, 2006) work on a Tech company, the "company culture" serves to shape and guide the member's roles by defining rules and reference frames. In this regard, 'enrolling' also resembles a brand-centred control in which all scientists take part, embracing RASD as proud representatives. Moreover, this enthusiasm - when taken up by outsiders - confirms the scientists' perception of the department as competitive and visible. The resulting tension when scientists 'enrol' and 'become enrolled' has been verbalized through on-going jokes. These jokes potentially allow what Collinson (2003) calls a "resistant self" to flourish - a self that simultaneously allows critique and appreciation of the place. In sum, 'enrolling' provides insight into how commitment,

persuasion and control frame the relationship of individual and collective identity work.

In order to unpack 'enrolling' and its impact on identity work further, it is crucial to bear in mind that it is an ambiguous process. 'Enrolling' depicts how scientists relate to a research department that provides an international and competitive reputation and a collective environment. Thereby, the scientists are able to meet today's academic demands for distinctiveness while also finding temporary stability. Hence, the researcher-group relation brings forth temporary stability for the researchers and counteracts the lack of coherence in groups. However, next to offering stability, the scientists are at the same time becoming part of a controlling environment that conforms to the current science regime and its competitive selective procedures without providing alternatives.

In the last couple of years, RASD has become a top-notch place in the international community, according to the list of publications, honours, fellowships and third-party grants. The director has received national and international honours as "highly cited researcher" and publications of its members have gained far-reaching international acknowledgement. Additionally, a revised homepage and manifold media captures keep RASD well represented and provide a "good image" (Ylijoki, 2014). It can be said that it has successfully established a visible and competitive international landmark despite re-structurings in Austrian universities (Fochler, 2016; Felt and Glanz, 2003; Felt et al., 2017) that intensified short-time contracts and project-based funding.

Along with this, RASD scientists construct an identity as stakeholders of a 'brand' that supports a wider recognition and perpetuation of RASD's reputation and visibility. At the same time, RASD imitates a "firm-like entity" (Etzkowitz, 2003: 111) as it resembles core characteristics of a 'brand': e.g. striving for uniqueness and commitment, a corporate image and reputation, emotional attachment and a corporate culture that employees can relate to (Balmer, 2001). This imitation is based on efforts to create coherence and distinctiveness for an internal and external vision, attempts to establish measurements for quality control (e.g. cleaning; SOPs), in the distri-

bution of work places, or simply by referring to it as an “enterprise”. Consequently, the self-identity of the scientists is tightly knit into the department’s demands, leaving little room for how a member could be otherwise while being part of a ‘brand’. However, an important question becomes: which scientists does this system select? In order to keep up a highly competitive ‘brand’, group leaders need to attract prospective members (e.g. through reputation, excellent equipment and facilities), while choosing potentially dedicated scientists in line with the group leaders’ imaginations of the characteristics of a good researcher. This might lead to a potential streamlining of who is being employed or gets a (stable) position, which also affects epistemic practices.

Accordingly, ‘enrolling’ to a ‘brand’ establishes a mutual dependence between scientists and the department, who similarly have to “sell” their identities in order to take part in the prevailing game of representation and performance. Both scientists and RASD are in a process of capitalisation (to paraphrase Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004), as RASD as a ‘brand’ is taking advantage from highly skilled international scientists, while researchers are capitalizing the department for their own careers. The ‘brand’ clearly takes part in the credibility cycle (Latour and Woolgar, 1979) as the growing need for reputation and visibility builds a basis for further investments, collaboration, grants and publications. This is tangible when RASD plays an important part in the review process of a journal and potentially has an impact on the subsequent outcome of the publication, or if future job applications of RASDies rely on the reputation of the workplace. The investment strategies in the credibility cycle benefit and thereby provide stability for both individual scientists and the department.

The relationship between scientists and the department also offered possibilities for counteracting the individualized working mode in the life sciences (Müller, 2014b) through e.g. the collective engagement of members in doing chores for the common good. Yet these chores however excluded members of the metaphorical ‘family’ at RASD. The ‘family’, imagined as “a place of closeness, safety and nurture” (Davies and Horst, 2016: 385), consisted of group leaders, staff scien-

tists and professors, excluding less experienced scientists. It expanded over time due to a constant increase in permanent jobs (professorships, staff scientist positions). While the research department resembles an important resource for its members, this had an even stronger implication for members of the ‘family’. This is the case when the members that perform well are promised a promotion and are likely to be assigned a stable position, or when the scientists need to have the genes of the metaphorical ‘family’ and adapt to its culture. Thereby, the scientists and the department also establish an alliance that anchors the scientists into a place (Callon, 1986). But again: what does it mean if a ‘family’ nurtures some and leaves out others, those who might not have its genes? And how does this potentially streamline knowledge production processes in ways that prefer the most outstanding and excellent scientists, thereby distinguishing between excellent scientists and others? While Latour’s (1987) definition of ‘enrolling’ does not only focus on those who are part of the ‘enrolling’ process, but also on those who are not part of it, investigating who is not part of the ‘family’ would provide an interesting step for further research.

To conclude, the scientists at RASD have to conform to the pervasive principles of today’s academe that constructs a regime of selection and competition, leaving little room for alternative ways of living and working in academia. RASD scientists are competent and engaged, they are a valid resource for and stakeholders of its ‘brand’, and some of them are part of the RASD ‘family’ - yet lacking possibilities to develop their own individual portfolios. Accordingly, as STS scholars, we must continuously draw close attention towards asking how scientists relate to their workplace, their groups and research departments. And we need to analyse what guides these relationships in times of austerity measures and prevalent insecurities in science. Further: if there is an overtly dominating motive to conform to the demands of reputation and visibility, how can we counteract this and establish careful and caring relationships that provide stability, coherence and distinctiveness, but also the possibility of non-conformity? It is important to understand and critically reflect on how academia is constantly changing and

how this change has an effect on the relationship between scientists and their groups, and on academic culture more generally.

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## NOTES

- 1 "Laboratory" or "lab" stands for research group. Throughout the text I use both alternately.
- 2 I have anonymised all references to the department and its scientists.
- 3 Since the participants were promised confidentiality, pseudonyms are used for the interviewees' names and location. In order to mask the particularities of their disciplinary background, I will not refer to specificities of the field in the case of work-technicalities.
- 4 Biologists of certain sub-disciplines such as molecular biology, microbiology or genetics, typically work at a bench designated for laboratory work and at a (separate) computer terminal that in some cases is also shared with other colleagues.