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Articulating Identities

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Abstract One symptom of individualism in liquid modernity is the search for 'identity'. Using the five theoretically discrete articles in this Special Issue as both a 'rich' discursive resource and a point of departure, we develop a supplementary reading of the narratives which appear to inform identity research. We suggest that, while social agents in pursuit of 'identity' draw on a cacophony of discursive sources, it is the varieties of 'self-other' talk which emerge as the critical ingredient in processes of identity formation. The dualities which all such self-other talk articulate can be seen as discursive reflections of the more fundamental relationship between the individual and sociality. In turn, this is seen to refract one of the persistent problems of organizational analysis: the agency-structure issue. In addition, while we argue that deploying a discursive perspective to analyze identity work offers distinctive insights, such an approach carries with it an epistemological consequence. For what the articles also indicate is that in any attempt to delineate the 'identity of identities', researchers need to be aware of not only the reflexivity displayed by social actors constructing 'identity' but also of their own role in 're-authoring' such scripts. We briefly explore the implications of this for identity theory and organizational analysis more generally.

Keywords Agency ▪ discourse ▪ identity ▪ reflexivity ▪ self ▪ structure

Approaching Identity

Individuals deploy a wide variety of inter-textual identification processes to develop an on-going sense of the 'self' and the 'other' in interaction with their social environments. Following such routines permits the simultaneous construction of their personal identities as human beings and their public identities as social actors. And, since such practices articulate the personal in relation to the social, analytically, the notion of 'identity' may be regarded as a fundamental bridging concept between the individual and society. Its potential mediating quality lies in its dual character – it refracts what can be seen as a 'permanent dialectic' between the self and social structure.

From several theoretical positions and through various forms of discourse analysis, the articles in this Special Issue on *Constructing Identity in Organizations* explore how organizational actors display who they are to each other and to themselves and demonstrate how different discursive forms – such as autobiography, narrative, story-telling and everyday interactions – can illustrate how individual agents experience, shape, reconstruct and are subject to the situational and structured 'realities' they inhabit. Clarke, Brown and Hope (this issue) interviewed managers in a large manufacturing company and demonstrate how – in the process of accommodating mutually antagonistic discursive scripts within their narratives – they also 're-author' their selves as moral beings. In a study of management consultants which combines participant observation with interviews, Costas and Fleming (this issue) explore the implications of dis-identification – when actors experience their putative 'real' selves as unreal and foreign – for their conceptions of authenticity. Essers and Benschop (this

issue) use examples from the life-stories of Muslim businesswomen in the Netherlands to illustrate how they negotiate a complex of cultural, ethnic and religious boundaries in order to construct themselves as entrepreneurs. Through an unusual combination of observation, interviews and self-narration, Reveley and Down (this issue) examine how a frontline supervisor constructs his identity as a 'manager'. What emerges is an iterative process which seamlessly combines dramaturgical performance with self-narration. In contrast to the shifting, practical and occasionally contradictory processes which inform 'identity-construction' in these four articles, Watson (this issue), in a classic illustration of 'identity work', deploys narrative analysis to interrogate a manager's autobiography and detail the discursive resources which are drawn on to fabricate and secure a relatively coherent and stable 'identity'.

In what follows, we review the concept of identity and its theoretical entailments, outline the analytical potential of the discursive perspective in identity studies and consider a number of analytic themes which run through the five articles included in this Special Issue. Finally, we explore two more fundamental concerns which appear to inform the articles. The first relates to a common methodological awareness of the need for reflexivity in any discursive analysis of identity; and the second concerns the central issue which – sometimes ineluctably – seems to provide the underlying inter-textual theoretical thread which ties all the articles together: the agency-structure issue. The concern with the elliptical relationship between agency and structure continues to be a fundamental problem of organizational analysis more generally (Reed, 2003) and – given that the construct of 'identity' appears to articulate the relationship between the individual and society – it is perhaps unsurprising that any attempt to establish the parameters of identity is likely to surface analytic issues which find their origins in the agency-structure debate.

The self and sociality

In the most general of terms, the formation of an 'identity' appears to involve the discursive articulation of an on-going iteration between social and self definition. Social definitions (and re-definitions) are framed, for example, through prescriptive organizational and professional discourses relating to appropriate and desirable role behavior as well as the creation of shared beliefs through 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu, 1977) or the social construction of 'subjectivity' through 'disciplinary' power-knowledge processes (Foucault, 1972). All such processes are located in the wider societal mélange of cultural conditioning, class affiliation and religious and moral codes. In tandem with such influences, the assertion of self-definition – while this may often merely reflect individual conformity to such expectations – finds expression through, for example, role embracing and re-definition, emotional distancing, position taking, meaning making, adopting dress codes and rule breaking. As the articles in this Special Issue demonstrate, the social processes implicated in identity formation are complex, recursive, reflexive, and constantly 'under construction'. The appearance of stability in any given 'identity' is, at best, a transient accomplishment: discursive construction and re-construction emerge as a continuous process and stability appears to be either a momentary achievement or a resilient fiction. Thus, we suggest, 'identity formation' might be conceptualized as a complex, multifaceted process which produces a socially negotiated temporary outcome of the dynamic interplay between internal strivings and external prescriptions, between self-presentation and labeling by others, between achievement and ascription and between regulation and resistance.

Unfortunately, this intrinsic duality and complexity is sometimes marginalized in pre-emptive accounts of social identification processes in organizations which focus on either internal or external definitions of the self, on the impact of macro discourses and institutions, on social actors accommodating to particular subject positions or on the subjects' own

strategies of self-construction (Webb, 2006). In consequence, 'identity' does not always live up to its promise as a mediating concept. 'Close readings' of individual identity need to 'be balanced with consideration of broader contexts and macro-developments to avoid myopic pitfalls' (Alvesson, Ashcraft & Thomas, 2008: 12). Ideally, identity studies should pay attention simultaneously to both self-definitions and the definitions of others for 'identity may be a matter of being "subject" to, or taking positions within discourse, but also an active process of discursive "work" in relation to other speakers' (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006: 18). This is by no means an easy task. However, we suggest that by adopting a focus on varieties of organizational discourse – for example, cultural scripts, professional rhetorics, management discourses, everyday talk or shop floor narratives – we may have access to a more up-close and in-depth view of the intricacies which inform the processes of identity construction in organizational settings.

These suggestions can be theoretically grounded by situating 'identity' as a lynch-pin in the social constitution of self and society. The relation between individual agency and social structure is one of the central problems of both social theory (Giddens, 1984) and organizational analysis (Reed, 2003). Berger and Luckmann's classic work, *The Social Construction of Reality* (1991/1966), is an exemplary attempt to connect an interpretivist and institutionalist approach to the study of social life. Their basic assumption is that 'society' has a dual character: it exists both in the personal realities of individual thinking, feeling and acting, and in the institutionalized realities of collective structures and 'symbolic universes'. The connection between the individual lifeworld and social structure is theorized as a two-way process in which people externalize their presumed inner world of thoughts and feelings in their (inter)actions, a process which gradually gives rise to supra-personal processes and persistent patterns of thought and action which we experience as directive, taken-for-granted and partly independent from our own wishes and strivings. Since such institutional structures constitute the medium for individual thought and action, they profoundly shape the individual's lifeworld when (s)he becomes a member of society (or an organization) and internalizes the outer world by learning the cultural knowledge and accepted behaviors of the community. The role of language is significant in this process for discursive construction operates at various junctures to facilitate socialization and enable institutional rules and routines to become part of the individuals' habitus. Society, organizations and individuals are thus constructed in a continuous interplay between externalizations and internalizations (for not dissimilar views, see Bourdieu, 1984; Elias, 1970; Giddens, 1991; Layder, 1997).

Seen from this theoretical vantage point, for the individual, identity formation involves processes of negotiation between social actors and institutions, between self and others, between inside and outside, between past and present. As an outcome of this continuous self-society dynamic, an 'identity' is simultaneously both what is projected and what is perceived and, thus it is a processual facticity constructed somewhere 'in between' the communicator(s) and their audience(s) (c.f. Alvesson, 1990: 376). As Jenkins (1994: 199; see also Jenkins, 2004) observes: 'It is in the meeting of internal and external definition that identity, whether social or personal, is created'. Hence, social identities can be theorized as the refracted articulation of agency and structure, playing out in different forms in different discursive domains and temporal spaces. Individuals tend to picture their selves, for example, in terms of a 'conversation' between internal ideas, wishes, and affections and external images and evaluations. It is little wonder empirical analyses indicate a sometimes confusing multiplicity of situational factors influencing identity formation.

Discourse, identity and the self

The discursive analysis of identity embraces a wide variety of methods and approaches, but, at a minimum, a discursive perspective frames identity as being constituted through the

situated 'practices of talking and writing' (Grant et al., 2004: 3). What this emphasizes is that the focus is invariably on either identity discourse (Ainsworth & Hardy, 2004; Hardy et al., 2005; Thomas and Linstead, 2002), identity talk (Snow & Anderson, 1987) or identity narratives (Beech & Sims, 2007; Brown, 2006; Czarniawska, 1997; Somers, 1994). What appears common in nearly all approaches is a concern with analyzing the 'core constructs of self-categorization' (Clegg et al., 2007: 500) that organizational members individually or collectively deploy in the process of accomplishing 'identity'. Hence, research explores how identities are formulated or reformulated, embraced or resisted, inscribed or proscribed. Taking language seriously enables researchers to begin to unravel the complexities of the processes of identity formation and construction: it can offer insight into how identities are constituted and, over time, reconstituted in everyday organizational talk and texts, it may reveal how dominant organizational discourses play out in members' identifications, it can illustrate how discourses inscribe particular subject positions, or be deconstructed to demonstrate how discursive strategies may encourage or marginalize the adoption of certain meanings.

Since the focus of discourse-analytic approaches is on how language filters experienced realities, a significant methodological advantage is that they minimize the danger of portraying a particular identity as the 'essence' of an individual or a collective (Czarniawska, 1997). Hence – echoing Goffman (1959) – it is not a pre-given or pre-constituted 'essentialist' self which is the object of interest but what the *presentation* of self in everyday life reveals about how social actors endeavor to construct themselves. This is not to imply that 'identity' is nothing *but* talk and text. Although usually taken as primary expressions of 'identity', on the extremes, some identities – such as ascetics or hermits – are enacted through the specific exclusion of talk while others – such as convicts – are imposed through social coercion (although, arguably, such identities are inspired and 'organized' through texts). In addition, in most if not all instances, 'identity talk' is enhanced, elaborated or secured through a wide variety of additional semiotics – such as bodily acts, the use of artefacts and dress codes – which may all be regarded as embodied symbolic expressions intrinsic to the adoption or ascription of particular identities. Such features reflect the materiality of identity which – with the rise of consumerism (Bauman, 2007) and the processual re-identifications of 'self-identities' associated with 'life-style choices' (Connolly & Prothero, 2008) – are associated with wider social concerns about the putative fracturing of sociality consequent on reflexive or 'liquid' modernization (but see also, Warde, 1994). What it does mean, however, is that we refrain from objectifying identities as observable entities. Constrained by the visible manifestation of 'identity' – that *presentation* of self – the question of whether or not there really is something unique and distinctive 'in there', we do not and, perhaps, cannot know (Marshak et al., 2000 explore how the unconscious might be subjected to discourse analysis). In this respect – while it is impossible to ignore the analytical importance of essentialist beliefs about 'identity' or 'self' – a discursive perspective is antithetical to any essentialist notions. As an approach, it is about the complex ambiguities of identities or selves as enacted through discourse and other semiotics and the multiple sources of influence which generate, shape and, perhaps, determine such identifications.

Thus, identity talk about selves (and others) offers organizational actors 'imagined' or 'imaged' referents that serve as 'symbolic rallying points' (Brown, 2006: 742) from which individuals or groups portray and project their identities. And, again echoing Goffman (1959), these narrative accounts offer the researcher a glimpse of both the front and back stage locations from which actors tell us who they and others are. Analytically, what all this suggests – as Clarke et al. insightfully observe – is that 'discursive regimes … offer … epistemological spaces' which individuals and groups use as a resource to discursively accomplish identities. While such constructions are channeled through the circuitry of the

structural context, the view taken here is that identities are, to a greater rather than a lesser extent, more accurately seen as co-constructed or dialogical entities which are 'fabricated' through discourse, 'staged' through performance and 'fictionalized' through text.

Such a view also appears to confront us with an epistemological paradox for, while the 'observers' may regard identity talk as merely refracting what organizational actors' project as their presumed 'essence', it appears the 'observed' have less difficulty with essentialist talk in their front-stage presentations. Hence, they often depict 'self' and 'other' in an essentializing way, sometimes almost in terms of fixed character traits. For example, Leonard Hilton's autobiography (Watson, this issue) tells us about 'the sort of person' he is and sketches what he refers to as his 'personality' which, as Watson observes, is grounded in the assumption of a 'basic or underlying identity that is there throughout life'. There is even a suggestion that his managerial identity has colonized his sense of 'real' self for he writes: 'I felt like a manager, talked like a manager and behaved like a manager.' Similarly, as Costas and Fleming note, 'people still significantly appreciate their working lives in terms of fake, false, real or authentic selves' which are perceived to differ from non-work selves, as one of their consultants declares: 'When I am on the weekend I can be *myself*' (our emphasis). As these examples demonstrate, the enactment of identity talk in autobiographical accounts, everyday conversations or public performances frequently presumes – as a disposition or as an aspiration – an inner, authentic core, a deep essence, or a set of stable characteristics that are assumed to represent 'the' self of a person or a category. And – while social actors can express both doubts and seemingly conflicted notions about their identities (Clarke et al.) – more often than not, they resort to unashamedly essentialist talk when constructing them. While certainly not disputing the situated legitimacy of the actors' voice, for the purpose of analysis, we interpret such essentialist claims as stabilized moments in an on-going process of identity-formation and re-formation; for us, this underlines the point that the dialogical process is invariably dialectical and didactic (Bakhtin, 1986; Beech, 2008; Shotter, 2008).

The dramaturgical consequence of enacting reified selves and others is that it lends an appearance of objectivity and the persuasive contact-comfort of a 'matter-of-factness' to identity claims. The practical social importance of such essentializing is undoubted for it triggers and legitimizes the role-behaviors associated with such identities. For example, the central character in Reveley and Down's study adopts the identity and enacts the role of a 'people manager' to engender compliance from subordinates and legitimacy from co-supervisors. Similarly, the Muslimas (Essers & Benschop) are seen to negotiate the boundaries of their entrepreneurial identities around an essential – albeit creatively reconstructed – notion of themselves as 'good Muslimas'. Yet, if we assume that identity is socially constructed, then any given identity is always provisional (Sturdy et al., 2006) and all such claims are continuously articulated, contested, and negotiated (Parker, 2000). Hence, their social 'facticity' and legitimacy resides in an actors' *continuing* capacity to enact the identity. From this perspective, essentialist identity talk is perhaps best interpreted as a deceptively mundane form of 'truth claim'. Such didactic constructions inform nearly all the quotations deployed throughout the articles in this Special Issue and, in this respect, to claim or enact an identity facilitates the creation of a self-referential truth which maintains an on-going position of status, defends an interest, or makes oneself acceptable or respectable to others and to oneself. More generally, such truth claims may be regarded as routine rhetorical resources in everyday sensemaking for, as van Maanen reminds us, 'theory' – a term which can be applied to any mode of truth claim –

> '…thus works by making sense of times and situations for readers and audiences but, because this always involves rhetoric, it is a matter of words, not worlds; of maps, not territories; and of representations, not realities' (van Maanen, 1995: 134).

In similar vein, we suggest that 'identity' is a matter of claims, not character; persona, not personality; and presentation, not self.

Self-other identity talk

The examples cited above illustrate the 'essentially' relational character of 'identity' and emphasize the more general point that, critically, identities emerge though the articulation of similarities and differences. Enactment involves the discursive separation of 'self' from the 'other' and it seems that an intrinsic part of the process by which we come to understand who *we* are is intimately connected to notions of who we are *not* and, by implication, who others are (and are not). Whether in the normative prescriptions of organizational discourse, wider socio-cultural scripts or actors' definitions of themselves and others in their self-narratives, 'sameness' and 'otherness' emerge as pivotal guidelines in the elaboration of 'my' or 'our' identity. As Jenkins (2004: 5) argues, the social construction of identity is a matter of establishing and signifying 'relationships of similarity and difference' which impose seemingly arbitrary boundaries to create and define 'alterity' (Czarniawska, 1997). In everyday discourse, such distinctions are usually accomplished through the process of 'discursive positioning' (Garcia & Hardy, 2007; Hopkinson, 2001). This refers to the often unreflective discursive truisms which produce the categorical alternatives through which we invariably define, locate and relate our 'selves' to an apparently external reality – good versus bad, sane versus insane, black versus white, old versus young, past versus future, 'hard and ruthless and unremitting' versus 'weak' or 'pink and fluffy' (Clarke et al.), the 'bully' versus the 'heroic saviour' (Watson) or 'creative', 'artistic' and 'philosophical' versus 'cold', 'driven' or 'aggressive' (Costas & Fleming) .

Unsurprisingly, given the crudeness of many such distinctions, there is an element of over-simplification and distortion in definitions of sameness and otherness. And, as Ainsworth and Hardy (2004: 155) remind us, linguistic binary oppositions are often utilized in identity construction to set up a hierarchy and position the other not merely as different, but also as less acceptable, less respectable and, sometimes, less powerful (Hall, 1997). The images invoked thus tell a selective, frequently stereotypical and often dramatized story which scripts the 'self' in relation to the 'other' on a stage which magnifies differences. Among the more visible discourses which demonstrate this are those relating to class, gender, race, ethnicity and nationality. Such discursive positioning underscores the point that identity construction may be a far from neutral or benign process. It is invariably colored by emotions, moral judgments and approbations, and political or economic interests. In short, it implicates social maneuvering and power games. Such phenomena often appear to inform the claims of 'sameness' or 'otherness' in relation to, for instance, male and female roles, colleagues, subordinates, younger and older generations as well as more detailed organizational differentiations. In all such instances, identity discourse appears to be instrumental in attempts to establish, legitimate or challenge the prevailing relationships of power and status (Ball & Wilson, 2000). Thus, self-other identity talk can be seen to refract the agency-structure dialectic *in action*, for it shows in plain words how selves and sociality are mutually implicated and mutually co-constructed. More generally, self-other identity talk is invariably constructed within the discursive context of meta-narrative – sometimes referred to as meta-discourses, official discourse, dominant discourse or discursive formations.

Identity talk in meta-narrative

There are numerous studies which illustrate how normative discourses such as culture (Kunda, 1992, Willmott, 1993), corporate strategy (Knights & Morgan, 1991), career (Grey, 1994),

HRM (Townley, 1993) or the older worker (Ainsworth & Hardy, 2008) can be analyzed to demonstrate the seemingly hegemonic workings of discursive regimes. And detailed identity studies often demonstrate the complexity of this recursive or inter-textual relationship between actors drawing on discursive sources to enact identities while simultaneously appearing to be subject to those selfsame (re)sources. The issue of whether actors constitute themselves *through* discourse or are choreographed *by* discourse remains, of course, an 'essentially contested' matter of interpretations which – not to put too fine a point on it – also draw on or are subject to their own theoretical meta-narratives. All the articles in this Special Issue highlight particular processual moments in this interplay between agential attempts to differentiate themselves from the 'other' in the context of meta-narrative discursive structuring.

The impact of meta-narrative is perhaps most clearly visible in Essers and Benschop's research. While Islam appears to provide the discursive touchstone which defines the discursive space available for the 'boundary work' from which the Muslimas articulate their identities as businesswomen, their room for maneuver is further constrained by the wider cultural meta-narratives of gender and ethnicity. As Essers and Benschop note – with perhaps a hint of understatement – 'identity construction in the context of entrepreneurship is complicated when multiple social categories are involved'. In contrast, the interpretive ambiguities confronted in any attempt to 'separate' the relative influence of agency and structure are exemplified in Clarke et al.'s intriguing study of what happens to managers' identities in a small island community when they are forced to declare redundancies. Professionally constrained to abide by the rational-economic corporate discourse – which Clarke et al. delineate in terms of three 'mutually antagonistic discursive resources' – the managers are deeply discomfited when the taken-for-granted 'market' meta-narrative which legitimizes their actions simultaneously confronts them with the 'immorality' of taking away the livelihood of their friends and neighbors. Emotionally, it might appear to be an impossible situation, for the integrity of the 'self' can only be preserved by abandoning 'identity'. To resolve this contradiction in their self-identities, the managers' enact an alternative meta-narrative of 'moral order' which permits them to '(re)-author their selves as moral beings'. Hence, in practice, it seems that discursive inconsistency may be a condition of stability when the 'self-agent' is confounded by the 'identity-structure'. A not dissimilar – if less stressful – process seems evident in Reveley and Down's analysis of how an engineer who is promoted to first-line supervisory management accommodates two conflicting corporate-sponsored official discourses. In their study, an anti-bureaucratic 'people-oriented' culture change program had, subsequently, been discursively re-engineered to re-assert the utility of a more rule-bound managerial discourse. The supervisor, having embraced the 'people-oriented' discourse with enthusiasm, is thus confronted with negotiating what he perceives to be a reactionary change which disconfirms his newly self-ascribed identity as a 'people expert'. It is remarkable that, despite the formal legitimacy of this new corporate script and in the face of an unsympathetic industrial sub-culture, Reveley and Down detail how – through a creative combination of discursive performance and self-narration – the supervisor successfully protects, enacts and possibly secures his new found 'identity'.

Since the problematic and elusive notion of what might constitute the 'real' self is the central analytic focus of both the other two articles, it seems reasonable to suggest they are informed by the meta-narrative of individualism (or, more precisely, the putative 'self' itself, Costea et al., 2003). Fortuitously, in part because of the particular discursive resources utilized to construct and display 'identity', these two articles offer deeply contrasting accounts of this phenomenon. In what might be described as a monumental narrative, the autobiography of Leonard Hilton analyzed by Watson offers the reader a distinctive, well-rounded image of a once powerful 'hero-manager' reflecting upon past battles and personal victories. As the analytic counterpoint – through the narrative lens of self-alienation – Costas

and Fleming's study of management consultants provides vividly detailed discursive images of organizational members who dis-identify with their work identities and display an angst-ridden existential search of 'authenticity'.

Watson's manager, through a medium which permits him to fabricate an engaging linear semiotic, crafts a highly visible singular 'identity' of a rather distinguished manager. To accomplish this, he draws with dexterity on a wide range of social and cultural sources – films, novels and poems – to underpin the creation of an epic tale about himself as 'the lone hero conquering tyrants'. Of course, as with all autobiographical narrative, the authorial voice can be accused of selective memory, rationalization and – despite the singular difficulties encountered when claiming to offer a 'factual' account of any social process – even invention. In our view, Hilton's story can be regarded as conforming to the genre rules and cultural scripts available for the production of such 'historic' artefacts. In any case, Watson's analysis is also clearly informed by other discursive resources. More to the point here – which relates to the self-referential portrayal and enactment of a particular self/identity – the autobiography is decorated with references to personal struggles, occasional self-doubt and an unfriendly outside world which thwarts his 'self'. His self-storied response – which is empirically grounded in a highly competitive and successful senior management career in the private sector – echoes the stereotypical images of a competitive entrepreneurial 'self': he engaged with enthusiasm and treated each of these episodes as something to be countered and conquered. Whilst his narrative is inevitably filtrated through retrospection and surely incomplete, what remains distinctly undecidable is whether or not his self/identity has been constructed through or by discourse. The definitive voice deployed permits him to control the realization of his 'project of self-creation' by simultaneously apprehending *and* producing who he is. It is a narrative process in which agent and structure have been airbrushed through history.

Discursively, the contrast with Costas and Fleming's management consultants could not be more stark. Apparently enjoying the financial rewards merited by their enterprising individualism in a company with an 'elite identity', all appear more or less disaffected by the work itself and dissociated from corporate culture. Despite the public veneer of valuing diversity and 'achievement, drive and success' and the pursuit of an active CSR programme – elements which might be seen as designed to 'enlist' individuals and perhaps 'discipline' their selves into serving the organization whilst satisfying their own needs – work-life is predominantly experienced as merely 'long-hours'. All appear to dis-identify with work, the work environment and possibly even their own 'identity' at work; nearly all display a clear awareness of the artificiality of corporate discourse. The general outlook is captured by one who remarks: 'It is like you are at a masquerade party and you come to the party every day and choose a mask. And you wear that mask every day and you return it at the end of the day.' 'Self'-survival appears to depend upon a cultivated sense of resignation if not cynicism. But not all have re-positioned their 'selves' to finesse these putative corporate attempts to 'govern the soul' (Rose, 1990/1999). For them, work remains 'quite asphyxiating'; they continue searching for 'authenticity' despite a reflexive awareness that their 'real' self might amount to no more than a pale imitation of those corporate projections. In their analysis, Costas and Fleming pose some awkward questions not only about the nature of 'identity', 'self' and what we might mean by 'authenticity' but also about the complex workings of meta-narratives and how individuals negotiate the meanings of such discourses by shoring up their identity through building a fantasy self that is unmanaged and untouched by corporate life. An essential 'self' appears to dissolve for differential discursive engagement appears to offer them a variety of enacted 'selves' and alternative modes of 'authenticity' (see also, Costea et al., 2003; Bauman, 2005).

As these examples indicate, it is very difficult to arrive at any secure conclusions about how identity talk plays out in the wider context of dominant discourse. Meta-narratives

are a permanent and powerful ingredient of everyday sensemaking and, particularly in 'strong' cultural contexts, may set distinctive limits on individual discretion in constructing identity. Simultaneously, however, there is always the possibility of self-defined meaningful escape through agential choice. Clarke et al.'s managers effect a 'solution' to their threatened identities by reconfiguring and reasserting the moral character of their 'selves' while the Muslim women entrepreneurs portrayed by Essers and Benschop deploy a range of creative discursive strategies to accommodate and reconstruct the resilient meta-narratives which define the limits of their sociality. And the first-line manager described by Reveley and Down shows active agency by divesting himself of the new, non-supportive managerial regime and regaining a sense of 'self'-worth as a manager from his interactions with subordinates and colleagues. Watson's manager declares his autonomy through autobiography while the consultants interviewed by Costas and Fleming may have constructed an ideal, more authentic (albeit not 'realized') self in their identity talk in order to preserve the integrity of a shrinking sense of 'real' self. So, within the bounds of the available discursive regimes social actors may carve out situated identities or subject positions for themselves and others. With respect to the agency-structure issue, all such 'actions' are indicative of the felicity with which social actors can ingeniously constitute 'identity' and 'self' through a seemingly endless variety of discursive strategies. At one end of the spectrum, 'effective' agency appears dependant on actors' ignoring, being oblivious to, or acting in defiance of the prevailing structural constraints; at the other end, structures appear durable despite the assertion of the 'self' and the liberating enticements of contemporary individualism. Although few are ever fully captured by it, it seems none can escape the carapace of meta-narrative: self-other talk is ineluctably embedded in sociality or 'structure' whilst agential choice is destined to remain inevitably constrained by imagination and differential dependence.

Coherence and Fragmentation in Identity Talk

Of course, everyday interactive 'identity work' is rarely conducted through talk which displays a reflexive awareness of the nuanced ambiguities which pervade agency and structure. Yet, in situated self-other identity talk – such as the assertion that 'I don't want to be an engineer' (Watson), we can see the implicated interplay of self and sociality operating in a single statement. As noted above, the most common type of self-other identity talk probably draws an essentializing coherence that emphasizes the distinctive and favorable image of an actor's 'self' in relation to others which may then be deployed to establish or maintain a sense of 'moral uprightness (Watson) and to stage a 'character' with 'spirit, strength, and other sterling qualities' (Goffman, 1959: 252). Such processes build social capital and the integrity of the 'self' (on display). This mode of identity talk is so common that it is not unusual for it to be regarded as the core impetus in identity work. As Watson remarks, such discourse involves 'establishing to oneself and others that one is a *good* person' and it surfaces the 'ongoing mental activity that an individual undertakes in constructing an understanding of self that is coherent, distinct and positively valued' (Alvesson, Ashcraft & Thomas, 2008: 14).

All the organizational actors quoted in this Special Issue lend some substance to this interpretation. Hilton portrays his social world in terms of the 'giant slayer' (Watson) confronted by a succession of abject 'others' who are demonized as aggressive and violent 'bullies' to be vanquished while Clarke et al. demonstrate how managers who show emotion in their work are portrayed as 'weak' or 'pink and fluffy'. And Essers and Benschop describe the discursive moves enacted by Muslim businesswomen to secure their 'coherent selves' as 'good Muslimas' in the face of an 'outside' world where being a Muslim, a woman and an entrepreneur occupies a volatile 'intersection' of the prevailing cultural, gendered and

religious meta-narratives. However, the articles also indicate that identity work is replete with more convoluted, context-dependent and situation-specific varieties of self-other identity talk. There are numerous examples of talk that speak to the self-doubt, self-pity, inconsistency, antagonism, alienation and self-depreciation which also fuel the identity-formation process which need to be depicted as integral contributions to whatever emerges as a 'coherent' self-identity. This might suggest the more testing and challenging identity work is accomplished when our sense of self is threatened or socially invalidated or destabilized by 'self-doubt and self-openness' (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003: 1165). Such moments of instability in identity-formation are often theorized as examples of fragmented, fragile or fluctuating identities (Collinson, 2003; Potter & Wetherell, 1987), but there are few empirical studies that privilege the potential analytical purchase and subtleties of indecisive, insecure, critical or self-depreciative identity talk.

For example, Reveley and Down's supervisor displays a mode of identity talk which draws judiciously on a 'positive-self, negative-other' narrative. Backstage, he extols his own skill as a 'people-expert' and emphasizes that his 'fellow Technicians lack his understanding of how to manage people'; in public, although he strategically asserts himself as *primus-inter-pares*, he takes care to position 'himself as an in-group member' and refrains from making any self-aggrandizing comparisons. And their suspicions and rhetorical abuse of his nascent ambition are met with self-abasing humor and seductive compliments. Following Goffman, Reveley and Down observe that the 'claiming of special skill or expertise vis-à-vis others risks eliciting embarrassment or hostility, particularly given the "threat to another's face" posed by using that expertise claim to comment on their performance'. His tactical self-deprecation and vocal other-appreciation in face-to-face interaction deftly disguises his managerial aspiration and the private conviction that 'they don't know how to manage'. Underlining the distinctive situated parameters of identity work, the discourse deployed by Costas and Fleming's management consultants enacts not only the 'other' but also different 'selves' or various 'others-in-me'. Their analysis suggests that, while self-other comparisons are crucial in actors' sensemaking, the 'other' may also refer to the 'other-in-oneself' for the consultants' identity struggles appear to reflect an inner conversation between various possible selves. In contrast to Hilton's self-accomplished epic, the consultants craft a tragic tale that authors a version of their selves as self-alienated victims of the corporate world. In their self-narrative, work is a source of disenchantment – it encroaches on their lives, slowly destroying their intellectual, artistic, creative and critical 'authentic' idealized selves. This is discursively counterpoised to the lived 'self' which is overworked, stressed and unfulfilled, a comparison which permits escape to a perhaps unrealizable 'imaginary' self. Clarke et al. offer a variation on this theme of 'other-in-self' for their managers who – conflicted by the necessity of redundancies – appear to preserve their integrity by the more common discursive tactic of *separating* 'identity' from 'self'. This latter process seems to involve discursively equating 'identity' with organizational role thus freeing up the 'self' to encompass 'me-as-human-being'.

Such instances, we suggest, points to a need in identity research to place equal emphasis on situation and context in relation to the appearance of coherence and fragmentation in identity work. Identity talk comes in a very wide variety of situation-specific forms – we encounter self-other cultural positioning and self-depreciation in both outward-facing identity talk as well as in inward-facing self talk. While self-other talk may aspire to the construction of coherence and a positive validation of self and/or identity, there appear to be various and sometimes circuitous discursive routes and differential mechanisms through which this may be accomplished. Analytically, this points to greater sensitivity being paid to identity talk which reflects, for example, incoherence, self-doubt, insecurity, antagonism or fragility. Methodologically, the problem is that, when we inquire, people invariably offer a front-stage discursive performance which tends to privilege a positive

essentialist image of 'self' or 'identity' whilst discursive displays of ambiguity and indecision or a negative self-evaluation are rare.

There is clearly more to essentialist talk than mere 'essentialism'. Among those 'imagined selves' – either hoped-for and aspired-to or feared and avoided – lie imaged working self-conceptions that may help social actors to interpret and evaluate the full range of their current, former and future actions and to express their hopes, fears, anxieties, pride and shame. And, as illustrated by the articles in this Special Issue, there are creative ways of exploring and exposing the ambiguity and persistent contradictions which pervade the contemporary enthusiasm for research on 'identity'. Finally, we want to conclude by considering the epistemological entailments of framing 'identity' through the processes of discursive construction.

Reflexivity, Identity and Agency

Contemporary concern with the discourse-analytic perspective within organization science may be regarded as one consequence of the so-called 'linguistic turn' which has framed many poststructuralist accounts of organizing (Grant et al., 1998). However, as Deetz (2003: 421) has observed, the linguistic turn, 'like other historical attempts to escape subject/object dualism … has frequently become a justification for new forms of subjectivism and objectivism'. For underlying our interest in how social realities are constituted in and through 'discourse' lie a complex of historically grounded philosophical issues concerning the relationship between language – our primary medium of expression, description and explanation – and how the putative 'scientific observer' chooses to interpret social reality[2]. As Gergen (2003: 453) insists: 'Our assumptions about organizations (including our values) are ultimately written into our accounts, and in this way what passes as knowledge essentially reflects the views and visions of those who inquire' – an observation which carries the sociological truism that 'no one, including ourselves, can stand outside their own epistemological and ontological commitments' (Johnson & Duberley, 2003: 1294). However, it is not merely that social science is not 'value-free', that our stance or perspective is intrinsically implicated in (and may determine) what we see, that the I/eye is the medium through which we construct, for example, our narratives of 'identity' or 'self'. More graphically, it is the realization that the notion of 'value-freedom' involves a metaphysical contortion which places the observer outside of humanity for it requires the assumption that s/he can somersault in and out of 'society' unencumbered by history, socialization or emotion. What this emphasizes, as Deetz (2003: 424) reminds us, is 'the 'languagely' character of all 'seeing'.' Hence, while 'identity' is certainly not merely all 'talk and text', language – with all its inherent hermeneutic limitations – is the only medium we have available to 'account' for it. This metaphysical impossibility of value-freedom fundamentally informs the social constructionist approach which places such analytical significance on the need for reflexivity and highlights the constitutive effects of different modes of discursive representation (see also, Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000).

Firstly, with respect to reflexivity, the implications this carries for the possibility of a 'science' of organizing is emerging as an important focus of concern. Johnson and Duberley (2003), in an extensive analysis of how different ontological and epistemological assumptions generate different modes of reflexivity, highlight the ambiguity of the term itself and suggest there are three generic forms of reflexivity: the methodological, which highlights the limitations of research method; the deconstructive, where the focus is on offering an alternative view of the same 'reality'; and the most challenging form, the 'epistemic', where the researcher adopts a 'participatory' approach to the 'researched'. Their work is complimented by Wolfram Cox and Hassard (2005) – who explore the implications of reflexivity for triangulation and emphasize the interpretive significance of what they call the

'researcher stance' – and Quattrone (2006), who identifies some awkward and problematic issues about the role and author-ity of the researcher in case study research. And, in a specific examination of discourse analysis as a mode of research practice, Alvesson, Hardy and Harley (2008) have identified four sets of textual practices that researchers have deployed in attempting to ensure they embrace a measure of 'reflexivity'. These relate to the adoption of multiple perspectives; the use of multiple voices in combination with a clear recognition of the authors' voice; destabilizing practices such as those associated with deconstruction which, more often than not, are intended to expose the power effects of particular discursive formations; and what they call 'positioning practices'. The latter refer to the self-conscious acknowledgement by authors of their own immersion in an historically contingent and invariably institutionalized set of knowledge-producing practices. As Alvesson, Hardy and Harley (2008: 485) conclude, 'our reading of the literature points to a range of textual practices – to reflexivi*ties* rather than reflexivity' (see also Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000).

It is no coincidence that these 'reflexivities' emerge as one of the analytic themes which informs all the articles in this Special Issue. Through various routes, all attempt to provide plausible accounts of how 'identity' is discursively fashioned by *both* the observers and the observed. Methodologically, this is perhaps most evident in Clarke et al. who not only endorse the need for 'critical self-reflexivity' but also explicitly recognize fieldwork as 'a creative endeavor' and insist that no 'monologically authoritative' account of data is possible. In elaborating the 'mutually antagonistic discursive resources' with which their managers juggle while constructing their 'identities', Clarke et al. are acutely aware of the front stage reflexivity displayed by these actors. This point is also graphically demonstrated by Reveley and Down who provide a rare glimpse of how actor-reflexivity infuses the on-going process of 'managerial identity formation'. In navigating his way through the competing discourses of 'how managers should behave', their supervisor – Wilson – self-consciously constructs his 'identity' through 'an iterative process in which self-narration and dramaturgical performance are almost seamlessly interwoven'. Wilson is not only aware of the constraints on his possible choices but also that he can make 'good' and 'bad' decisions on how to enact the manager role/identity. By way of contrast, the 'identity' Leonard Hilton displays for us embodies a skillfully sculpted stability. However, this is accomplished retrospectively through the 'reflexive and creative writing' of his autobiography which Watson uses to elaborate the reflexive relationship between 'inward-facing' and 'outward-facing' identity work which Hilton deploys to construct his integrated 'self-identity'. Similarly, although it involves an additional layer of complexity, the articulation of such inner 'imaginary' narratives and outer self and identity narratives is also evident among the dis-identifying management consultants. While recognizing that – 'like all research' – their data 'could very well be interpreted differently if studied from another theoretical perspective', Costas and Fleming focus on the complex of reflexivities which are revealed when attempting to reconcile the consultants' identity discourse with their discourse about 'authenticity'. Their analysis serves to underline the complicated and recursive inter-textual relationship between 'self-talk' and 'identity-talk' for, in 'those reflexive moments when actors recognize "who they really are" is in fact the unwanted corporate self', the consultants are confronted with a 'self-awareness of failure'. Paradoxically, what appears to emerge is a coherent 'real' self which, perhaps, is a potential source of despair rather than the imagined 'self-actualization'. A similar – if perhaps more demanding – range of complex reflexivities are found in Essers and Benschop's study of Muslim businesswomen. Based on 'situationally co-produced' interviews, their exploration of how four Muslim women negotiate the discursive boundaries of Islam, gender and ethnicity to facilitate agential and social space for their entrepreneurial roles demonstrates how they enact a variety of discursive legitimations to 'stretch the boundaries' of the cultural scripts through which they live their lives. Hence, the research reported in all the articles – in the literal sense – re-presents the collaborative

processes through which researchers and researched co-produced scripts delineating the parameters of 'organizational identity'. Although both exercise some measure of situated reflexivity, unavoidably, it is the observers who have the definitive voice – hence the constructivist insistence that the observer is implicated in what is portrayed as the observed.

This brings us, secondly, to the constitutive importance of modes of discursive representation. Earlier, we quoted John van Maanen (1995) on the discursive properties of 'theory' in relation to the implicit 'truth claims' embedded in essentialist identity talk. In not dissimilar fashion, each of the articles in this Special Issue offers us a distinctive 'truth claim' about the discursive construction of particular organizational identities in specific contexts. The legitimacy of such claims is routinely validated though well-known – we might even say 'taken-for-granted' – institutionalized editorial processes designed to ensure that all such scripts are 'genre-compliant' (Mauws, 2000; Orlikowski & Yates, 1994). However, echoing van Maanen, the discursive construction of each article involves a rhetorical conceptual-theoretic framing of the privileged focal issues ('it is a matter of words, not worlds'), the detailed illumination of various signposts which guide us through the terrain of scrupulously sifted data ('of maps, not territories') in order to 're-present' the highly complex socio-psychological discursive processes through which social actors relate their conceptions of identities and selves ('of representations, not realities'). Just as the social actors depicted in the articles make sense of their self-conceptions by drawing down from meta-narratives, so too the articulators of these identities make sense of such images through their preferred theories of sociality. Since actors and analysts draw on different discursive resources, this begins to account for why we are presented with 'narratively plausible' alternative, competing and conflicting accounts of the same social phenomena – 'identity'. Both the observed and the observers are 'making sense of times and situations for readers and audiences' (van Maanen, 1995) through inevitably partial and self-referential context-dependent modes of representation. This strongly suggests that the ways in which both social actors and management and organization scholars go about constructing their respective 'identities' embodies 'the languagely' character of all seeing' ' (Deetz, 2003: 424).

Finally, as we have emphasized throughout, what typifies the differences in the modes of representation deployed by the observed and the observer is the formers' predilection for essentialist identity talk and the latters' insistence that all such representations should be construed as discursive constructions. And, despite their differential theoretical framings, what characterizes the analyses of the wide range of identity-discourses presented across the articles is that nearly all vividly illustrate the fundamental and persistent inter-textual tensions between the self and society which are embedded in the actors' discursive claims. Moreover, analytically, all pay direct or indirect homage to the central thesis offered by Berger and Luckmann (and, indeed others) that the process of identity formation refracts the continuous articulation of agency and structure. Thus, despite 'the tumult of contradiction, tension and dissonance' which Costas and Fleming note about identity talk, it would seem that the meta-narrative which informs the discursive constructions of those who would understand the 'identity of identities' is the meta-narrative of agency and structure – the seemingly permanent dialectic which suffuses identity theory.

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Footnotes

1. As with this list, the articles are printed in alphabetical order by author name.
2. Deetz draws primarily on Husserl and Heidegger. Other equally important historical influences are Whitehead (1979) and Austin (1962). See also Searle (1995) and Lakoff and Johnson (1999).

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