

# CENTRE FOR DEMOCRATIC NETWORK GOVERNANCE

## WORKING PAPER SERIES

### ROLE THEORY AND THE LINGUISTIC TURN: WHAT POSSIBILITIES FOR DEMOCRATIC NETWORK GOVERNANCE?

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Forty years ago at the height of modernist views of administrative life, an analysis of organizational roles would be fairly straight forward. In the so-called golden age of organization theory, organizational roles were understood as a unit within the broader social system of organization. Such a view held the organizational role as relatively unproblematic. As McSwite suggests, the role is “defined as the set of stabilized expectations that organizations comprise. Human beings are seen simply as role players who respond to ‘role senders’ who transfer expectations to them” (1997, 185).

The logic of this view was a structural functional one (Parsons, 1951, Burrell and Morgan, 1979). That is, the organization was understood as a tangible, typically biological, structure composed of subunits that insured its survival. Parsons, in an effort to describe human action argued that while social scientists were often at odds to explain the particular behavior of individuals, a coherent explanation of human action could be ascertained if one examined the roles (the functions) that individuals carried out within the context of the larger society. From this perspective, one’s identity or “self” was based on one’s societal roles. As such: “One is a mother, a son, a Texan, a Scot, a professor, a sociologist, a Catholic, a lesbian—or a combination of these social roles and possibilities” (Kellner as cited in Anderson, 1997, 107). This view, dominant at the time, emphasized the **functions** of a society and the way in which an individual’s “values” either facilitated or complicated an individual’s socialization and integration into the social order. An emphasis was placed on the values which established and maintained the social order. Entities such as the home, the nuclear family and the school were understood as sites for the reinforcement of this perspective.

Such a view, also framed the subject as an information processor, a rationally choosing entity able to consciously identify its interests and choose how to act in accordance with those interests. This view, by the way, serves as the foundation for the self as developed by those in the field of artificial intelligence. It was also the base for early work in cognitive science.

Of importance in this section of our brief chronology on role theory is that the role was understood as independent of the person who “occupied” it. This approach however, had significant limitations. How did these limitations surface? The general view in the organization studies literature is that even though Parsons’ theory delineated several

categories of functional activities required for an organizational system to survive: goal attainment was understood to be more equal than others<sup>1</sup>. The result, we know from the groundbreaking work of Argyris (1959) was that the relationship between the articulators of organizational goals (role senders) and those who carried out the goals (role players) always created a surplus value.

One way of talking about this surplus value<sup>2</sup> is in terms of the informal organization (an arena that Simon (1947) saw as a threat and theorized about ways to contain that threat). That is, the subordination of other dimensions of the organizational experience produces “strains” in the system which the informal organization served as a mechanism to relieve (McSwite, 1997). In fact, the sociology of organizations after Parsons is primarily the documenting of the inadequacy of formal role theory<sup>3</sup>. It was Goffman’s work, especially his concept of role distance that helped address this problem. Role distancing is just that-- a conscious or unconscious distancing from a role that is uncomfortable for one reason or another. Goffman saw such role distancing as a dramaturgical act. The dramaturgical as it is articulated in his *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* suggests that life is a stage on which we act, i.e., recreate social conventions and also improvise our behavior as a result of face-to-face interactions. The work of Berger and Luckmann, Garfinkel and Weick, just to name a few all build on this point. Goffman’s version of role theory is fully developed in his book *Frames of Analysis*. At its most basic, a frame is a definition of a situation which one uses to navigate one’s face-to-face interaction and presentation to self and others in a given context. Further, the tacit social conventions of a particular setting generate the possibility of a particular frame. So, a frame and the meaning constituted by it governs the behaviour of self and others. This line of epistemology is in my view an important intersection of any work that we hope to do in the future.

Although Goffman’s work represents an interpretive turn away from the functionalist sociology of Talcott Parsons, he is still seen as working within the orthodoxy of modern Western sociology. He, like Parsons, takes the concepts of role and function as axiomatic (Chriss, 1999). This so-called orthodox view of sociology sought to develop a deductive model of general societal functioning in contrast to the more inductive German phenomenological tradition, brought to the U.S. by Schutz and taken up by the ethnomethodologists. This view emphasized the subjective experience of the individual. Goffman’s view was that the objectivist-subjectivist split led to the privileging of the phenomenological view. He characterized it as “the ‘vulgar’ tendency to divided the conduct of individuals into sacred and profane parts” (Chriss, 1999, 65). The profane being the formal

roles of society and organizational life. The sacred being the personal life of the individual, including the intrapersonal dimension.

This is not just an arcane or esoteric point but is germane to our discussion of role theory as it might be applied by democratic network governance researchers. Much of the work in the network governance literature related to the regulation of identity matches the theoretical description of Goffman's epistemology. That is, the analysis is about the roles and functions of actors within individual or multiple networks. Further, the point of the analysis is to provide insight about the efficacy of democratic network governance. As such it is the search for a deductive model that articulates, from the interpretivist perspective (Burrell and Morgan, 1979), the dynamics of the actors within the network(s).

What are other researchers doing in relation to role theory these days? One fruitful line of research is being developed in the field of Organization Studies, particularly by Mats Alvesson at the University of Lund. Alvesson and his colleagues have put out a steady stream of research on the regulation of work identity. The relevant core aspect of their view is that role expectations in the workplace trigger what they call "identity work." They take the view that: "Roles influence identity, but also roles are formed (and enlarged, modified, marginalized, rejected) in identity work" (Svengisson and Alvesson, 2003, 1178).

What is identity work? This stream of research is grounded in two important conceptual developments: 1) the linguistic turn in social science and 2) a definition of the self that is reflexive. The next section of the paper will address these two conceptual developments. Doing so will help locate the empirical work done by these researchers.

## **2. The Linguistic Turn**

What is the linguistic turn in social science? The argument goes something like this: In the recent history of knowledge there has been a movement away from the epistemology of representation: where in a one-to-one correspondence between a word and an object is assumed to exist. At the level of epistemology, the concept of representation underscores the Enlightenment view that the task of knowledge is to discover a truth as it is observable in the world, i.e. the search for uncontested facts and objective reality.

The emphasis on language and the way in which language is mediated through it has opposed to the correspondence theory of truth suggested above- is grounded in the so-called *linguistic turn*, the view that the structure of human activity could be better understood by analyzing language rather than apriori; categories or sensate experience. This view,

associated with Saussure, Wittgenstein, and Pierce (among others) suggests that all descriptions of the “true nature of things” are mediated by language. Here, the work of Paul DuGay is a useful source of support. In his book *Consumption and Identity at Work*, he writes:

The explicitly philosophical or epistemological strand of contemporary cultural analysis refers to a development known as the ‘linguistic turn’. It involves a reversal of the relationship that has traditionally been held to exist between the vocabularies we use to describe things and the things themselves. The usual, you could say, common-sense assumption is that objects exist ‘objectively’ as it were ‘in the world’ and as such are prior to and constraining our descriptions of them. However, in recent years, the relationship between language and the objects it describes has been the subject of a radical re-think...this idea that things only have meaning through their insertion within a particular classificatory system...has some pretty profound consequences (1996, 41-42).

So, if we were to sum up this particular set of arguments, it isn’t that language is necessarily plastic but that the correspondence theory (mimetic theory) does little to help us conceptualize the fragmented contingent world in which we live. Rather than coming closer to the thing in itself, we find that everything is mediated by language and is situated in a specific context. And so it is the context that must be explained. As such, it is the articulation of context—that is to say how a specific discourse is embedded—that can help us understand how we are to proceed in a situation, whether we experience that situation as administrators, members of a network, students or simply human beings going about their everyday lives.

Why is the linguistic turn relevant to our discussion of role theory? Well, because as I read it, role theory in the field of organization studies has been recast as the regulation of identity in the workplace. In addition, the epistemological framework applied to such analyses is grounded in discourse theory, particularly an analysis informed by Foucault. Hence, what we find is not an actor carrying out specific roles, but rather, a subject in discourse. In fact, the influence of this view has so dominated organization studies, that a recent article (Jones and Spicer, 2005) essentially asked the question: Can we accept the epistemological shift to discourse analysis as a result of the linguistic turn, without having to exclusively embrace Foucault’s vision of social relations?

### **3. A Brief Detour into Discourse Theory**

For now let us develop an understanding of discourse as it relates to the study of organizations and/or networks and those subjects who are constituted within those settings. For writers like Du Gay and Alvesson, whose work I want to highlight, the discourse of management and its constituting effect on the workplace is quite powerful. It is a window into a set of ideas, patterns, habits, routines and language that can affect individuals in everyday life and very specifically as actors in the arena of policy and administration. It is the sense in which public service work becomes a performative act. That is, management as a discourse—or for DuGay, more broadly the discourse of enterprise-- reflects the ways in which individuals involved in societal production of all sorts conceive of what they do and how they do it. It is a series of rationalities that one finds in the workplace. That is, the expectations of the workplace, policies at all levels that affect workplace practices, changing patterns and routines as a result of technology, globalization, etc. As Rose suggests, the effects of this discourse on people at work are crucial to “the fabrication of new languages and techniques to bind the worker into the productive life of society” (Rose as cited in Du Gay, 1996, 53).

For writers in organization studies, this management discourse has even stronger significance because its impact on worker identity is tied to the history of management from Taylor to Simon to Argyris and to the current literature on technologies of the self. It lionizes the self-actualizing, self-regulating capacities of the human subject and the suturing of such behaviour not only to work life but to every facet of human relationship. As Alvesson and Willmont note: “Increasingly organizational discourse is about promoting the so-called soft dimensions: ”passion, soul and charisma...These discourses can also be read as expressions of an increased interest in regulating employees ’insides’ their self-image, their feelings and identifications” (2002, 622).

As I alluded to above, an interesting debate has developed within the field of organization studies. Can research proceed in light of Foucault’s insights but not paralyzed by them? The core of Foucault’s position is that he interprets: “all knowledge and all discipline as oppressive—inextricably and pervasively implicated with power. This move universalizes power making it the only social device of social relations such that culture...is replaced by outright coercion or social war if you will” (McSwite, 1997, 958).

In this regard, the Foucauldian perspective has been something of an intellectual straitjacket especially for those who want to champion worker autonomy. As the argument goes, if one is completely a product of discourse and that discourse is primarily a series of power relations

then what is left of the subject? That is if one's subjectivity is solely product of the discourse of power, or if you will the power/knowledge nexus, then there is no room whatsoever for human action.

Alvesson and his colleagues have wrestled with this point. Some of their work reflects this said "muscular discourse." They seek however, to theorize not only about the influences of various discourses but the way in which those discourses dynamically interact with theirs of the self. Hence the effects of various types of discourses, as powerful as they might be are understood as a part of identity construction. As Alvesson and Willmott note, identity construction is "a process in which the role of discourse in targeting and moulding the human subject is balanced with other elements of life history forged by a capacity reflexively to accomplish life projects of various sources of influence and inspiration (2002, 622). Figures 1.1 below is useful in describing the approach they want to develop.

**Identity regulation** is affected by various types of discourse that affect and in most cases constitute social relations. Such discourses regulate the dynamics (the dialectic of *differance*) of identity formation as it relates to the world of law, family and societal institutions. These might include discourses about post-traditional society, democracy, public administration, networks and management, to name a few. The categories for theorizing about identity regulation are:

The employee: regulations in which the employee is directly defined or implied by reference to the other;

Action orientations: regulations in which the field or activity is constructed with reference to appropriate work orientations;

Social relations: regulations of belongingness and differentiation; and

The scene: regulations indicating the kind of identity that fits the larger social, organizational, and economic terrain in which the subject operates (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002, 632).

**Identity work** is the reflexive process of "becoming." Alvesson and Willmott describe it as "interpretive activity involved in reproducing and transforming self-identity" (627). This view is grounded in a sociological view of the self delineated by Goffman and later by Giddens (1991). The sociological self as defined by Goffman:

consists of a mental state, but not one that is derived from nor sustained within the individual. Rather the self emerges and is transformed through interaction with others in a social context. The self is a process in the sense that it acts upon the world, interpreting messages, planning action, and directing the behaviors of person and other. It also is an object for the individual

as when we rehearse actions mentally, reflect on past behaviors, or project ourselves into one of the many social positions that we occupy (Lynxwiler, 2005, 3).

Giddens suggests that there are some unique qualities to this reflexive self that are the result of life in post-traditional society (Giddens uses this term synonymously with high modernity). The self in the context of high modernity is affected by the discourses of modernity<sup>4</sup> which constitute different resultant conditions. The key conditions of high modernity are:

Separation of time and space: the condition for the articulation of social relations across wide spans of time-space, up to and including global systems;

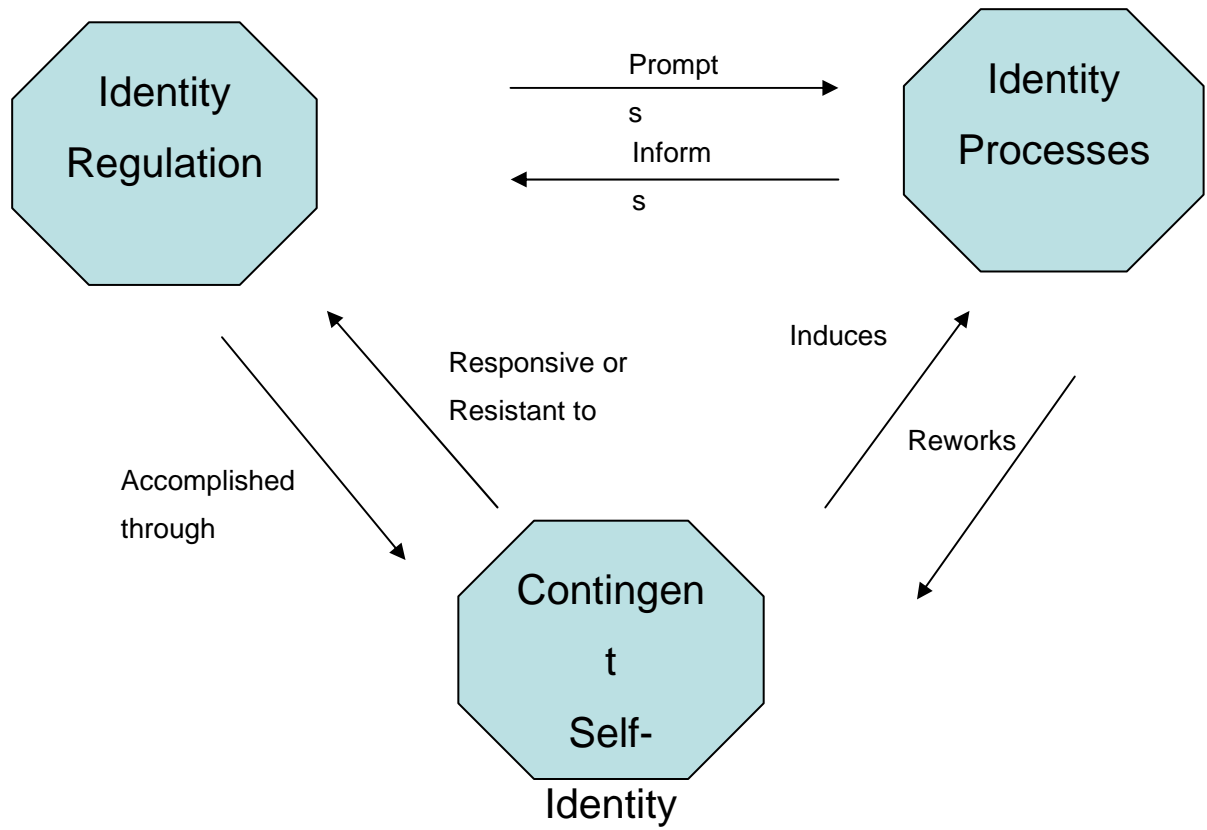
Disembedding mechanisms: symbolic tokens and/or expert systems (systems of abstraction) which dislocate the particularity of experience; and

Institutional reflexivity: the regularised use of knowledge about circumstances of social life as a constitutive element in its organisation and transformation (1991, 20).

The conditions of high modernity: issues of time and space, e.g., working with others in a globalized society; the impact of abstracted systems, e.g., the role of experts in raising our children; and the constant application of knowledge to social relations, e.g., therapeutic culture, effect a self highly adaptable and perhaps malleable. The backdrop of the self in modernity is the motif upon which Giddens addresses the specific questions of ontological security and existential anxiety for “the self and society in the late modern age.”

**Self identity** is “the precarious outcome of identity work comprising of narratives of the self” (Alvesson and Willmont, 627). One might imagine the reflexive self as we’ve described it, always in process and always subject to a range of discourses. In the context of this description, self-identity is somewhat contingent but simultaneously stable. One imagines self identity as the ongoing biography of a person, partly sedimented history and partly dynamic experience.

Figure 1.1  
Alvesson and Willmott  
(2002)



## 4. Empirical Applications

How is the above model applied to organizational research? It might be useful at this point in the discussion to reiterate the distinction between traditional role theory and newer forms of identity construction. To review, our brief chronology of role theory presented the concept of the organizational role as a relatively unproblematic notion especially in light of functionalist sociology. Goffman's work signalled the interpretive turn in sociology wherein roles were understood to have an unfailingly dramaturgical quality. The linguistic turn in social science reconfigured our understanding of organizational action by showing that organizational actors are powerfully implicated as subjects in discourse. Hence current research on work identity takes into consideration of the interplay between roles and other aspects of identity constellation. As Svengisson and Alvesson note:

Most of the literature views organizational identity or roles as crucial input to identity work. Kunda (1992), for example, draws upon Goffman, and defines role as explicitly and systematically enforced prescriptions for how organizational members should think and feel about themselves and their work. The self then arises out of the balancing and rejections of the organizational ideology and the member role it prescribes (p. 162)... we try to balance the significance of discourse, role and other 'external' forces targeting and moulding the human subject with the relative inertia following from life history and capacity to reflexivity and to actively struggle to create a life project out of various influences, including to produce and edit an integrating narrative over one self (McAdams, 1993) (2003, 1168).

Let me introduce a detailed example of research along the lines of the model I've summarized. In an in-depth case study on a senior manager in a research and development organization, Svengisson and Alvesson, demonstrated the interplay between organizational discourses and the reflexive self. I'll summarize the findings here (See Figure 1.2 for more detail.). Their in-depth case study focuses on a senior manager in a research based organization. The manager has recently been appointed to the position and finds herself, not surprisingly, with overlapping duties and functions. The researchers conducted interviews with this manager as well as with her peers, superiors and subordinates. Approximately 46 related interviews were conducted along with various types of observations. What is interesting about the research is not only the discourses that were presented as influencing her

daily experience, nor merely the identities she described in relation to the enactment of her work, but the processing of those dynamics.

In this case we get a picture of H, the female manager presented in the case, as finding herself as a subject in four particular discourses. They are: 1) **Global discourse:** the effects of the work of the organization and its global reach; 2) **Innovation and creativity discourse:** the efforts to maintain a well managed organization while also sustaining an environment that is open to iconoclasts and work processes that “appear” idiosyncratic; 3) **Research network discourse:** the reality of overlapping sets of social relations that is common to research based organizations but increasingly common in all types of organizations; and 4) **Management control discourse:** the demand for auditability within an organization with highly specialized functions. These are discourses that to one degree or another regulate identity. The researchers define discourse as

“A way of reasoning (form of logic), with certain truth effects through its impact on practice, anchored in a particular vocabulary that constitutes a particular version of the social world” (1171-1172).

So, H finds herself as the subject in these particular discourses. Her subjectivity is, to a large degree, based on our review of discourse theory, a product of these organizational discourses. Her organizational roles also affect the constitution of her identity. In the case described, H sees herself as having three major organizational roles: administrator, spokesperson, and cultural integrator (1187). However, she does not talk about them in precisely those terms. Instead she describes her management role as one of “a janitor or as a manager of an industry hotel” (1179). These parallel metaphors of janitor and industry hotel manager refer to the effects of the design of the parent organization. It has a global corporate level and then a bevy of research “cells” which historically would have been analogous to research divisions. In effect, these cells are research

FIGURE 1.2  
 Managing Managerial Identities  
 Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003)

DISCOURSES<sup>1</sup> OF IDENTITY IDENTITY WORK (Reflexive Self)  
 REGULATION

- **Global discourse:** the effects of the work of the organization and its global reach.
- **Innovation and creativity discourse:** the efforts to maintain a well managed organization while also sustaining an environment that is open to iconoclasts and work processes that “appear” idiosyncratic.
- **Research network discourse:** the reality of overlapping sets of social relations that is common to research based organizations but increasingly common in all types of organizations.
- **Management control discourse:** the demand for auditability within an organization with highly specialized functions.
- **Not just an administrator:** managing the employees of the organizational unit, promoting the success of the research internally and externally, leading a senior management team.
  - *Janitorial work* as a metaphor for managing
  - *Embassy work* as a metaphor for sustaining internal and external relations.
  - *Culture work* as a metaphor for balances competing subcultures within the broader organization.

## SELF-IDENTITY

- A simple farmer with both feet on the ground
  - Research as curious reflection
  - Management as a partnership

1. Discourse is defined in this study as: “A way of reasoning (form of logic), with certain truth effects through its impact on practice, anchored in a particular vocabulary that constitutes a particular version of the social world” (5).

divisions stripped of their independent coordinating and operating functions. As such they are colloquially known as infrastructure hotels comprised of technical expertise, operating facilities, and administrative capacity (e.g., HRM and Finance). So, H's managerial identity is as she and her peers put it: janitorial. As the researchers note: "strategy and culture issues are downplayed in favor of operational activities, the latter facilitated by the management control devices, i.e. time registration systems and balanced scorecards" (1180). What is at issue in the case isn't necessarily the term "janitor" but rather the effects of this role/identity as it is processed in relation to other roles and other discourses.

In the case it is evident that H would prefer to distance herself from the so-called janitorial tasks. However, in point of fact they are central to her job and seen as important by both her superiors and subordinates. Hence, this constitutes a major conflict for H and so in this sense her primary organizational role is negatively defined, or is an "anti-identity." It is an anti-identity in that this is not the preferred way in which H sees herself. Rather, she identifies with a managerial role that is more consistent with the creativity and network discourses. So, analyzing the dynamics between this primary organizational role and the four discourses identified gives one a flavour of how this research is conducted.

Let me continue with this example and link the third component of their tripartite schema: self-identity. Consistent with the sociological approach to identity presented in this model, self identity is the narrative through which one understands oneself. Self-identity is one's sedimented biography, i.e. life story. In the case of H, she identifies herself "as a farmer, as a simple woman, 'with both feet on the ground,'" (1185). This self-identity is reflected in her view of what the company's culture ought to reflect in that as much as it is a global organization "[we] have a need for local everyday life, we are local as human beings" (1186).

While there are many other dimensions to this case, what is of interest is the type of findings that this kind of research produces. Sveningsson and Alvesson suggest that their model can serve an integrating function between traditional role theory on the one hand, and "discourse driven" subjectivity on the other. They view identity not as a fixed position but as an ongoing "struggle". As such they neither want to position themselves as defining the human subject purely as a product of discourse. Neither, do they want to position themselves as defining the human subject purely as enacting multiple roles: societal, organizational and so on. Finally, they do not suggest that their "Self-Reflexive Identity Model" constitutes a meta-theory of personal mastery. Such a meta-theory is more consistent with new age spirituality than academic research.

## 5. A Brief Critique

While there is much to applaud about the theory stream that Alvesson and his colleagues are generating, it also warrants some critique. It is unclear whether the Self Reflexive Identity Model really addresses the problem of Foucault or merely finesses it. The “Foucault effect” has cast a long shadow over the organization studies literature. As I mentioned earlier, it has been something of an intellectual straitjacket especially for those who want to champion worker autonomy. In this regard a question to be posed is: Does the research model of Alvesson and his colleagues take into account fully the operation of discourse upon the human subject? In the case study I summarized, it is unclear whether the four organizational discourses presented measure up to the concept of discourse developed by Foucault, or others such as Lacan for example<sup>5</sup>. The challenge is an epistemological one. The intellectual tradition of discourse theory is grounded in the linguistic turn and in the problematic of representation and therefore of identity. In short, the subject in discourse cannot easily be dismissed. As a corollary, neither can theorizing about a discourse.

A second important issue to address is theory of the self articulated by Alvesson and his colleagues. While one might readily accept the notion of a reflexive self that is always in process, how does one theorize about the aspects of the subject in discourse that defy representation? It seems to me it is around this reference point that the question of the subject in discourse and the definition of the self both turn. On this point the Self Reflexive Identity model addresses only imaginary axis. By the imaginary axis I am referring to the plane upon which the ego operates. To be sure this axis constitutes a rich depiction of identity as it includes one’s self perception and the expectation that are formed of it by others and by the broader social order. However, if we accept the implications of the linguistic turn which suggests that the human subject is first and foremost constituted by language, then one has to come to grips with the fact that the Self Reflexive Identity Model is insufficient. It avoids, in Lacanian terms, the Real, the unsymbolizable elements of the subject. The real-- the stuff that cannot be symbolized in language or described in words-- is human experience that we cannot name but experience as felt experience nonetheless. One must have a way to reflect upon this dynamic between the imaginary and the real—the symbolizable and the unsymbolizable. This dynamic gap or lack is central to the Lacanian depiction of subjectivity which redresses in my view some of the limitations of the Reflexive Self. The basic components of the Lacanian schema are introduced in Appendix A.

## **6. Applications of the Self-Reflexive Identity Model to Democratic Network Governance**

Can the Self-Reflexive Identity Model have applications for Democratic Network governance? An example familiar to all of you here is Eva Sørensen's analysis of municipal reform in Skandeborg (Sørensen, 2002). This research addressed the implications of the Skandeborg reform for both democracy and administration. The analysis richly described the role tensions implicit in administering in the gray zone. Wherein the Skandeborg research sought to implications of these role tensions for network theory and for democratic theory, an application of the Self-Reflexive Identity Model might directly provide guidance to the organizational actors experiencing the role tension. To cite but one example from the Skandeborg case, Irene, a gray zone administrator in the area of sports and recreation found herself genuinely conflicted about both her loyalties and her responsibilities to the municipality on the one hand and the umbrella of voluntary organizations for which she was responsible, on the other. This role tension affected all aspects of her work. In this situation one could see how the broad scope of dynamics articulated in the Self Reflexive Identity Model could help Irene directly.

In the U.S. we sought to replicate Eva's study. Interviews with eight public administrators from the city of Omaha were conducted. While Omaha did not go through a conscious effort to move to a network model of governance, those administrators interviewed for the study had organizational responsibilities that included participation in a network style decentralized multi-dimensional system of actors to accomplish the delivery of services.

Although the results of the Omaha effort had some limitations<sup>6</sup>, one could project also project ways in which the Self-Reflexive Identity Model could be applied. For example, a significant finding in the Omaha study was the shadow of hierarchy that operated on what were perceived to be network structures. Clearly the model developed by Alvesson and his colleagues could help individual administrators address not only the implicit governmentality issues, but also other related "symptoms" such as the tacit use of professional citizens<sup>7</sup>.

Finally, it seems to me that Birgitte's research framework already includes the elements of the Self-Reflexive Identity Model. Her seven main research themes<sup>8</sup> include the relationship between the concepts of role and identity.

## APPENDIX A

### *The Subject in Discourse: The Lacanian Approach*

We can connect Lacan to our earlier discussion of the Linguistic turn in philosophy and social theory. Lacan argues that language is much more than a tool, which we consciously use to communicate. Rather, language creates our social experience. Wherein Berger and Luckmann revealed with clarity that the social conventions, which we take for granted actually make everyday life possible, Lacanian theory shows how each of us is implicated in language. The core idea that infuses Lacan's view is that, at bottom, discourse is the "necessary structure" that is embedded in the basic relationships that all of us have: intrapersonally (within ourselves); interpersonally (with others) and with the world at large. In this sense "discourse" governs every claim we make and every action we take. He famously states: "What dominates [society] is the practice of language." And in terms of a social theory Lacan wants to show how language has a "formative and transformative effect on human affairs." In this regard, Lacan's central point is that our world is structured through language. This is in contrast to most frameworks of social theory, which suggest that each of us is born into a material world where we think rationally in order to "survive." Instead of a material view of the world, the Lacanian perspective suggests that "the human subject is the product of a forced and ultimately impossible union between two incommensurable phenomena: the symbolic and the Real: Language and biology

### The Symbolic Register

Our entrance into the world of words which Lacan calls the symbolic register refers to the way in which our identification with certain identity bearing words like "man" or "woman" create our primary identity. This identification of "who we are" occurs as a result of a signification process which starts even before we are conceived: the utterances, gazes, routines that are attributed to us or practiced on our behalf by our primary care givers and more broadly society at large. The symbolic order then, represents the societal order, law societal values, the dynamics that structure one's social experience. The Lacanian perspective as delineated by Fink, 1997 is useful here:

What are symbolic relations? One simple way of viewing them is as one's relation to the Law, to the law laid down by one's parents, one's teachers, one's religion, one's country. Symbolic relations can also be thought of as the way people deal with *ideals*

that their parents, schools, media, language, and society at large, embodied in grades, diplomas, status symbols and so on (33).

As it relates to the ideas of language the symbolic is the world of signification. The plane of semiotics is therefore important because it is this grid—this system of sounds, words, symbols, images and all the operations that obtain as a result, that constitute the plane of human experience. This is explicitly an anti-metaphysical view. It is anti-metaphysical in that there is no over-arching God or Spirit that animates this plane of signification. There is just the economy of difference. Again, the Lacanian perspective is instructive here. Stavrakakis (1999) writes:

From the time of its birth and ever before that, the infant is inserted into the symbolic order...the symbolic network constructed by its parents and family. The infant's name is sometimes chosen before it is born and its life is interwoven in the parents' imagination, with a preexisting family mythology. This whole framework, while the new born is not aware of it, is destined to influence its psychic development. Even the images with which are identified in the mirror stage derive from how our parents see us (thus being symbolically sanctioned) and are linguistically structured, which explains why the mirror stage takes place around the period the child is first inserted into language and starts developing its own linguistic skills (19).

### The Register of the Real

*Simultaneously as we become socialized subjects, we are in effect cut off from the experience of pure enjoyment that we had as infants. This world of pure enjoyment is what Lacan calls the register of the real. It describes a body, which is unaware of itself as anything but a bundle of desires. It is what we might describe in Freudian terms as the drives. The real is how we experience the world prior to consciousness. It is that which cannot be symbolized.*

So, for Lacan the central dynamic of human experience is this tension between our biological drives, the so-called register of the real and our experience as expressed through language. The latter helps one to have an identity in which can be recognized by one's self and be encountered and recognized by others. At the same time something also remains unknown and unexpressed. We all have this sense of not being able to fully explain what we experienced. That which remains unsymbolized is often revealed to us through parapraxias of

language. The key point here is related to articulating the place of the unconscious. The unconscious as related to the divided subject can be found in the enunciation as opposed to the utterance. By the time of utterance, language has already enveloped the subject. As Dror notes: “The unconscious therefore reveals itself in the *saying* [the enunciation], whereas in *the said* [the utterance], the truth of the subject is lost under the mask of the subject of the utterance” (152-153). This argument is central to the act of psychoanalysis, particularly the Lacanian approach. The analyst must respond not to the content of what is said, but to the enunciation of the signifier-in-play. As Dror notes:

The analyst’s intervention, which also avoids the sterility of an explanatory interpretation, aims only at punctuating the patient’s act of saying with a scansion that provides—right in the locus of enunciation—the signifying opening that makes itself heard in that place where it is destined to close up again with the closure of the utterance (155).

### The Imaginary Register

In the discussion above I’ve touched on two of the three so-called Lacanian registers. These registers: the symbolic or social order, the real or the unsymbolizable aspects of human experience (often equated with the Freudian drives), and the imaginary register also known as the mirror stage, are framework through which Lacan deploys his psychoanalytic theory. The imaginary register becomes manifest during the mirror phase of human development; ages 6 to 18 months. It is called the mirror stage because the defining event is when the child recognizes an image in the mirror that he/she ultimately realizes is a self-reflection. Having said this, there are really three sub-phases of the mirror stage that occur in relation to this self-recognition (Dror, 2004). In the first stage, the child often tries to grab hold of the specular image that he/she sees. The body (or face) in the mirror appears not as an image but as a real being. What is significant is that there is no necessary recognition of a coherent self. Rather, this initial confusion between the self and other (the image in the mirror that at least initial appears like another person) is evidence that one’s identity is gained through the other. Lacan notes that throughout the mirror stage, a child orients his/her own self-consciousness through the experience of others: “During the whole of this period, we note the emotional reactions and the spoken accounts of a normal transitivity. The child who strikes another says he has been struck; the child who sees another fall, cries” (Lacan as cited in Dror, 2004, 96).

The second phase of the mirror stage occurs when the child realizes the image in the mirror is not real but merely specular. It is in this period as well that the child is able to distinguish “the image of the other from the reality of the other” (96). The third phase of this specular awareness—the establishment of the imaginary (i.e., image) register—is the culminating phase because the child finally experiences the image in the mirror as his/herself. By doing so, the child recognizes (identifies) a coherent image—a unity of the body. This detailed discussion of the imaginary register is necessary because it is in the imaginary that the “I” or ego is prefigured. However, as Dror notes, the “I” is simultaneously alienated by this self-identification because as the body subject will realize over time, this “I” is comprised more than this specular image. That is “the child is not yet mature enough to have a specific *cognition* of his own body” (97). A further dilemma of this simultaneous awareness and alienation is a result of the image itself.

The recognition of the self in the mirror image is accomplished—for optical reasons—through indications that are exterior and symmetrically inverted. At the same time, therefore, the very unity of the body takes form as exterior to the self and inverted. And so this re-cognition in itself, prefigures, for the subject who is in the process of acquiring his identity, the nature of his imaginary alienation and the beginnings of the chronic misrecognition that will characterize all his future relations with himself (97).

The discussion of the symbolic, the real and the imaginary is significant because it is what distinguishes Lacan’s work from the traditional interpretivist, or as is preferred here in Denmark, social constructivist frameworks. As Jones and Spicer note:

The challenge of the mirror stage is that the act is not in seeing the subject as being constructed in relation to the Other, a notion that is anyway almost commonplace today. The challenge is that the act or recognition simultaneously involves a dynamic of misrecognition (231).

The authors go on to point out that the subject:

misrecognizes a coherence that represses its fragmented character. Hence for Lacan ‘[t]he subject is no one. It is decomposed in pieces. And, it is jammed, sucked in by the image, the deceiving and realized image, of the other, or equally by its own specular image. That’s where it finds its unity’ (231)

Thus the subject is decentered. It is not the unity that we perceive it to be. This is central to the Lacanian theory of identity. Jones and Spicer support this point by developing the Lacanian concept of the real. The real is a crucial concept because it shows how the subject is never completely closed off from world of experiences that constitute and constituted him/her. However, the metaphors that we use to explain this are typically biological ones. We search for the essential qualities that make us human and consider them biologically determined. This basic view of human nature suggests a needs based theory in that it assumes that people are not unlike organisms who are have biological “needs” that they seek to reduce or “satisfy”(McSwite, 1997a).

The linguistic turn puts a cramp in that particular line of argument when it suggests that subjectivity is constituted in language rather than solely in biology. As such if language is the constituting factor in subjectivity, in that sense it is vital to understand that identity is not constituted solely by the ego. For most of its short history, the science of organization with its emphasis on the study of administrative behavior has focused on the mind as a self-interested needs based machine, whose subjectivity can be perfected by improving one’s capacity for rational analysis. It is only recently that this view has been broadened.

## END NOTES

1. This system as articulated by Talcott Parsons consisted of functional requisites all of which were necessary for system (organizational) survival: defining and seeking to attain goals, inputting and transforming resources into usable values, obtaining and socializing new members, and coordinating and managing tensions among and between components (Parsons, as Cited in McSwite, 1997, 185).
2. The concept of surplus value as it applies to social relations is well articulated by Lacan in his Seminar XVII “The Other Side of Psychoanalysis” presented in 1969 through 1970. The Discourse of the Master (work relations prior to the science of organization) and The Discourse of the University (work relations articulated by the science of organization) depict the impossibility of totally capturing the subject of production.
3. I am not suggesting that the informal organization was not articulated prior to the prevalence of the structural functionalist model. Cf. Chester I. Barnard’s *The Functions of the Executive*. However, the Parsonian model in sociology and the Simonian model in public administration serve as the point of departure for managing not just the functions of the organization, but the minds (from the perspective of social psychology) of the individuals who comprise the organization. On the point of documenting the limits of formal role theory: Homans, 1950; Eztioni, 1960; and Argyris, 1959 are prime examples. An excellent discussion of the issues that I am briefly discussing here can be found in (McSwite, 1997, 184-194).
4. According to Giddens, there are four key aspects to modernity. That is, four main discourses. They are: 1) industrialism – the social relations implied in the widespread use of material power and machinery in production processes; 2) capitalism - a system of commodity production involving both competitive product markets and the commodification of labour power; 3) surveillance – the supervisory control of subject populations, whether this control takes the form of ‘visible’ supervision in Foucault’s sense or the use of information to coordinate social activities; and 4) organization – the regularized control of social relations across indefinite time-space distances (1991, 15).

5. Lacan argued that at the societal level, there is always a tension between the human order and the social order that is trying to program it. His discourse of master, university, hysteric and analyst constitute four ways of understanding one's social experience.
6. While the administrators interviewed saw themselves as operating in network structures, the Omaha cases were better characterized as horizontal self-coordinating entities wherein the negotiation games occur more often than not in an embedded hierarchy. (Scharpf, 1994).
7. An important finding in one of the cases not heretofore addressed is the so-called professional citizen. As detailed in Case #1 of the Omaha study, Joe, perhaps not maliciously, but certainly with some intentionality, limits the entry of unknown actors into the network. In several of the other Omaha cases, the gray-zone administrators noted that there were most comfortable with actors who understood how the system worked.
8. The seven themes are: 1) roles through differences; 2) institutional handling of the formal role; 3) the role as interpreted by the subject who occupies it; 4) the "overriding" of a role defined by a specific institutional context; 5) the historical exclusion of particular discourses within an organization; 6) the relationship between role and identity; and 7) norms for handling role conflicts and role dilemmas.

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