

**Encountering the Arugula Leaf: The Failure of the Imaginary and Its Implications
for Research on Identity in Organizations**

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Key words: identity, organizations, discourse, Lacan, psychoanalysis

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Abstract

The paper reviews research on identity in organizations. It suggests that current research reiterates imaginary constructions of identity by which identity can be defined as coherent or fragmented. Based on a psychoanalytic understanding of subjectivity, it explores how articulating identity as lack may unsettle such imaginary constructions. The paper develops the significant implications this has for how identity is conceptualized and researched and, importantly, how the failure of imaginary identity constructions relates to resistance and control in organizations. The paper provides new directions for the study of identity in organizations particularly with respect to widening the discursive spaces in which creative identity struggles occur.

Introduction

Questions of identity, subjectivity and self have a long history in the social sciences (Collinson, 2003). Organizational studies have been similarly occupied with such questions particularly in view of post-bureaucratic forms of organizing and normative controls in organizations (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Indeed, how individual identity is constructed in organizations as the site of more or less managerial control is one of the most important and widely researched topics in organizational studies today (e.g. Ashcraft, 2005; Barry et al., 2006; Bergstroem and Knights, 2005; Down and Reveley, 2004; Hodgson, 2005; Merilainen et al., 2004). There are conference tracks and themed journal issues (e.g. Alvesson, Ashcraft and Thomas, 2008) and a large number of empirical studies investigating the complexities of identity work in organizations today (e.g. Alvesson and Robertson, 2006; Karreman and Alvesson, 2004; Kornberger and Brown, 2007; Laine and Vaara, 2007).

What I would like to focus on here is the notion that “processes of identity (re)formation [are] at the center of social and organizational theory” (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002: 638) not just because identity, as a subject matter, has such a long history or is the site for normative controls in organizations today. Rather they take center stage because “[t]his growing interest in selves, subject and subjectivities presents a challenge for organization theorists” (Collinson, 2003: 542) in view of the complex nature of identity work (Collinson, 2003) and, as I will argue, its often imaginary character. This challenge does not seem to be addressed adequately by how we currently conceive of and investigate identity. Particularly, it does not seem to be addressed well by reiterating that identity is complex due to the many contradictions and tensions that mark post-

structuralist conceptions of the de-centered subject (Kondo, 1990). Nor does it seem to be addressed well by reiterating that therefore identity is continuously caught between ontological security and the insecurities of multiple, fragmented selves (Collinson, 2003), a contested struggle, in which there are opportunities for control and emancipation (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002), coherence and security as well as fragmentation and existential anxiety (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003).

As I will show, particularly when looking at the many empirical studies on identity work in organizations, it becomes clear that we need to address the challenge posed by our interest in identity differently than simply reiterating the contradictions and tensions of identity work without also providing additional insights and implications. That is, the time may have come to move beyond, as one reviewer for this paper put it, “existing studies [which] are yielding the same findings (i.e. evidence of coherence/stability and fragmentation) accompanied by a ‘set-piece’ around reflexivity”. While such research has yielded important and valuable insights, I think it has also missed an underlying dynamic of identity work that, when uncovered, may help us address the challenges of identity research in new and perhaps more constructive ways.

Based on a psychoanalytic perspective (Lacan, 1977a,b; 1988a;b), I think, what has been missed in the identity debate so far is that identity is problematic because it is marked by a fundamental lack. Consequently, what is missed in current identity research is that identity is neither coherent nor fragmented. Rather identity is NOT. Or rather identity is what is missing from discourse in which identity is articulated as a definable entity as this is an imaginary construction that necessarily fails. The perspective I develop in the paper invites us to explore this failure and the creative identity struggles that

accompany it when lack is articulated rather than covered up. This in turn provides new directions for identity research as an exploration of failures of the imaginary and importantly as a discursive space in which the absent subject can be experienced. Therefore, an important contribution to be made here is to develop a perspective through which identity research can relate differently to lack and conceptualize control and resistance in organizations in relation to how lack is articulated in identity discourse and how it may absorb, suck up or (re-) appropriates larger, potentially controlling discourses.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, I examine how the challenge of identity work is currently addressed in organizational research particularly in view of recent empirical investigations and the set-piece approach to coherence, fragmentation and reflexivity. Second, I review key concepts of Lacanian psychoanalysis (Lacan, 1977a,b; 1988a;b). Third, I discuss what these may tell us about how identity is theorized and explored and conclude by discussing implications for the theory and practice of identity research.

Empirical Research and the Set-Piece

I now examine how the challenge of identity complexity is dealt with in current research, particularly empirical research, on identity work in organizations. In this review I will focus on studies that investigate how the self is constructed in everyday language (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) and how subjects position themselves in interactions with others by drawing on different discourses (Davies and Harre, 1990). That is, I focus on research that conceives of identity in relation to discourse as “a more or less integrated, prefabricated line of using language and reasoning in which the phenomenon [here identity] is constructed rather than revealed or mirrored” (Sveningsson and Alvesson,

2003). My review will try to map out first how the themes of coherence and fragmentation are played out in current research in relation to the research findings but also authorial reflexivity.

I begin my review with a study of managerial identity in which ethnographic materials furnished the contextual framework for an in-depth case study of an administrative manager, referred to as H, at a multinational firm in the high tech industry (Sveningsson and Alevesson, 2003). The theme of identity coherence emerges in this study as the authors find that H draws on a relatively stable and coherent identity, which provides security from more ambiguous, contradictory and fragile constructions. Particularly, H's identity as a farmer provides this security but also the ability to resist various organizational discourses. The theme of fragmentation emerges as H's stable self-identity creates tensions and conflicts with dominant discourses of globalization, creativity, networking and management control found in her organization. As she defines herself in opposition to some but not all of these discourses, what seems to be a stable identity is continuously in tension with them, which also creates insecurity for her.

The authors conclude that the study provides evidence for both coherence and fragmentation by drawing on the concept of self-identity, which they define as a more stable, coherent core that may be contrasted with more superficial and therefore more fragmented identity narratives. Additionally, they conclude that identity work is a force for integration and an increased susceptibility to conformity and managerial control as well as fragmentation and the resistance to organizational discourses and therefore managerial control. The authors suggest that these findings point to the complexity of identity work and reflect on the need to get thicker descriptions of identity processes via

in-depth studies perhaps focusing on a single individual while taking an open-minded approach that avoids reducing identity work to the labeling of social categories, such as organizational identity or gender.

By reflecting on the: “need to listen carefully to the stories of those we claim to understand” (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003: 1177), the authors propose that the complexity of identity work may be unraveled more constructively through a thicker and more focused approach. Yet, their own study does not seem to go much beyond previous research establishing that identity is indeed coherent as well as fragmented and a force both for control as well as emancipation (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). In fact, one might even make the case that their study represents a certain regression as the concept of self-identity developed in the study seems to indicate recourse to conceptions of identity as a pure or inner core that were previously refuted (Karreman and Alvesson, 2001).

But the point here is not to deconstruct individual studies of identity. Rather the point is to show how current conceptions of identity complexity, as for example coherence versus fragmentation, are not only played out in current empirical research but also constrain it to some extent. In particular, empirical studies rarely seem to escape from documenting recurring identity themes of coherence and fragmentation and, as a result, generate somewhat limited implications. A common implication for control and resistance is that the latter is always possible but we do not know what specific role identity plays in either, only that some identity dynamics seem more conducive to control while others seem more conducive to resistance and this varies from study to study.

For instance, in a discourse-oriented study of identity in an IT consulting firm, the authors find the identity discourse of the consultants to be remarkably coherent as they

identify quickly and seemingly without resistance with hegemonic organizational discourses (Karreman and Alvesson, 2004). As the consultants internalize these discourses defining what it means to be a competent and high-performing member of the firm, the study shows how bureaucratic and normative controls work in tandem. This in turn makes identity work unlikely to lead to resistance but highly likely to lead to dysfunctional behaviors such as consulting work that is neither creative nor of high quality (Karreman and Alvesson, 2004). In a later review of this and related studies, these findings are somewhat modified by suggesting that while processes of subjugation to dominant and appealing organizational identities, such as being elite, provide for coherence and stability of identity narratives, a closer analysis of discourses that people draw on in a given situation may reveal contradictions and fragmentation (Alvesson and Robertson, 2006). Therefore, while there is evidence that identity coherence may be linked to increased organizational control, there is also evidence that it is linked to decreased control (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003).

A study of the public services sector exploring new public management discourses reiterates this approach. In it identity is found to be a contradictory process of stabilizing and destabilizing discourses “as individuals negotiate the complexity of ‘being’” (Thomas and Davies, 2005: 688). The study finds that identity work is never as coherent as individuals and/or organizations may wish it to be. Individuals draw on and interpret discourses differently from situation to situation thereby constructing a dynamic identity that reiterates but also subverts dominant subject positions. For example, Kate a personnel manager for a police service draws on the discourse of being a mother to resist the discourse of masculine competitiveness in her organization but in so doing also

reproduces the gendered conception of the other this discourse relies on (Thomas and Davies, 2005: 693). The authors conclude that resistance is the exploitation of the spaces created by the ambiguities and polyvalence of discourse as the dynamics of identity work unsettle and weaken larger, perhaps more dominant and coherent, discourses (Thomas and Davies, 2005: 701). They also reflect on their interactions with research subjects describing their interviews as co-constructed social events and their subsequent interpretations as constructions of constructions. It remains unclear how such constructions may have facilitated or subverted larger more dominant discourses and as such how perhaps the researchers' construction of identity may be implicated in the identity dynamics uncovered.

Such reflection was undertaken somewhat more explicitly in a discursive study of the professional identity of women engineers (Jorgenson, 2002). Particularly, the author aims at uncovering the challenges faced by women in a male-dominated profession but quickly finds that the coherence she may have attributed to her respondents is highly contested in practice. The author reflects extensively on the research process as a communicative encounter in which the researcher discursively positions research participants who in turn position themselves by either conforming to or resisting these positions. The author concludes that identity is constructed in discourse as multiple, negotiated positions and that research participants need to be given more voice "as authors of their experiences" (Jorgenson, 2002: 365). What the author may be alluding to but does not reflect on explicitly is that identity coherence as well as fragmentation may be as much a product of how research or the research encounter is produced as of the underlying identity dynamics uncovered in the process.

This aspect was explored further in a discourse study of gay identity in a government department (Ward and Winstanley, 2003). The study examines identity discourse in relation to silence or the absence of negativity. That is rather than being constructed coherently around a discourse of “the Department [being] a very good place for sexual minorities to work” (Ward and Winstanley, 2003: 1262), the authors find identity being fragmented around various forms of silence what was not being said. For example, the discourse of revealing one’s sexual identity at work may on the one hand lead to greater control for the subject as he or she is no longer silent about his/her sexual identity but it may also lead to a loss of control as the revelation is now part of and perhaps controlled by a more dominant heterosexual discourse.

The authors reflect extensively on how identity may be co-constructed in discourse between researchers and researched and how respondents may become mere vehicles for the researchers’ own identity work turning authentic insight into “acts of ventriloquism” (Ward and Winstanley, 2003: 1266). They conclude that researchers may harm research participants in this process and examine how particularly in this study they had to take responsibility for naming identity or naming it wrongly. This points to the co-construction of identity discourse and may implicate researchers/authors in processes of control and resistance. That is, engagements with research participants may not only be construed as acts of control or resistance, as in the study of women engineers cited earlier (Jorgenson, 2002), but, importantly, may contribute to making identity discourse available for control or resistance.

This theme seemed to emerge also in a cross-cultural discourse study of management consultants in the UK and Finland (Merilainen et al., 2004). It finds

fragmentation in how consultants construct their identities relative to discourses of work/life balance. Consultants in the UK seemed to construct issues around the integration of work and life as a form of resistance to dominant organizational discourses in which work takes precedence, while consultants in Finland constructed the same issues by way of conforming to a larger organizational and societal discourse around ideals for the integration of work and life. As such the theme of fragmentation emerged in the analysis of professional identities of consultants while coherence was found relative to cultural identities with consultants from the same country drawing on similar discourses. The authors reflect extensively on how research subjects may have been constructed in the research process. Additionally, they consider their own identity work as members of a particular culture may have co-produced the interviews as a lived experience. Here they reflect at least implicitly on how both coherence and fragmentation are constructed in researcher/researched interactions and how the dominance and normalization of larger discourses such as cultural ideals of work/life balance may be reiterated in and through these interactions.

This kind of reflection is taken up in a study of entrepreneurial identity (Down and Reveley, 2004). It examines how entrepreneurs attempt to construct coherent self-narratives in and through encounters with older managers in which they define their younger, entrepreneurial selves in opposition to the older, less entrepreneurial identities they attribute to the older others. The authors conclude that localized materials and interactions rather than conformity to larger, hegemonic discourses inform identity work. They also reflect on the subjective nature of identity research and the importance of letting the researched tell their story. They reflect extensively on how the identity of one

of the authors as entrepreneur and friend of the researched as well as the personal nature of the research may have affected the researchers' identity work. For example, they consider how this work has enabled one of the researchers to overcome the anxiety and identity threats of fieldwork by establishing "a sense of 'sameness'" (Down and Reveley, 2004: 236) with the research subjects. They do not explore how this sense of sameness may have informed the identity work of the researched and reiterated the larger, hegemonic discourses they seem to have found in their study. For example, they do not consider how their interactions with the respondents may have reiterated generational norms as researchers and researched co-constructed the discourses of "young guns" and "old farts" (Down and Reveley, 2004: 233).

The point again is not to deconstruct individual studies but rather to highlight how conceptions of identity are played out in current research. When we review the studies described above and others described in Table 1 what I think emerges is that current research seems to be confined to what I have referred to as the set-piece of identity research and the following insights.

Insert Table 1 about here

First, identity may cohere by conforming to dominant discourses or by constructing an oppositional subject position (Bergstroem and Knights, 2006; Down and Reveley, 2004). Second, identity may fragment in the very act of unsettling dominant discourses (Sveningsson and Alevesson, 2003) and the varying positions that may be constructed by drawing on different aspects of the dominant discourses and doing so differently in different situations (Thomas and Davies, 2005). Third, researchers seem to

play a part in all of this as they co-construct the identities of research subjects (Jorgenson, 2002) and may in turn subject research participants to their own dominant identity discourses (Ward and Winstanley, 2003), share participants' identity discourses (Down and Reveley, 2004) or subvert and/or normalize the discourses that can dominate identity work in particular contexts (Alvesson, 1998; Merilainen et al., 2004; Thomas and Davies, 2005). I would now like to examine why this set-piece seems to exist and what underlying dynamics and new avenues for research may be missed by reiterating it. To this end, I turn to the theorizing of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan.

Subjectivity and the Failure of the Imaginary

Lacanian psychoanalysis (Lacan, 1977a,b; 1988a,b; 2001) with its focus on how identity is constructed in discourse has been shown to have increasing relevance for organizational studies today (Arnaud, 2002; 2003; Arnaud and Vanheule, 2007; Driver, 2005; Jones and Spicer, 2005; Roberts, 2005; Vanheule, Lievrouw and Verhaeghe, 2003). It suggests that the conscious language in which a person articulates the self is typically an imaginary construction from which the authentic subject, or the subject of the unconscious, is missing. It is missing because we always construct the self in language. But language is a symbolic order that can never provide us the unmediated experience of the world we have had prior to attaining language and (self) consciousness.

The self we construct in this symbolic order is alienated as an object constructed in the language of an other, internalized others or even the conventions of language itself handed down through generations of others. Therefore, the answers we continuously seek about who we are and what we want never actually answer our questions or, importantly, fulfill our desires. Lacanian psychoanalysis does not offer a cure for this ill. Rather it

offers the insight that the failure of our conscious imaginary self-constructions is a highly valuable experience that we should reflect on and explore further. In so doing we will not be able to rid ourselves of the imaginary or somehow learn who we truly are so we can finally get what we truly want. Instead we may learn that the failure to do those things is not a personal shortcoming but rather a structural condition. It is an impossibility we can never overcome but live with.

Particularly, we can learn to render transparent the lack that fundamentally marks who we are as subjects (Ragland, 1996). We can reflect on lack as an articulation of our unconscious that speaks through us even though we cannot understand it. We can let ourselves be reminded again and again that there is something we long for, someone we want to be, but when we try to articulate this, we come up empty. Finally, we can come to notice that we continue to circle around this lack in everything we say and do, but that this lack also provides us with immense and creative potential (Lacan, 1988b). This potential rests in interactions and discourse in which we amplify, render transparent and further reflect on our struggles with identity and desire and the failure of the imaginary. Because it is here that we come closest to experiencing the self as subject uniquely marked by its lack (Soler, 1996).

To make it more obvious what all this means particularly for identity research, I would like to share an analogy I recently presented at a conference where I asked participants to imagine the perfect dinner date. You are there. He/she is there. The restaurant is perfect. The menu is perfect. You order your appetizers and they are perfect. You anticipate an evening in perfect bliss with the one person you really want to be with. Then you take your first bite of your perfect appetizer, a perfectly tasteful and beautifully

presented arugula salad (leafy greens often served with or instead of green salad). And you realize that one arugula leaf has become lodged between your teeth. You suspect, but are not sure, that he/she can see it, too. From then on your experience of your perfect dinner date revolves around this arugula leaf. While you are perfectly aware that it is silly to let such a small thing distract you, you are nonetheless distracted. You talk in ways that conceal your arugula leaf and listen only with half an ear while planning for the moment you can escape to the restroom to dislodge it knowing you may not be able to because your dental floss is at home.

Imaginary constructions of identity are like this perfect date. We aim for an unmediated and of course unmarred experience of the self and the world we live in but there is always an arugula leaf that mediates and mars this experience. This arugula leaf is language and the otherness and alienation that it creates for us when we articulate ourselves. But the arugula leaf also offers an important opportunity. It indicates an encounter with a failed fantasy or the failure of imaginary self-constructions. If we do not engage with this failure or spend our time covering it up, this opportunity is lost. Unlike actual arugula leaves the failure of the imaginary cannot be removed. However, we can stop thinking about leaf removal and focus instead on how we can enjoy this evening with an arugula leaf between our teeth. We can enjoy how alive we feel when we are confronted with the arugula leaf and how we experience every detail at that moment of struggle. Importantly, we can enjoy this as an opportunity to experience each other in whole new ways. What if he/she also has an arugula leaf between his/her teeth (which he/she is bound to of course)? What if we actually admitted this and thereby discussed

our ambivalent feelings, missed expectations, etc., all by way of uncovering new questions?

In short, when we engage with the failure of the imaginary and further reflect on it, we can not only experience our creative potential but also relate to others in new ways (Vanheule et al., 2003). Psychoanalytic praxis suggests, in order for the latter to happen, it is important to shift our focus in identity discourse from what is said to what is not said (Lacan, 1988a). This means focusing on the many failures that commonly mark our discourse such as omissions, tangents, slips of the tongue, inconsistencies, distractions and other linguistic and rhetorical constructions that point to the failure of the imaginary. If we avoid covering up such failures by completing the incomplete, correcting the erroneous or making “reasonable” interpretations and inferences, we make space for creative struggles with language and identity by simply allowing the failures to be noticed and explored further.

What does all this mean for research on identity in organizations? First, it does not mean that research is an analytic setting in which psychoanalysis should be practiced by putting research subjects on the couch. Rather, as in other studies drawing on Lacanian thinking (e.g. Driver, 2005; Jones and Spicer, 2005; Roberts, 2005), I suggest that such thinking can provide new insights about how we conceptualize the construction of identity in discourse and importantly how we may theorize and encounter subjectivity with the kind of fluidity offered by a Lacanian perspective (Elliott and Frosh, 1995).

Identity Research as an Encounter with the Arugula Leaf

Specifically, the contribution of Lacanian theorizing of subjectivity to identity research is threefold. First, it provides a way to uncover and render noticeable imaginary

constructions of the self. Second, it provides a way to explore their failure. Third, it offers the potential to unsettle the imaginary and explore or even widen the space for creative identity struggles. In so doing it may provide new possibilities for the theory and practice of identity work in organizations and move us beyond the set-piece of coherence and fragmentation. Here is how.

Lacanian theorizing suggests that any construction of identity as a definable object, or by way of answering questions about who we are, is an imaginary construction. Particularly, discourse in which we present a coherent and stable self is such a construction. Therefore, whenever we conceptualize or find, in empirical research for example, that someone has a coherent and stable identity, we are articulating an imaginary construction of subjectivity. In this sense the theme of identity coherence in the literature can be viewed as an identity articulation that is firmly rooted in the imaginary. But this may or may not mean that the theme of identity fragmentation offers a way out. Specifically, it does not offer a way out (of the imaginary) if we conceptualize fragmentation as yet another (imaginary) answer to what identity is. That is, to the extent that identity is conceptualized as fragments that can be put together to form a whole, fragmentation becomes another reiteration of coherence.

For example, coherence may be found when someone has a professional identity completely defined by their organization's professional norms. But coherence may also be found when someone articulates their professional identity as being a mix of different subject positions, by for example, drawing on some but not all the norms offered or imposed by the firm. So rather than dealing with one coherent, monolithic identity, we find instead pieces of the puzzle. But in the end, we come back to putting them together

to see the whole picture. In this sense what has been reiterated in research is that there is very much still coherence but we are showing how this coherence is like a big jigsaw puzzle. So we no longer show a smooth picture but a puzzle in which we can see the seams of the pieces. However, the picture is still there.

As long as this picture is not only there but offered in research as an answer to what identity is, fragmentation is not much more constructive than coherence in moving us beyond imaginary constructions of subjectivity. The alternative offered by Lacanian theorizing is that fragmentation may also be conceived of as the failure of the imaginary. This in turn makes it possible to examine the fragments not as parts of a coherent whole we can uncover but as disruptions articulating an underlying lack that we can make present. In this sense, it is not about putting the pieces of the puzzle together but about exploring the seams between the puzzle pieces to show how they do *not* fit together.

Building on this perspective then, identity research is very much still about examining identity coherence and fragmentation but as an interplay in which fragments are explored as disruptions and a way to articulate identity as an absence rather than a presence. In particular, it is about uncovering how every subject struggles creatively with lack and how identity work is a unique articulation of the failure of a particular imaginary construction. Consequently, it is not about finding out that “H” really sees herself as a gardener rather than a professional manager in a global company (Sveningsson and Alevesson, 2003). Rather it is about exploring how this imaginary construction of a self-identity (Sveningsson and Alevesson, 2003) fails again and again at the interstice of the many discourses through which subject positions are constructed. In H’s case for example, it fails at the interstice of the four discourses dominating her organization,

namely globalization, creativity, networking and management control (Sveningsson and Alevevsson, 2003). Therefore, the lack that marks H's identity discourse may be triangulated by examining what she articulates as the lack in the four discourses and how, in her particular case, the gardener discourse is the discursive space (Kornberger and Brown, 2007) around which this lack is focused but also around which organizational discourse is (re-)appropriated to make space for the divided subject (Arnaud and Vanheule, 2007) whose lack absorbs any attempts at controlling it.

It has been suggested recently that the creation of identity lack on the part of organizations is a powerful means for inviting employees to bring in, as it were, their own identities and therefore to appropriate their identity discourse for organizational purposes (Maravelias, 2003). If we build on this idea but turn it around, we can say that identity lack on the part of organizational members is a powerful means for appropriating organizational discourse so that the individual may experience a space in which it can be divided (Arnaud and Vanheule, 2007) or lacking. The implication of such identity conception for control and resistance in organizations is that the articulation and experience of lack in identity discourse absorbs, sucks up perhaps, discourses aimed at identity control and thereby makes resistance possible as creative struggles in discourse and new relations to others and the self (Vanheule et al., 2003). This in turn may make more externalized conceptions of subjectivity possible in practice by creating a discursive space in which it becomes possible to undermine an organization's cultural management program by putting not 1 but 100 stickers bearing the company logo on one's car (Fleming and Spicer, 2003) as a simple affirmation that the imaginary always fails and that lack feeds on organizational resources.

To explore such dynamics further, identity studies would need to focus more on fragmentation as an articulation of lack. For example, rather than examining how masculinity provides discursive resources for coherent identity narratives in a firm seeking to impose femininity as a dominant discourse (Alvesson, 1998), we could investigate how the feminine organizational discourse is absorbed in struggles with masculinity and the lack it articulates repeatedly. In this sense, we might focus less on how dominant discourses may be unsettled by various local articulations of subjectivity (Thomas and Davies, 2005) but rather how such discourses are sucked into and feed the lack articulated in the “dynamics of identity work” (Thomas and Davies, 2005: 701).

How this may be done has been illustrated perhaps already in a study I referred to earlier in which gay identity in a government department was explored by focusing on silence and negative space (Ward and Winstanley, 2003). The authors focused extensively on gay identity discourse as it was articulated around what was missing or what was not being said. They found that the dominant discourse of the department being a good workplace because it accommodated homosexual identity was continuously absorbed in particular articulations of gay identities and struggles over the failure of this discourse. Based on the perspective I am advancing here, this failure is not a failure of this particular organization trying to be good by accommodating sexual minorities (Ward and Winstanley, 2003). Rather it is the failure of any imaginary construction of goodness or sexual orientation to address the lack of the subject. This becomes clearer when we focus on the interplay of coherence and fragmentation in particular identity narratives and examine the failures of the imaginary articulated therein.

For example, rather than exploring how entrepreneurial identity is constructed by drawing on the discourse of generational differences (Down and Reveley, 2004), we might focus on how the latter discourse is used to articulate the lack in the former and visa versa. This may bring into focus how entrepreneurial identity and entrepreneurship remain lacking the more we seek to articulate them and, like a sublime object, instantly turn into something we did not want as soon as we do (Jones and Spicer, 2005). In this study, it could have been examined how the lack in entrepreneurial identity discourse was filled with generational discourse resulting in rather creative struggles to articulate (the failure of) entrepreneurial identity around “guns” and “farts” (Down and Reveley, 2004). Then it could have been examined how entrepreneurial organizations offer discursive spaces for such creative struggles and how many resources are appropriated in and through the lack in and of “guns” and “farts”.

This lack also extends to and is reflected in the interactions between researchers and researched. As the authors of the above study suggest, there is “sameness” between researchers and study participants (Down and Reveley, 2004:236). This sameness is not just an imposition by researchers using research subjects to perform acts of “ventriloquism” (Ward and Winstanley, 2003: 1266) but importantly the result of a shared fantasy that identity exists as a definable object and can be articulated in a coherent story. By way of undertaking reflexive research in general (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000) and reflexive identity research in particular, it is worth exploring how the maintenance of this fantasy is necessitated by, as a reviewer for this manuscript put it, “academic conventions” that make only coherent stories socially acceptable and therefore publishable. But I would argue that resistance to such conventions, if they constitute

indeed a dominant and controlling larger discourse, is best explored as the failure of individual (researchers') identity discourse.

A promising avenue for exploring this exists in building on but also extending the reflections currently undertaken on how researchers interact with research participants in identity studies. For example, in the reflections undertaken in the identity study of female engineers reviewed earlier, the author underlines how research participants frequently broke the frame of the interview to re-negotiate how the author was positioning them in discourse (Jorgenson, 2002). Such moments can be explored further as failures of imaginary identity constructions especially those of the researcher seeking to validate particular answers to identity questions or at least the possibility that such answers exist. Here the lack of the researcher's identity discourse as scientist who can cover up lack by being the subject-supposed-to-know (Lacan, 2001) can be seen as appropriating the larger discourse of "academic conventions". The coherent story of identity work continues to be disrupted by the failure of the researcher to be the one who knows or can know.

But this failure is also an important opportunity as it shifts the focus from the imaginary competition of identity discourses of researchers and researched clamoring for more voice (Jorgenson, 2002) to uncovering and widening the space in which researchers and research participants can articulate lack and perhaps create something new in the process (Vanheule et al., 2003). What if, for example, we conceived of identity research very much as a localized and situated enactment of identity work (Thomas and Davies, 2005) whose main goal is to document the unique and creative ways in which failures of the imaginary are articulated in organizations? What if we reconceived writing good stories (Kornberger and Brown, 2007) as unique articulations of the failure to write

coherent ones? What if we listened carefully to our research participants but not to better tell their stories (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003), but instead to create new stories with them? What if we did do more in-depth single case studies (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003) but not to ensure that we can discern ventriloquism from authenticity (Ward and Winstanley, 2004), but rather to more fully explore unique articulations of lack as localized acts of disruption (Thomas and Davies, 2005) in which we play a part?

And could this be the beginning of identity research as localized and situated identity discourses that facilitate resistance and emancipation in organizations (Thomas and Davies, 2005)? My own imaginary identity construction of a researcher making such conceptions possible prompts me to answer yes. But I am sure that, at this very moment, as you are reading these lines this has become a failed fantasy. So there is nothing left but to ask more questions about identity and identity research. And that is of course the point! There are no answers because all answers fail. But failure is an opportunity to experience creative potential and relate to others in new ways (Vanheule et al., 2003).

Conclusion

It has been argued that identity is more contested and used more for managerial control than ever and that this is why organizational researchers should aim to make identity better understood (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). The present paper makes a contribution to this effort in three ways.

First, it suggests that conducting research with the aim of showing that identity is more contested in organizations today misses an important underlying dynamic of identity work. Specifically it misses that identity discourse, whether contested or otherwise, is often stuck in the imaginary and always marked by and articulated around

lack. As I have shown, this confines it to reiterations of what I have referred to as the set-piece of identity research with somewhat limited implications for resistance and control.

The second contribution this paper makes is to underline that managerial control is no more likely to be reduced by contested identity discourse than by uncontested identity discourse as long as imaginary identity constructions remain in place. Therefore, it suggests that more promising avenues for the theory and practice of resistance and control in organizations exist in pursuing contested identity discourses as localized failures of uncontested imaginary discourses and *visa versa*. In so doing, the lack that marks identity discourse can be rendered noticeable and, importantly, available for reflection and dialog. This in turn offers new avenues for theorizing and practicing resistance particularly as we focus on how lack absorbs discursive and perhaps material resources (such as stickers with company logos?) and how interactions do not only articulate lack but also widen the space in which the divided subject can exist (Arnaud and Vanheule, 2007).

Related to this last point, the third contribution the paper makes is to suggest that our efforts at better understanding identity are implicated in control and resistance but not necessarily in the ways typically reflected on by researchers. Specifically, to the extent that efforts at better understanding identity are translated into finding answers to our own identity questions or into, at least, validating the possibility of finding them, such efforts keep us firmly enmeshed in the imaginary order. Therefore, by way of unsettling this order, it may be worth reflecting on how we can undertake identity research that helps us, and others, notice and amplify the inevitable failure of this fantasy and connect the lack in the research participants' identity discourse to our own. It may turn out that research

interactions undertaken with this in mind constitute an important and significant opportunity for resistance by re-appropriating dominant, potentially controlling, organizational discourses to articulate lack and creative struggle.

Recently research was undertaken to examine how professionals in audit firms construct identity around the fantasy that a core self exists, which is continuously validated by distancing this self from organizational norms, which therefore must be upheld and complied with (Kosmala and Herrbach, 2006). This drives home how powerful the imaginary is in maintaining organizational control but also how subversive it may be to take seriously, and explore, its inevitable failures. For me, the promise of identity research is to do just that. Of course, this will not rid us of our arugula leaves. But I have a fantasy of participating in interesting conversations about why we cannot quite say who we really are and why we did not get what we wanted in and through organizations (again!), all because of some, well, some damned arugula leaf!

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Table 1 Brief Overview of other Discursive Identity Studies

Study Topic and Author	Themes of Identity Coherence and Fragmentation	Implications for Control and Resistance	Reflection on Research Process
Individual identities and career discourse in the retail sector (Coupland, 2004)	Coherence to the extent that individuals use dominant career discourse to construct identity; fragmentation in how different subject positions are constructed from this discourse	Different subject positions alternately normalize and subvert dominant career discourses	How the subject positions that emerged in the interviews were co-constructed as the researcher positions subjects in discourse and prompts them to give an account of themselves
Professional identity of project managers (Hodgson, 2005)	Coherence in how dominant discourse is used for identity work, particularly front stage; fragmentation how this is performed backstage	Project managers perform identity work that conforms to but also subverts dominant discourses of professionalism	How subject positions may be performed for researchers (backstage as opposed to front stage)
Identity of consultants who sell advise on flexible work arrangements (Whittle, 2005)	Coherence in how consultants reproduce dominant organizational discourses; fragmentation as they also dis-identify with these discourses	Dis-identification reduces pressure for identity conformity while allowing individuals to perform in ways that conform	How interpretations were co-constructed from the author's understandings of the participants' meanings as well as academic concepts
Occupational identity of airline pilots (Ashcraft, 2005)	Coherence in dominant discourses as to how occupational identity is becoming feminized; fragmentation of how subject positions are constructed in response to this	Identity is a struggle over contested meanings as agents reiterate and alternately subvert dominant discourses of gendered work identities	How researchers may impose meaning on the identity work of research subjects
Identity of academics relative to discourses of new public management (Barry et al., 2006)	Coherence of gendered identity; fragmentation of occupational identity; female identity work more fluid, male identity more stable.	Identity discourse subverts some dominant discourses but reiterates others such as dominant gender norms	How interviews are socially constructed; importance of giving voice to the lived experience of respondents