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### **'Ethics' as a discursive resource for identity work**

#### **ABSTRACT**

This paper analyses how participants in a not-for-profit service organization (the 'Incubator'<sup>1</sup>) drew on understandings of 'ethics' in order to make sense of their individual and collective selves. Identities are theorized as being constituted within discursive regimes, and notions of ethics, are conceived as discursive resources on which individuals and groups may draw in their attempts to author versions of their self and organizational narratives. We show how conceptions of ethics were a rich vein on which organizational members drew to elaborate narratives that legitimated particular modes of working and which cohered an otherwise quite disparate community of individuals. The research contribution of this paper is twofold. First, we discuss how a discourse focused on ethics may be a strategic resource for identity work. Second, we analyze how talk and writing about issues of ethics are implicated in relations of power and ongoing struggles for control over organizations conceived as discursive spaces. In so doing, this paper advances our understanding of ethics as discursively complex constructions, which require the micro-analysis of language practices in situated contexts for action.

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<sup>1</sup> 'The Incubator' is a pseudonym.

## **Introduction**

How do organizational members draw on discursive resources in their efforts to author meaningful accounts of their individual and organizational identities? Consonant with calls for the discipline of organization studies ‘to be fundamentally reshaped...to provide room for ethics’ (Wicks & Freeman, 1998: 123), we address this question through an analysis of participants’ accounts of ethics and ethical behaviours at the Incubator. Predicated on an understanding that processes of organizing are constituted through language, we focus on how employees authored their organizational text. Local actors, we argue, constructed their organization through linguistic acts – conversations, storytelling, labelling and descriptions etc. – which produced and reproduced a set of understandings that shaped, centred and cohered their individual and collective selves. We attend in particular to how local ethical discourses functioned hegemonically to discipline organizational members’ understandings of their work.

Research suggests that discourses centred on ‘ethics’ are increasingly important in the conduct of work in many contemporary organizations (Lewis & Mackenzie, 2000; Roberts, 2001; Barker, R.A. 2002). A huge and burgeoning literature has linked the concept of ‘ethics’ to, for example, everyday organizational routines and practices (Jackall, 1988; Paine, 1994; Clegg et. al., 2007), participant subjectivity (Keleman & Peltonen, 2001), organizational culture (Beyer & Nino, 1999), empowerment (Styhre, 2001), political activity (Barker, J. 2002), decision making (Watson, 2003), and strategy (Andrew, 1989). We draw on this work in order to explore the ‘contextual, situational, [and] highly specific’ (Jackall, 1988: 6) ways in which participants in our case constructed moral rules to guide their, and others’, behaviour. We contribute to

understandings of 'ethics' as discursively complex, requiring the micro-analysis of language practices and situated contexts for action in which actors operate under conditions of "bounded morality", uncertainty and ambiguous information (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1994). We also build on prior work which has shown how power is enacted in ethical discourses (Willmott, 1993), and how concertive control (Barker, 1999, 2002) may be sought and resisted (Fleming & Sewell, 2002) in values-based communities. Thus our approach permits a sophisticated analysis of how ethical matters are discursively defined, inform behaviour, infuse individual and organizational identities, and are implicated in relations of power (Foucault, 1977).

Our paper is structured into five major sections. First, we outline our view of organizations and identities as discursively constituted through networks of conversations, and argue that these are most appropriately regarded as power effects. We then provide an overview of our research design, data collection and data analysis. Third, we give a detailed account of our case study organization, focusing in particular on the importance of an ethical discourse for people, both individually and collectively, to develop, sustain and contest identity claims. Power, we suggest, is exercised not merely through observable coercive means, but the discursive production of 'quasi-fixed' meanings which reify social orders (Clegg, 1989). Fourth, we discuss our findings and their implications for our understanding of ethical issues as a discursive resource for the accomplishment of identity work. Finally, we draw some brief conclusions regarding identity, discourse and power.

## **Identity, Discourse and Power**

Our view of organizations suggests that they are socially constructed by participants (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) through networks of conversations (Ford & Ford, 1995), which draw on and contribute to prevailing discursive practices (Brown & Coupland, 2005). The dialogues whereby people ‘mobilize language by talking, listening and constructing meaning’ (Rhodes, 2000: 217) are understood here not merely as ‘a process in an organization, but organization itself’ (Hazen, 1993: 22). It is the intertextualities, continuities and consistencies manifest in discursive processes which maintain and objectify ‘reality’ for participants. What we refer to as ‘organizations’ are in fact ‘complexes of social meanings’ (Kress, 1995: 122), unstable and shifting, in which understandings emerge, are deferred and dispersed (Westwood, 1987). Most importantly, organizations ‘are not discursively monolithic, but pluralistic and polyphonic, with many conversations occurring simultaneously and sequentially’ (Ford, 1999: 485). Our purpose is to analyze how organizational members’ discursive practices come to form the ‘calibration points for defining local reality’ (Chia & King, 2001: 312).

Identities, individual and organizational, are linguistic accomplishments authored within discursive regimes which ‘provide social actors with important symbolic resources for identity negotiation’ (Read & Bartkowski, 2000: 398). The institutionally-based discursive resources available for the conduct of identity work may differ greatly between organizations. In our case, notions of ‘ethics’ and ‘trust’ were some of the principal discursive resources on which people drew to accomplish their ‘identity work’, i.e. the forming, maintaining, repairing and revising of individual and group conceptions (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Individuals’ self-

construed identities are best regarded as reflexively organized and temporally informed narratives which are 'productive of a degree of existential continuity and security' (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002: 625-26). Organizations' identities are 'constituted by the identity-relevant narratives that their participants author about them', i.e. the stories that actors' author in their efforts to understand the social entities with which they identify (Brown, 2006: 734). Such constructions are not 'static' or 'fixed' but the constantly evolving products of 'continuous processes of narration' (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1994: 198). These assemblages are also essentially contingent and fragile – no more than temporary marshalling yards of power/knowledge that endeavour 'to endure in a congenitally failing battle with a bewildering array of multifarious potential allies and assailants' (Lilley, 1995: 79).

Discourses are not neutral in their operations or their effects, but exist within and transmit networks of power. Our approach highlights 'those discursive practices that constitute organizations as regimes of truth and discipline action by privileging particular forms of language use' (Brown & Coupland, 2005: 1050). Recognizing that identities are power effects, considerable attention has been given to the attempts by senior managers to 'manufacture' the subjectivities of workers (Newton, 1998). Alvesson and Willmott (2002: 623), for example, have described 'identities' as the 'target and medium of management's regulatory efforts', and du Gay (1996) has commented upon the increasing trend for organizations to produce workers who 'discipline' themselves independent of external monitors and constraints. This said, while communicative interactions between participants promote some shared understandings, these negotiated realities lead only to a degree of collective consistency (Currie & Brown, 2003). What is more, there often exist subaltern

discourses which exist in contradiction to those which are hegemonic. Organizations are not only pluralistic and polyphonic (Ford, 1999: 485) but also highly politicized arenas in which individuals and groups pursue their own interests (Mumby & Clair, 1997).

The clear implication of this is that the discursive practices associated with senior managers can only rarely exert pervasive controls over other participants, colonizing them from the inside (Humphreys & Brown, 2002). Even the most insidious normative and panoptic controls are generally only partially successful, and ambivalence or even outright resistance is as likely as subjugation (Oglenky, 1995). People exploit the epistemological spaces made available to them by discursive resources to construct preferred versions of themselves (Bruner, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1988) and sustain physical, emotional and symbolic personal space through, for example, rumours and whistle blowing (Jermier et al., 1994), the use of irony (Trethewey, 1997), scepticism (Fleming & Sewell, 2002), and cynicism (Fleming & Spicer, 2003). This said, it is clear that identity is an outcome of relations of power, a complex and dynamic substrate that results from processes of subjugation and resistance that are contingent and perpetually shifting. In short, control is 'never total' and hegemonic imposition is never complete (Clegg, 1994: 163).

### **Research Design**

This research was designed and conducted from a broadly interpretive perspective, (which Evered and Louis (1981) refer to as 'inquiry from the inside'), between January 2004 and June 2005. Our intention was to understand as much as to explain (Stake, 1995: 38), and to collect the kind of data that would allow us to author a 'good



story' (Dyer & Wilkins, 1991) capable of generating empathy and insight on the part of the audience for our work (Von Wright, 1971: 6). The case study organization, the 'Incubator', was in a state of transition throughout this period of study. In January 2004 it employed 7 full time and 3 part time staff and its activities were restricted by national borders<sup>2</sup>. By the time this research concluded it employed 15 people and had opened a subsidiary on another continent. Most importantly from our perspective, during this period organizational participants engaged in an intense series of debates on the importance of ethics at work.

The project was conceived as an exploration of how ethics was embedded in an organization's practices and enacted in its discourses. The 'Incubator' was specifically chosen as our research site because its executive team had publicly announced that 'ethics' were at the core of the business and key to its success. Access to the organization was granted by the CEO on the understanding that we would report our findings back to him and his senior team. Our roles were thus defined as 'professional researchers' from an established University. A confidentiality agreement was signed which guaranteed the organization no data would be published that could potentially identify it, its members or clients. Following an initial round of interviewing, the already cordial relationship between the research team and employees of the Incubator improved still further. Many more informal meetings were arranged spontaneously, and we also received invitations to client meetings and public events. Members of the Incubator may have seen advantages in agreeing to participate in our study, as this signalled the organization's apparent seriousness about ethics and transparency to various stakeholders. Although this utility was never explicitly

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<sup>2</sup> In order to preserve anonymity we are unable to specify the countries in which the Incubator operated.

articulated, it seems likely that at least some members rationalized their participation in this project in instrumental terms. After completion of the project the first author of this paper has maintained an amicable relationship with the CEO and other organizational members. It is our belief that our case narrative represents an authentic and realistic account of the organization that would be recognized and condoned by our interviewees.

Our paper is based on five main sources of data. First, formal semi-structured interviews were conducted with each organizational member. In total 9 interviews, which lasted between 30 and 90 minutes, were tape recorded and fully transcribed. During these interviews organizational members discussed their daily organizational practices and routines, how they dealt with sensitive client information and addressed potential conflicts of interest, and how they communicated internally and with their clients. In these structured conversations special emphasis was placed on the role of ethics in processes of organizing to ensure that interviewees reflected on the embeddedness of ethics in everyday practices. Second, we collected organizational documents and publications in the form of newsletters, a quarterly magazine published by the Incubator, strategy and other business planning documentation, presentations to clients, legal documents, training manuals, and various versions of a document that came ultimately to be known as ‘The Code of Ethics’. This documentation provided background information from which we culled an in-depth understanding of the organization. Third, almost all members of the organization were engaged in multiple informal conversations, which could not be taped, but summaries of which were written up, and which inform our analysis. These un-taped data were transcribed as field notes, and analyzed systematically, contributing significantly to

our case story. Fourth, the research team gained access to six internal meetings of between one and five hours' duration, four workshops, and one three-day 'retreat' where the executives discussed future strategies. Fifth, observations of two client meetings, two public presentations, other events such as the launch of the internal magazine, and two client lunches involving members of the organization's executive team, were attended and noted. All these data were collected by the first author and a research assistant.

In our efforts to produce 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) our empirical material - transcripts, coded observations, formal and informal company documents and descriptive memos - was subject to an interpretative process in which coded categories were derived in an inductive process of interaction and integration of theory and empirical data (Putnam, 1983). 'Identity', individual and collective, and 'power' soon emerged as focal points of our analysis of ethical material and discursive practices. A recursive approach to working through our data led us to collapse and refine initial categories into integrative sets of key themes, including 'being ethical', 'being trustworthy', 'being professional' and 'conflicts and dissonance', which we wrote up as theoretical memos from which this paper has been authored. Early iterations of the case material were discussed with the members of the Incubator we had formally interviewed, and their comments were used to further refine our analysis. This said, it would be inappropriate to suggest that our relatively rigorous and systematic approach to data analysis has led us to write-up anything other than one idiosyncratic version of our case. Indeed, we readily acknowledge the 'crises of representation and legitimation' that ethnographers face in seeking to account authentically for the experience of the Other (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994: 576).

We hope, nevertheless, that our approach is sufficiently rich to shed light on our research questions and to raise new questions and new ways forward for theorizing.

### **‘Ethics’ as a discursive resource for identity work**

Founded in 2000 by the Government, the country’s largest industry group, and a charitable foundation, the Incubator was a large national institution that had originally been designed to generate and nurture an innovation network through open forums and other industry events. As the CEO explained, the Incubator ‘was established to facilitate improved relationships across industry, government and public sector, and indeed education institutions’. While it was a successful knowledge exchange network the Incubator did not initially provide tangible commercial benefits to participating organizations. This altered in 2003 with the recruitment of a new senior executive who had the experience and expertise required to transform the Incubator into a not-for-profit service organization that facilitated not just communicative interactions but commercial transactions. The simple yet compelling business model now involved highly trained and experienced researchers called trusted mediators (TMs) performing sophisticated knowledge brokerage roles in order to exploit synergies between client organizations.

In practical terms, commercial organizations could use the services of the Incubator by paying a ‘consultancy’ fee for which a client would have a TM embedded in its organization. Depending on the level of fee paid, the TM would spend between 2 hours up to 3 days a week in the client organization gathering data on their R&D and other commercial activities. While there was a notional ‘methodology’ for accomplishing this work, in practice different TMs performed their roles in very

different ways, with some adopting highly structured work practices and others favouring a more *improvised* approach. The information collected was then coded and stored in a central database that could be searched by other TMs according to various criteria. The TMs met weekly to analyze the database and to discuss the data. Their objective was to identify mutually beneficial win-win situations between two or more clients and to produce 'opportunity briefs' to be presented to the organizations involved.

For instance, a TM might identify that a new technology of client organization A could be used by Company B from a different industry sector. By sharing the new technology Company A would recoup some its development costs whereas Company B would profit from the new and already proven technology. The *raison d'être* of the Incubator was that these two companies would not normally talk to each other because Company B would not know in which industry to look for a new technology and Company A would not (without the mediation of the Incubator) grant access to their costly and strategically important technology. Once an opportunity that might benefit two or more client organizations had been identified a complex process of negotiations backed-up by legal agreements was enacted which, when successful, led to the establishment of a joint venture project. The Incubator sold its services to clients as an efficient and relatively risk-free way for them to identify new commercial opportunities across industry boundaries, and to resolve the practical problems that often accompany inter-organizational activities. The major challenge for the Incubator was to gain the kind of detailed high-level access to organizations that meant staff could collect the confidential data they needed to perform their role:

‘From a practical point of view we, we don’t take on members that aren’t willing to give us the level of access we think we need’ [James, executive].

To counteract these difficulties, and to add to the Incubator’s growing list of Fortune 500 client organizations, TMs relied heavily on notions of ethics. Conceptions of ‘ethics’ were integral to organizational members’ understandings of their own professional, as well as organizational, identities. ‘Ethics’ were a continuous focus for debate within the Incubator during the course of this research project, especially at the level of the executive team, including the CEO and two of his senior TMs. One aspect of these discussions was the perceived need to ensure confidentiality to clients. This was translated internally into a putative need for the establishment of ethical guidelines that would give stakeholders confidence in the Incubator, and regulate organizational members’ conduct. In discussions with the research team frequent reference was made to other organizations and the ‘fact’ that ethics formed integral parts of their projected identities and images. Clearly, senior executives at the Incubator felt under pressure to conform to what they thought were becoming industry norms, i.e. they exhibited isomorphic behaviour (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Given what they described as their complex and innovative business the executive team chose not to develop a rule-based code of conduct but to create a ‘living document’ in which ethical dilemmas and solutions would be added as they occurred in practice. At the core of their ethical discourse was a belief in ‘professional standards’ as institutionalized in other professions, such as law and medicine, and the conviction that in the long run, good ethical practice would be more or less automatically aligned with successful business practice.

### *Being Ethical*

One key discourse at the Incubator centred on the need for its members to be ‘ethical’ people. Participants’ stated that ‘...what really matters is being ethical, knowing what’s right and being principled’ [Jim, TM], and that an ethical approach should inform one’s handling of ‘a difficult situation’ [Sean, TM]. There was an overwhelming consensus among participants that ‘ethics is just at the core of a good operator’ [Carla, TM] and all organizational members agreed that ethics played a critical role in performing the Incubator’s tasks. Ethics was said to be the necessary platform on which other technical and inter-personal skills - such as flexibility, resourcefulness, synthetic ability and good judgement - could be deployed by successful TMs. These understandings of what it meant to be an employee evidently served a powerful framing function for participants that influenced profoundly their conceptions of themselves and patterned their behaviours. Such views were also incorporated into material practices, notably those associated with recruitment, selection, and induction.

In the absence of clear job descriptions ‘ethics’ informally guided the processes by which new organizational members were recruited. Among the first senior members of the organization hired had been a university professor and an experienced lawyer. In making these appointments, the very different backgrounds and skill sets of these individuals, and their relative lack of specific industry knowledge, had been deemed less significant than their personal qualities as ‘ethical’ people. Participants argued that ‘I don’t think you can train people to be ethical, and aren’t. People who are not ethical, are not ethical in my experience’ [Sean, TM]. This meant that ‘the selection of people is extremely important’ [Graham, CEO] and that ‘you really have to spend

your time doing your due diligence on people to make sure that they're good people' [Jim, TM]. While even the best recruitment and selection processes were recognized as 'fallible', it was said to be incumbent on established members of the organization to 'do the things that are in your power – like check someone out, check out their previous history, work with them, set in place mechanisms that actually help track progress and work ethic' [Jim, TM]. Once new recruits were in place they had then to be treated in appropriate ways, fed consistent messages regarding the importance of ethical behaviour, and subject to checks of their understanding that ethics had to 'guide your actions, almost instinctively' [James, executive]:

'...you've got to have your message clear. So we deliver that in the orientation/indoctrination process. And then you take them on a path that instils it into them. So they spend time with the clients, they spend time with the methodology – using it and then living to it in the way they operate within the group' [Jim, TM].

### *Being Trustworthy*

Our respondents said that gaining and maintaining the trust of their clients was essential to the performance of their roles and a key driver of their work activities on a day-to-day basis: '...there are certain levels of ethics you have to commit to... that's what gets you the trust' [Sean, TM]. They argued that clients' trust in them was the kind of resource that could be accumulated not by mandate, expressions of benign intent or statements of values, but as a result of clients' personal positive experience of dealing with them: 'You can't say "okay guys now trust us". Trust is earned, and it's only earned through peoples' exposure and experience with you doing the thing that, you know, develop that level of trust in you' [James, executive]. Most significantly, trust was equated with knowing 'how to keep our members' confidential information quiet' [James, executive], something that was intensely problematic in



practice given that their role as mediators was to facilitate joint venture activities between different organizations that often crucially depended on the disclosure of some potentially commercially sensitive information. In addition to legal confidentiality agreements, that regulated each project, the TMs also signed up to an institutionally arranged formal ‘code of silence’ to which repeated reference was made by participants who considered it an essential tool for retaining the confidence of clients. To build trust, and to minimize the risks to one’s reputation inherently associated with dealing in high value information, participants were adamant that ‘the way you operate’ had to be ‘based’ on a secure ethical framework: ‘People will see, and they will evaluate obviously the deliverables, but they will also evaluate the mechanisms upon which you got the deliverables’ [Graham, CEO]. As the CEO said, values are not trust building:

‘You don’t build trust by values. Values do not build trust.... Trust really comes from whether or not somebody does what they say they’re going to do’.

### *Being Professional*

The TMs described themselves as professionals, and said that they wanted their clients to consider them in the same way that they did corporate accountants and lawyers, i.e. as key to effective commercial operations, and ethically beyond reproach. The links they made between being ‘professional’ and being ‘ethical and trustworthy’ stemmed from their perceptions that they encountered three kinds of dilemmatic situations in the conduct of their work. First, they said that TMs had a vested interest in making specific inter-organizational deals occur, regardless of the incidental non-balance sheet costs and missed opportunities, which might accompany them: ‘...our interest is in making something happen. Their [clients’] interest is in making the right

thing happen or nothing happen. So our interests are not aligned' [Jim, TM]. Second, given their privileged access to information, TMs were theoretically in a position to exploit what they knew for considerable personal gain, and there was as yet no clear organizational policy regarding the solicitation and/or payment of cash inducements and bonuses to trusted mediators by the client businesses that they served: 'I call it the CIA problem, where you get paid so dirt little you have a very strong urge to use what you know to your advantage' [James, executive]. While no cases of 'abuse' had been discovered at the Incubator by the time this research came to an end, the possibility of such misbehaviour was perceived as a serious threat by participants. Third, TMs said that they occupied tenuous positions on the margins of multiple organizations and felt only loosely attached to the companies whose boundaries they traversed: 'A TM is essentially a commercially castrated individual...We are essentially virtual employees of many companies at the same time' [James, executive].

Thus the TMs were acutely aware that they possessed confidential information, and ambiguous institutional positions that made clients nervous, and that the mediating role they performed meant that they were in constant danger of being regarded as exploitative. This was one part of the reason why, they argued, 'you've got to be careful' about your reputation and why one's ethical calibre was such an important consideration [James, executive]. This analysis of their selves led TMs to argue that there was a strong need for them to present themselves to clients as ethically regulated professionals. There was an explicit recognition that 'morality comes from the barrel of the heaviest artillery' [Graham, CEO, quoting Napoléon], and that there was a need for the organization, and individual TMs, to present themselves as heavily armed in this respect. Huge significance was attached to a 20 page document entitled 'The

Code of Ethics'. This document contained multiple definitions and short cases illustrating ethical issues, and addressed areas of TMs working lives from 'becoming a TM' to defining 'professional misconduct' and even provided guidelines governing communication protocols with clients. All participants understood that 'part of our value proposition to our clients is that we are ethical' [Graham, CEO] and that The Code of Ethics was a 'selling point' [Jim, TM], that is, 'a very powerful marketing tool for us' [Graham, CEO]. It was regarded as a useful device that could be deployed to reaffirm their identities as professional 'service providers' by demonstrating to clients that 'they can trust you' because 'we can lose our jobs if we disclose things to people' [James, executive]:

'From an ethical point of view, I would use [the] Code of Conduct in marketing. I would use [the] Code of Conduct for marketing purposes, and make the point that ethics exist, and everyone's signed up to it' [Sandra, administrator].

In the longer term, it was planned to establish a 'Board of Ethics' which would serve as a locale for the discussion of ethical issues by both internal and external personnel.

### *Conflicts and Dissonance*

The key discourses associated with ethics, and related notions of 'trust' and 'professionalism', served to centre and cohere participants' understandings of who they were and what the Incubator was about. The result, however, was a degree of internal consistency and consensus, not homogeneity, on matters linked to ethics, work and identity. Three of the most prominent disputes that fractured the Incubator were those regarding the TM methodology, how TMs should relate to clients, and the most appropriate metaphor for understanding the role of TMs. First, the organization's officially preferred methodology for client analysis was a focus for

discontent. The disagreements over its merits had been of such an intense kind that, in the recent past, two senior members of staff had resigned, and the CEO interpreted the current struggle for a clear ethical methodology for service delivery as a major strategic challenge:

So the biggest hurdles to [our] success are very much the lack of a clear and shared methodology [...] and there's still a fair amount of tension and debate over the methodology – James [executive] has got one idea of whether a TM should be allowed to provide advice to a client. Sean [TM] thinks that intermediaries should provide advice. James thinks that's dangerous because they're providing advice that could set a company off on a course that's not good, or too good, and you're not using background knowledge.... So that lack of shared understanding and methodology has been one of the reasons and one of the things and problems.

Second, though relatedly, there were differing views regarding how the TMs should define their professional relationships with their client organizations, especially when the interests of the Incubator differed from those of their clients. A misalignment of this kind could, it was said, easily occur because TMs often lacked a detailed knowledge of all aspects of a client's technologies and business ventures. We witnessed one discussion among TMs where it was argued that this difficulty could be mitigated by giving clients 'a clear understanding that I [as a TM] don't actually represent them' but are more akin to intermediaries 'like a real estate agent' [Jim, TM]. However, this position was considered by others to be likely to undermine the core of the Incubator's value proposition, i.e. to be an independent mediator spanning boundaries between different organizations. On this occasion, the previously discussed 'code of silence' and the vaguely defined ethical obligations of a TM were mobilized during heated discussions to ensure that the Incubator's value proposition was not altered into the 'real estate' model. The notion of TMs as 'ethical professionals' played a pivotal role here, and was deployed by several TMs in order to obviate talk about TMs being brokers akin to estate agents.

Third, the widespread agreement on the importance of being ethical professionals did not translate into a common shared view regarding the metaphor or set of metaphors that best described the job function of a TM. An interaction that typified this dissensus occurred during a company ‘retreat’ when one senior executive argued that TMs should conceive of themselves as ‘corporate priests’ to whom companies would come for ‘confession’ [Jim, executive]. An emotionally charged debate unfolded in which reference to ethical and unethical conduct fuelled intense arguments. As the CEO asserted, ‘...priests have been responsible for some of the most hideous things that have occurred in human history and I do not want any spiritualism or religion around this’ [Graham, CEO]. Eventually it was decided that the Incubator wanted its clients to consider TMs in more conventional terms as analogous to corporate accountants and lawyers, i.e. as valuable professionals distinguished by their code of ethics. In these interactions notions of ‘ethics’ were again prominent, helping to structure people’s understandings of who they were, both individually and collectively.

## **Discussion**

To summarize, in this paper we have investigated how participants in an organization drew on the notion of ‘ethics’ in order to construct meaningful accounts of their individual and collective identities. Based on a conception of ‘organization’ as a metaphor referring to a domain of (apparently) legitimate authority, we have argued that these understandings were constitutive of, and constituted by, relations of power. Our case is, in effect, an analysis of how formations of power operate through the availability of discourses, the frequency/intensity of their presence, and the specific linking of discourse and subjectivity (Fairclough, 1985; O’Doherty & Willmott,

2001). Our aim in this discussion is to further elaborate and refine how notions of 'ethics' were bound-up with understandings of individual and collective identity, and how these may be analyzed as power effects.

'Ethics' constituted a discursive resource on which members of the Incubator drew in authoring their self narratives. All the participants in our study clung to understandings of themselves and the Incubator as ethically beyond reproach. Participants implicated norms that rationalized their preoccupation with ethical practices, told stories about the importance of trust as a strategic resource that established the 'appropriateness' of dominant practices, and put a positive 'spin' on their need to share their most valuable resource – information. This may, in part, have been because such a belief was ego supportive. Complementarily, it might also be regarded as a defensive manoeuvre that was in constant danger of being overwhelmed by TMs' day-to-day experience of the difficulties of managing confidential information, retaining the trust of clients, and resisting the temptation to resort to egocentric exploitation of privilege. This said, it cannot, however, be assumed that the Incubator's focus on trust and ethics would continue unaltered indefinitely. As we have argued, identities are plurivocal and morphogenetic, and 'identity' should not be regarded as 'an enduring reified concept' but a dynamic, negotiated, and reflexive narrative-in-progress (Gioia, et. al., 2000).

'Ethics' was also a central theme in individuals' authoring of organizational identities, which are constructed 'by managers and stakeholders who are simultaneously engaged in the construction of their individual identities' (Scott & Lane, 2000: 44). In the case of the Incubator, ethics was an important vehicle for participants to narrate

their organization, which allowed them to tie complex issues centred on organizational processes of recruitment, selection, socialization, and the methodology for service delivery with identities and business strategies. In specific terms, participants depicted themselves as engaged on a quest for a kind of ethical ‘knowledge’ or moral ‘wisdom’ that would make them individually and collectively successful. Their storyline was a complicated one in that they claimed both to have discovered the ethical wisdom they sought and yet also recognized vulnerabilities – for example, that clients might misunderstand their intentions. This, in part at least, accounts for their continuous updating and amending of their Code of Ethics, and their self-defined need to structure the moral journeys of new recruits so that they too would achieve the kind of ethical enlightenment that would make them, and the organization, successful.

Three related points are worth noting here. First, it is interesting to find a commercial organization with a sophisticated appreciation of ‘ethics’ not as a set of abstract values or as an ‘object’ that the organization could ‘possess’, but as a discursive arena where people negotiated their identities and enacted their futures. This conception of ethics stands in marked contrast to the often somewhat simplistic values-centred and ‘ethics acquisition’ discourses that tend to dominate contemporary business organizations. Second, as with other studies of knowledge intensive companies, which have shown how workers use knowledge that is complex and uncertain in conditions of ambiguity to promote a sense of empowerment and self-actualization, internal conflict on key issues (paradoxically) led to strong self-disciplining norms (cf. Robertson & Swan, 2003). Third, debates centred on ‘ethics’ were strategically manipulated in order to present a particular version of the organization to external

stakeholders. In particular, participants constructed themselves as active agents engaged in self-serving discursive activities in a constant 'struggle for credibility' (Turnbull, 2001: 232) with clients. Internal debates regarding the role of ethics in business, and arguments over shared metaphors for understanding TMs, which revealed the Incubator as polyphonic, were complemented by relatively homogeneous external projections of the organization's identity to clients. This commodification of 'ethics' was, from the perspective of members of the Incubator, largely successful (clients were impressed), and perceptions of success acted recursively to reinforce and reproduce the ethical discourse that so dominated the organization.

Internally, senior managers were assiduously concerned to promote their conception of what it meant to behave ethically, and to cultivate this through training, induction and socialization mechanisms. The self-defining ethical mantras that dominated organizational discourse served a disciplinary function as 'discrete, regular, generalized and uninterrupted' (Burrell, 1988: 227) linguistic performances that framed and constrained employees' understandings. One aspect of the value of our analysis has been to surface some of the dynamics by which social actors were 'constituted as subjects who exercise or submit to power relations' (Foucault, 1984: 49). Senior managers' preoccupation with the (perceived) need to inculcate a way of thinking and set of work practices in new recruits that were grounded in concerns to respect client confidentiality and not to exploit information for personal advantage were hugely important. Such concerns symptomized the, albeit unspoken, and perhaps, in this cultural context ineffable, possibility that a TM might contravene informal organizational norms and official rules in ways that would impact negatively on the organization. The threat of this was itself a significant aspect of organizational



functioning that may in part account for the intensity of the debates centred on trust and ethics in the Incubator.

While some researchers have focused on ‘the heterogeneity of language’ in order to capture ‘differences between individuals’ (Rhodes, 2000: 221) our concern has been to analyze the implications of apparent discursive homogeneity. ‘Trust’ and ‘ethics’ were integral to strongly supported organizational myths that created meaning and purpose for people (Le Bon, 1895). Such myths were not merely energizing but produced an organizational consensus on important issues. The myths – for example, of the possibility of uncontroversial ethical behaviour, of harnessing and controlling greed and egotism, and of objectively transparent organizational processes – were convenient legitimizing fictions that ‘organized human emotions for social action’ (Koon, 1985: 7). Perhaps most important was the myth that there was in fact a shared mind frame that TMs carried with them and operationalized in their interactions with clients. Closely allied to this was the myth that organizations are relatively stable and robust, when they are most often in continuous processes of transition. In organizations, centripetal forces mobilized by elites produce meaning and understandings through which they seek ‘to impose their own monological and unitary perceptions of truth’ (Rhodes, 2000: 227) but prior research suggests that these are always prone to contest and redefinition by people whose sense of self-control and self-determination is threatened (cf. Brown & Humphreys, 2006).

In line with suggestions that sets of discursive practices are acts of knowledge/power that self-privilege and legitimate while marginalizing and neutralizing alternatives (Foucault, 1977), it is tempting to argue that senior managers’ efforts to ‘reify a

particular social structure' (Rosen, 1985: 33) that championed ethical behaviour were largely successful in that there seemed to be limited scope for voicing alternative accounts. The view that participants' talk about the need always to be ethical indicated that they had willingly become 'the principle of [their] own subjection' (Foucault, 1977: 203) needs, however, to be moderated by their own suggestions that they were knowingly compliant, and reflexively committed to ways of talking and acting that they perceived to further their interests. Internal debates over the methodology, relationships with clients and appropriate metaphors for self-description were evidence for the limits of discursive notions of 'trust' and 'ethics' as identity framing devices. Individuals, it seemed, evidently had some scope to work idiosyncratically on their individual and collective conceptions of their selves. The discourse on ethics provided organizational members with opportunities, as well as constraints, for enacting their different roles and defining the self.

The TMs described themselves not as organizational dupes or prisoners of corporate-sponsored practices, but as sophisticatedly reflexive and knowingly compliant. In challenging dominant conceptions they accounted for themselves not as 'designer employees' (Casey, 1995: 143) merely acting out scripted roles (Goffman, 1959), but as 'co-authors of local discursive practices engaged in a responsive dialogue, and so helping to define legitimate occasions and ways to talk' (Brown & Coupland, 2005: 1063). It would thus be inappropriate to characterize the TMs as subjects of the 'panoptic dystopia of "total control"' (Ezzamel et. al., 2001: 1059). Rather than naively seduced or indeed cynical, sceptical or ironic, they were overtly instrumental in their use of discursive resources. That they were accommodative, facilitative and non-disruptive cannot simply be regarded as illustrative of their domination by a

hegemony imposed on them from without, as they were themselves co-organizers of this hegemony convinced that it was, for them, efficacious. The ongoing quest for 'being ethical' and training people to 'become ethical' may thus be understood as a Foucauldian 'care of the self' project in which individual and institutional forces shaped ethical subjectivity (Ibarra-Colada et al, 2006).

## **Conclusions**

To conclude, in this paper we have sought to analyze how language affects what we see and structures our thoughts, facilitating and constraining understanding in organizations (Gergen & Thatchenkery, 1996). The ethical discourse, we suggested, was one means by which organizational members coped with the contradictions and ambiguities inherent in social life. In the absence of an agreed, detailed work methodology talk about ethics and trust was a force for integration that functioned without demanding consensus. Such talk was, importantly, implicated in processes of self- and organizational authorship, suggesting that both individual and collective identities are not restrictedly private concerns, but are 'intensely governed' by, for example, social conventions, community scrutiny, and other organization-based injunctions (Rose, 1989: 1). In practice, the rhetoric centred on notions of 'trust' and 'ethics', and in particular the notion that TMs were and should be trustworthy, was in constant danger of unravelling in the face of observable deviations from supposed ethical norms. Incessant and repetitive recourse to these concepts constituted a kind of internal propaganda that may have been institutionally effective, but which might also, over the longer term, produce cynicism and boredom.

Although there have been sustained calls for ethics to inform management practice (e.g., Stark, 1993), there is still a dearth of research that analyzes how notions of morality influence and constrain the behaviours of social actors implicated in relations of power. In focusing on the ‘moral rules-in-use that managers construct to guide their behavior at work’ our study is similar to that conducted by Jackall (1988) who also found that ‘actual organizational moralities are ‘...contextual, situational, highly specific, and, most often, unarticulated’ (Jackall, 1988: 4, 6). Our paper has analyzed how these local realities are politically manipulated and sustained. This study contributes to understandings of business ethics by showing how, in an organization, notions of ethics can be a discursive resource bound-up in relations power, and how dominant discursive practices can work to legitimate certain decisions and actions rather than others. In particular, we have shown that ethics can be embedded and enacted in everyday acts of organizing and languaging, and can be analyzed as a discursive resource that organizational members utilize to make sense, narrate and affirm control of who they, individually and collectively, are.

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