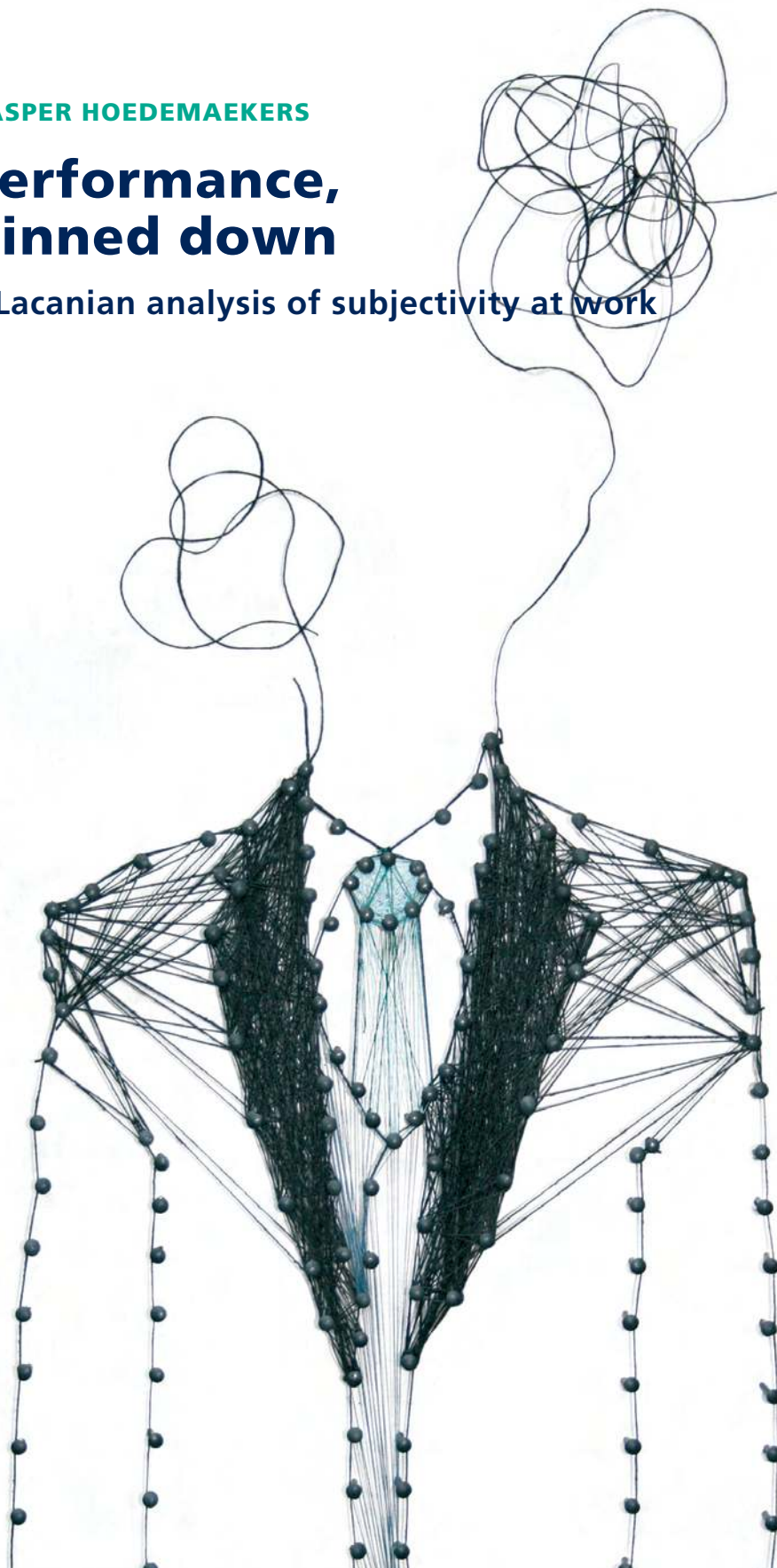


CASPER HOEDEMAEKERS

# Performance, pinned down

a Lacanian analysis of subjectivity at work



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## **A Lacanian analysis of subjectivity at work**

Vastgepind op presteren: een Lacaniaanse analyse van subjectiviteit en arbeid

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## **Chapter 1 Performing failure: putting Jacques Lacan in the place of the organizational scholar**

“There is no such thing as a science of man because science’s man does not exist, only its subject does.” (Lacan, 2006m: 730)

### **1.1 Introduction**

“Who am I and what do I want?” With radical shifts taking place in the boundaries that have long organized social life, such as globalizing trade relations, the decline of nation states, a dispersal of the relation between time and space and a gradual individualization within communities, it is perhaps not surprising that this question has become a central issue in contemporary life. It is an important guiding principle in many decisions that people make in their everyday lives.

This focus on ourselves, and the choices that we make in relation to our self-image, can sometimes make us oblivious to the ways in which our selfhood is decided upon for us. The sex and the race that we are born with inevitably leaves a deep mark upon how we view ourselves, and what possibilities we have in the course of our lives. The impact that economic and social class has on people’s lives is also well documented. As we live our lives within particular social strata, as part of particular groups, exposed to specific forms of communication, we come to be defined by them in ways that escape our direct knowledge.

This can be seen for instance in consumer behavior, where the products that we feel ourselves attracted to have often been introduced to us via advertisements. These advertisements are far from strictly informative, having been carefully crafted to appeal to deep-seated beliefs and desires that we have. Whether wittingly or unwittingly, consumption is becoming a way of constructing one’s identity by associating oneself with the image that the brand portrays, with the product itself taking a back seat in the process. Aspiring to express our individuality through our latest purchase, we remain unaware that the image was never ours to begin with.

This relation to ourselves has also been referred to as subjectivity, and has a long history in philosophy, and consequently in sociology and psychology, among other disciplines. It concerns the relation of human existence to the notion of being. From the very brief examples that I have mentioned above, it quickly becomes apparent that the subject cannot be reduced to the individual. There is something deeply shared about what constitutes us as beings, what marks us. And most of the time, this happens in ways unbeknownst to us.

Subjectivity is a concept that helps us to think about what constitutes existence within the present. It provides us with a category that helps us to understand how the current socio-historical condition in which we find ourselves affects our lives. As such, it raises political and ethical questions about our selfhood and the ways in which it is determined, what agency we can lay claim to and what our responsibility is to others.

This problematic is well suited for the purposes of this study, in which I will interrogate the question of how performance at work comes to be defined, and how this influences the subject in the workplace. Work remains an important part of the identities that we cultivate, and plays a significant role in the way in which social relations are ordered. Here, I can point

to the linkages between work and consumption, and the ways in which these support and reproduce a capitalist system of production (see for instance DuGay, 1996). The discourses that structure work within organizational processes extend far beyond the realm of organizations, and can be seen at work in diverse areas of social life. “Management” has become a ubiquitous term, and has increasingly come to refer to the way in which people stylize their existence (for a study of this in popular culture, see Hancock and Tyler, 2004). Many other signifiers that have traditionally belonged to management discourse have also come to reverberate through social practices beyond the workplace. “Performance” is another one of these signifiers that have taken up a place both in the context of organizations and outside of it. In this study, I will interrogate the ways in which this particular signifier is invoked, and what place it has within people’s discourse. In this way, I hope to shed light on how this term takes on meaning within subjectivity, and how one thereby comes to act as a performing subject.

### *1.1.1 Situating subjectivity at work*

Within mainstream management studies, a shift can be seen toward more individualized approaches to managing employees at work. With the shift from personnel management to HRM, a coupling of the personnel function to strategic concerns has taken place which has given rise to a range of performance management practices that aim to tie the individual employee’s work performance to organizational outcomes (Beck, 2000; Legge, 1995; Sennett, 1998). This ties in with broader changes in the employment relationship such as the disappearance of lifetime employment and a deterioration of employment security, flexibilization and a decline in unionization.

This can for example be seen in the way in which organizational control has been approached over the past decades. Normative approaches to management have placed a great emphasis on the individual and its behavior in relation to organizational goals and performance, and as a result the frontier of control has come to concentrate on the individual employee to a greater extent than before. Additionally, changes in the nature of work have also facilitated a greater focus on individual behavior than before. A good example of this is the rise of information technology.

In response to this increased attention to individual performance in mainstream management research, critically informed research has also taken a turn toward the individual, as the study of subjectivity at work has taken flight in recent years. In these approaches, the individual is seen as an important site of discursive articulation of managerial discourses. Informed by insights from poststructuralist theory, which have drawn attention the importance of language in constituting particular realities, the study of the relationship between subject and organization has sought to account for the different ways in which subject positions are constructed within the discursive practices of management. The way in which an individual becomes classified in discourse has far-reaching implications for how one will come to be called upon by organizational practices. This concerns the discursive determination of subjectivity by modes of organizing.

The critical research on subjectivity in organizations has undermined the traditional view of the individual that pervades mainstream management studies. It has shown, among other things, that the deeper, more intimate aspects of the self at work are rooted to a large extent within the language of management. With practices such as competence management,

assessment or mentoring, management practices aim to go the “hearts and minds” of employees in an attempt to shape workplace behavior. Employees are made subject to discursive practices by means of a confessional arrangement, in which they are invited to articulate their experience within the linguistic frame of dominant organizational discourse.

At the same time, recent research accounts have shown how employees divert from such schemas in many ways. Some of these divergences can be classified as overt resistance to these practices, in line with traditional conceptions of industrial action. Others, however, are subtler and cannot readily be grouped under efforts that are either oppositional or supportive of managerial interests, such as irony, cynicism or humor.

In this thesis, I seek to provide insight into this problematic of *subjectivity* at work, with specific attention for the way in the notion of *performance* impacts upon subjectivity. For this, I have chosen to specifically focus on a *government* organization as a case for empirical study. I will elaborate on each of these choices below.

### *1.1.2 Why subjectivity?*

The concept of subjectivity highlights the tension between consciousness and the frame in which it takes shape. It describes the ways in which the sensation of selfhood comes into being, and in what ways it is constrained. I will approach it in this thesis as a category for thinking through the processes that simultaneously make the self possible and delimit the potential ways in which this self may develop. This is not the same as taking an individual perspective. By taking the perspective of subjectivity as a way of approaching the study of an organizational setting, I focus on the processes that determine the self in ways beyond its own direct knowledge. This includes discursive determining factors, as well as micro interactions that work to sustain a particular image of the self.

Subjectivity should also be distinguished from the concept of identity. Although these are often used as synonyms, I argue that subjectivity must be seen as something that precedes identity. Where identity functions to position the self within the context of social interaction, subjectivity can productively be seen as the vehicle that makes this positioning possible, as well as providing a mode of reflecting upon this identity. Subjectivity is what provides the condition for selfhood, both making it possible and limiting its potential directions.

### *1.1.3 Why performance?*

In this study, I will approach the topic of subjectivity in relation to performance. In a classic labor process analysis, one might approach the concept of performance as follows. Performance can be thought of as a concept that is derived from the employee-employer bargain. In most labor contracts, both parties make an agreement on time. The employee sells their time, and the employer will be able to make use of the employee’s labor capacity for the duration of this time. The effort that the employee will spend on the tasks that are assigned to them, are a matter of negotiation on the shop floor. This is where management control finds its origins. The concept of performance defines the use that the employer gains from the employee’s efforts, and it provides the impetus for managing the activity of the employee in particular ways.

While not wholly departing from this approach, I will take a different starting point. I start out from the assumption that language enables our perception, and as such, that we must understand discourse as something in which the social is always enmeshed. Organizations can

be thought of as a set of discursive practices, which construct and order social life in particular ways. In this process, these practices give rise to certain modes of being. Accordingly, I will investigate how subjectivity comes to be defined in relation to the notion of performance. Performance can be thought of in this context as the product of language. Within the discursive space of organizational processes, its meaning is assembled by means of the interplay of various signifiers. It must therefore be thought of as a concept that is bound to a localized discursive setting. Its antecedents are thus not strictly contractual, but discursive in nature. However, as we shall see in this study, the concept of performance does take up an important place in organizations. It allows subjects to be judged, ranked and disciplined on the basis of what comes to stand for their individual or collective “performance”. In this study, I will analyze the relationship between subjectivity and this signification of performance. This will provide insight into the ways in which employees are made subject to what counts as performance in a particular organizational setting. For this research, I have chosen to study this signification of performance and its relation to subjectivity within a government organization.

#### *1.1.4 Why government as a site for study?*

I have chosen to study a government organization for two principal reasons. First, this organization represents a case where the influence of managerial discourses has been relatively low until recently. A recently initiated government-wide change program has sought to change this and introduce organizational reforms that have emphasized transparency, strategic integration and downsizing, among other things. Because of this relatively recent change in the organizational landscape, it presents a case where the incorporation and contestation of managerial discourses may be seen in relation to the modes of organizing that have prevailed thus far. Within this discursive field, “performance” appears as one of the terms around which the proposed organizational reforms are formulated.

Second, this provides insights into how subjectivity is re-articulated in terms of the changes that are taking place within the organization. Subjectivity derives its structure from the discursive context, and we can expect the changes that take place in this register to find their expression within the selfhood of employees who work in this setting. The change processes that are disseminated in the organization work through discursive practices, that re-order and re-distribute people, activities and knowledge within the organizational context. This entails a recasting of the terms that construct these entities, and this renaming irrevocably affects the subjectivities of those who are linked to them.

In this study, I will map out the signifying network that makes up the field of performance in the organizational context in question. By doing this, I hope to provide insight into the ways in which the performing subject is brought into being, and how it sustains or renounces a particular notion of performance. For this study, I have taken the work of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan as a theoretical basis. As I will argue extensively in chapter 3, I believe that the field of critical management studies in general, and the sub-field that concentrates on subjectivity in particular, has much to gain from this body of work that has been relatively unexplored. This is true especially for empirical studies of subjectivity at work. To use Lacan’s work in organization and management studies is by no means an unproblematic choice. In the next section, I will explain what objections may be raised against making such a choice, and why I believe it is vital that we do so.

## 1.2 Introducing Lacan into organizational analysis

The study of subjectivity in organisation and management studies has seen a strong focus on Foucault over the past ten years. For that reason, any study that will claim to address subjectivity in organizations will inevitably bear upon the large Foucauldian oeuvre that has emerged in the field. Much of this engagement with Foucault's work has been criticized for being overly narrow and reductive, and having neglected to situate Foucault's work within the broader historical and philosophical concerns from which it arose (Jones, 2002). As such, my remarks are not directed at Foucault's work but at the way in which it has been taken up within the field of organization and management. This dominant reading has drawn attention to the role of discursive practices in organizations, as constituting an apparatus of disciplinary power. The study of subjectivity has concentrated on the ways in which subject positions are delineated within these regimes. While this reading of power and subjectivity in organizations has proved productive in some ways, it has come under fire for having overlooked practices of agency and resistance in response to subjectifying influences. This critique has given rise to a variety of responses. Some research has specifically sought to report empirical accounts of resistance to demonstrate that disciplinary regimes do not give rise to "total institutions", but that some modicum of organizational life resists the disciplinary gaze. Others have sought to look elsewhere for theoretical inspiration.

In this thesis, I will take such a direction, by pursuing a Lacanian analysis to its conclusion with regard to an empirical case. I argue that Lacan's work can help us to understand many of the issues that underlie the debates on subjectivity at work. The tension between determination and resistance (or structure and agency, to use a different vocabulary) can be productively approached by means of Lacan's notions of identification, desire and enjoyment, among others. This may recast some points of division that currently exist in the debate on subjectivity at work, to include a wider range of insights from poststructuralist and other social theory (including Foucault's later work).

Having discussed the position of my approach with regard to other studies here in the simplest of terms, I will return to this matter at length in chapter 3. I will now discuss why a proposed Lacanian study of management must be regarded as a *failure*, at once productive and impossible. In many ways, this thesis is a failed attempt. It is a failure in what it tries to accomplish. It falters, botches the job, crosses itself out, comes up short. Within its appropriation of Lacan, it attempts to perform two impossibilities: it treats Lacan's psychoanalysis both as a science and as a metalanguage.

### 1.2.1 *Psychoanalysis is not a science*

By shoving Lacan into the place of the organizational scholar, I am going against Lacan's fundamental disdain of science, and more specifically the social sciences. Lacan holds that psychoanalysis must be distinguished from science. It is not a science, and neither is the subject of psychoanalysis the same as the subject of science. Science is caught in a "deadlocked endeavor to suture the subject" (Lacan, 2006m: 731); the knowledge it produces is aimed at explaining and predicting human behavior. For Lacan, this means that science is marked by a desire to explain away the fundamental indeterminacy in the subject by means of the knowledge it produces. Lacan argues that what counts as the subject within psychoanalysis is the subject on the level of Being. This concerns the way in which a subject is unknown to

itself, what drives it beyond its own intentions, thoughts and reflections. This is the subject of the unconscious. The subject of science, on the other hand, is concerned with the conscious mind, in which Lacan has very little faith. This is the Cartesian subject that is reflected in the formula “I think therefore I am” (Descartes, 1975). Conscious thought (which is what characterizes Descartes’ subject) is for Lacan a mere cover-up for what really drives and determines the subject, and that is the unconscious force of language. Science teaches us very little about this, and therefore the knowledge it produces is flawed.

This does not mean that Lacan holds no hope for the project of science. Instead he argues that the psychoanalytic subject should come to take the place of the subject of science, and that in this the fundamental lack at the heart of the subject can be taken into account in scientific study. He sees the current subject of science along the lines of a reformulation of Descartes’ formula, which should be read as follows. I think: “therefore I am”. There is nothing beyond thought, except the empty place that the subject itself is. It is a displacement in language, and it is language that provides it with Being. However, this being is always something Other to it, something that does not belong to it. The subject itself is nothing but its distance from this linguistic Other. This distance is what Lacan calls the cause. In this respect, he provides another gloss on the Cartesian formula by stating that “I think, therefore I am” provides a topological representation of subjectivity. The subject is the cause (“therefore”) between being (“I am”) and thought (“I think”) (Lacan, 2006m: 734; see also my discussion of this question in chapter 4).

#### *1.2.2 There is no such thing as a metalanguage*

By using Lacan as a mode for understanding subjectivity within the realm of organizations, one runs the risk of treating his work as a metalanguage that allows us to describe what goes on the level of the subject. Or put in other words, that it provides us with an account of what happens on the level of being. About this, Lacan is clear: “there is no such thing as a metalanguage” (Lacan, 1998: 118). There is no direct way that we can have access to being. There is no language that allows us to describe what happens on the plane of being. The only medium that a psychoanalyst has is that of speech, and any kind of cure must itself also be rendered within this medium. Psychoanalysis is the “talking cure”, after all.

In order to undertake a Lacanian analysis of subjectivity at work, we need to put him in the position of where we ascribe knowledge to him, where he is the subject-supposed-to-know. We need to presume that there is some truth in what he says, that in some sense he can save us from our symptoms (exploitation, governmentality, anguish, suffering?).

This is to place Lacan in the place of the guarantor, of the Master who has the ultimate say in what is true or not. This disregards the incompleteness that characterizes every type of discourse. There is always something missing, something that slides away and that cannot be accounted for.

#### *1.2.3 Embracing failure*

Even though these two points present this research project with deep paradoxes at the heart of it, I will insist that it is not obsolete for the following reason: a failure is all we can hope for. If we take Lacan seriously, we must hold that no knowledge claim can have the last word on the matter. There remains something that eludes representation. This unrepresentable kernel is the Lacanian Real, the hole at the centre of discourse. In this sense, all knowledge is flawed and essentially a failure. This might be extended, following Boehm (2006b: 185-189), to



include all discursive formations in the social field. These can be viewed as failed attempts that nonetheless serve to contest other discursive formations that seek to hegemonically position themselves as totalizing narratives.

What, then, is the value of this thesis? I suggest that we may instead view it as an attempt at *metaphorical substitution*. In Lacan's conceptualization of language, metaphor describes a mechanism that gives rise to a radically new meaning at the moment when a signifier comes to replace another signifier in the signifying chain. This substitution allows the newly established signifier to "stuff" itself with the meaning that was previously assigned to the replaced signifier, all the while retaining traces of its own, former meaning (see also chapter 4). The combination of these old and new meanings morphs into something novel, embodying an unexpected synthesis of the two. Lacan refers to this as a "poetic spark" that occurs (2006g: 423).

I propose that we view this research account along similar lines. If we put Lacan in the place of the scholar of management and organization, what overtones ring out? What meanings are occulted, and which ones are created? What does Lacan bring to the study of organizations, and happens when we put him in that position? The poetic spark that results from this substitution will tell. Even if Lacan does not belong in organization studies, and any attempt to put him there will fail, it may nevertheless be a productive failure. By approaching the relationship between the subject and the Other as failure, we can go beyond accounts that only seek to stress the failure of the subject (as fully determined by the Other) or those that merely stress the failure of the Other (by glorifying resistance in the smallest of ways). The objective here is to show how this entire relationship between subject and Other may be recast (see also Boehm, 2006a: 150-151).

It is important this thesis is not viewed as a codification of Lacan's work for the use of management and organization studies. Every attempt at reading will always involve some transformative element, and it is thus impossible to read Lacan without in some sense appropriating him. Conversely, any attempt to appropriate Lacan must proceed from a careful reading of what he has to say in relation to the situation in question. On this topic, Ian Parker states that

"Lacanian, like other psychoanalysts, refer to 'cases', but know that there is really no such thing as a 'case' at all. Analysis is conducted 'one by one', and the discourse of the analyst is underpinned by a theoretical account of what the parameters might be by which to interpret what is going on, an account that must always be ready to mutate in the face of each new case. This is why every good description of a 'case' is also an elaboration of theory. The same applies to Lacanian approaches to discourse. Each reading of Lacan and of Lacanian writing about discourse will need to be a rewriting of their reading when it encounters each new text." (2005: 179)

Lacan himself acknowledges this in seminar VII when he argues that his body of work is built up in such a co-dependent manner that none of the individual concepts can be successfully isolated, thereby prohibiting a haphazard take-up by "intellectual cricket[s]" (1992: 252-253).

This thesis represents an attempt to read the subject at work through the conceptual framework that Lacan provides. In this attempt, I have signaled what I perceive as two major

shortcomings, but I hope this attempt may be read and thereby taken up, in spite of these shortcomings, as a productive failure.

### 1.3 Impossibility as a way of approaching organization

The notion of impossibility can be seen as a guiding principle in my approach to subjectivity. The subject itself, for Lacan, must be thought of as an impossibility, as something that is excluded from the social order, an empty placeholder. As a space carved out within the social order, devoid of substance, it becomes inhabited by something that is not itself, something Other. A whole host of social expectations, norms, rules and prohibitions come to take up this empty place within the subject, and it is in response to this Otherness that it can take a stance and differentiate itself. This takes place beyond its direct knowledge. It is a prerequisite for engaging in social interaction, for communication, for the recognition of other subjects.

And on the conscious level, the subject deludes itself at the same time with narcissistic posturing, rivalry and identification, in which it fails to see what really determines its actions with the social order. Lacan refers to this as the misrecognition.

Somewhere in between these two realms of unknown being and false thought, the subject resides. It is something else, consisting in something more than these two dimensions. Within an organization, it takes shape between the disciplinary gaze that keeps the “good employee” in line, and the various identifications with the images that surround it. Here, we can begin to explore it as a desiring subject.

#### 1.3.1 *How this thesis will proceed*

The structure of this thesis will be as follows.

In chapter 2, I will discuss the case study that forms the empirical basis of this research. I will provide a description of the organizational context and elaborate on some important developments that have taken place in recent years. Here, I will also comment on the research methods that I have used and how they must be understood in relation to the philosophical framework upon which I will draw for the remainder of the study. Finally, I will make some remarks on the role that translation has played in the analysis of case data. I advise the reader at this point that methodological notes will also appear in chapters 5 and 6. This is necessary because these notes draw on Lacanian theory that will only be introduced in chapter 4.

In chapter 3, I will present a reading of the recent literature on subjectivity, power and resistance in organizations, insofar as it pertains to the questions addressed in this thesis. Furthermore, I will draw out several influential readings and critiques of Lacan in order to position my own reading of his work, in terms of my interest in the question of subjectivity and performance in organizations.

In chapter 4, I will present an overview of Lacan’s theory on the basis of the three registers of the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real. I will focus in detail on the specific operations of the registers of the Symbolic and the Imaginary, because these play an important role in the subsequent textual analysis. I will also open up the central question of the Real in Lacan’s account of subjectivity, and its corresponding notions of desire and jouissance.

In chapter 5, I will approach the problematic of subjectivity in relation to performance with respect to the register of the *Symbolic*. This entails an analysis of the chain of signifiers that

pertains to “performance” in the empirical case study. This addresses the signifiers of the interviews on a formal level, separated as much as feasible from the meaning that they take on. I have undertaken this analysis in order to draw out the locally produced signification of these signifiers, in order to create an overview of how the concept of performance is constructed within the organizational context in question.

In chapter 6, I will focus on the *Imaginary* aspects of subjects in relation to performance at work. I will discuss the notion of identification with regard to the interview texts, in order to demonstrate how particular identifications are fostered within the case organization. These identifications are constructed by subjects in response to particular images of performance, as they emerge from specific performance management practices in the organization. We will see here that subjects construct these identifications with the image of the “ideal employee”.

In chapter 7, I will analyze instances in which the interruption of the *Real* may be seen in subjectivities, as witnessed in the interview accounts that form the empirical basis of this study. I will draw out illustrations of where signification and identification falters in the discourse of subjects, and propose that this interruption of the Real represents a starting point for thinking about ethical and political questions. Here, I will argue that within the case organization, the signification of performance puts forward an ideal that enlists subjects within its ideology. In this, it reinforces other ideological discourses that work in the same way. However, it is the fragmented nature of this ideal, and its inevitable breakdown, that provides the possibility of disengaging from it.

In chapter 8, I will conclude this study by drawing out its main insights, and its contributions to the field of organization studies. I will do this on a chapter-by-chapter basis, discussing what has been achieved in each chapter.

## Chapter 2 Situating case and method

“[T]he subject finds his signifying place in a way that is logically prior to any awakening of the signified.” (Lacan, 2006j: 579)

### 2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will discuss the empirical case research that I have undertaken in order to study subjectivity in relation to performance. The case study that I will present is based on the research that I have undertaken within this organization. Before going any further into this, it might be prudent to make a few qualifying remarks on what constitutes an organization. The concept of organization has come under scrutiny as the influence of poststructuralism came to be felt in organization studies. Chia (1996) has suggested, among others, that it might be more appropriate to discuss processes of organizing, rather than organizations. This accounts for the ways in which everyday organizational life is based, and exists by virtue of, the continuously enacted routines and scripts that make up everyday social reality. It is also important to note the role that signifiers may have in stabilizing some of these routines (or rather, fields of signification) (see also Žižek, 1989; Lacan, 1993). An organization may be conceived of as such a signifier that binds a field of signification to it, rather than a social phenomenon that exist in itself. It is from this starting point that I will discuss the case.

I have anonymized the case organization in question and have dubbed it “Publica” throughout this study. After introducing the case organization and its organizational context, I will discuss the research methods that I have drawn on to compile this empirical case study. The most important element in this are the interviews that I have conducted. However, several other sources of empirical data have helped me in creating a contextual account of the organization that will be of importance throughout this thesis.

This chapter will be structured as follows. First, I will introduce the case organization and the major organizational change projects that are currently underway (section 2.2). Here, I will also address the broader discursive shifts that can be seen in the organizational context. We shall see that many of the important changes in Publica are linked to a specific change program. I will discuss this at some length, after which I will discuss some of the consequences it has had in terms of the dominant discourses that can be observed with respect to the organization.

Second, I will discuss the methodological aspects (section 2.3). With interviews being the primary source of data in this case study, I will devote some attention to the theoretical elaboration of the research interview in general, and in light of poststructuralist and discourse-analytic research in particular. In addition to this, I will discuss the interview guide that I have used. I will also touch on the topics of access, sample selection and description, a list of data obtained and the initial coding that I have undertaken.

Third, I will make a few remarks on the role of interviews in the study of subjectivity, and we can conceive of them as speech addressed at an Other (section 2.4). Here, I will also address how the concept of translation will figure in the subsequent analysis.

## 2.2 Case description

The case organization that will be the object of analysis in this study is Publica, as previously stated. I have chosen to present this organization in anonymized form, even though this has not been explicitly requested. I have chosen to do so to safeguard the possibility of using the data collected, and to protect the informants in this study. This decision was informed partly by the possible political sensitivity of some of the data (possibly reflecting badly upon managerial decisions), and partly to prevent the exposure of the identities of the relatively easily recognizable group of informants.

Publica is one of the Dutch ministries, and as such it is a very large and decentralized organization. It currently has over 37.000 employees. The main managerial part of the organization is the Department of Government. Here, policy blueprints are developed under direct supervision of the minister, and written up in extensive policy documents. These are consequently carried out in practice by so-called Operational Organizations. These are responsible for the provision of social services within the guidelines specified in the general policy. Accountability for the planning and the execution of policy is tied to the position of the minister, as is customary in parliamentary democracy. The Department of Government (the policy-making part of the organization) is managed by the secretary-general, who in turn delegates responsibility to several directors-general. The organization is characterized by a highly formalized chain of command and accountability.

In the last decade, Publica has been subject to a far-reaching set of change initiatives the aim of which has been the modernization of the government apparatus. Much of these initiatives have taken place as part of the government-wide change program “Different Government” [*Andere Overheid*]. This program has been introduced by the previous national government to change the “face” of the public sector toward the public. The focus has been on implementing changes in legislation (“removing bureaucracy”), the provision of services (“improving service delivery”), major organizational changes in the ministry (“eliminating overlap”) and improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the various government organizations (“improving business operations”) (taken from the reports “Actie Programma Andere Overheid, 2005”, “Voortgangsrapportage Andere Overheid Oktober, 2005” and various letters to the parliament by the Ministers for Governmental Innovation and Internal Affairs).

### 2.2.1 The “Different Government” program

Under the banner of “Different Government”, which is described as not merely a policy framework but rather a “movement by and through government agencies and professionals to work in a more goal-driven and demand-driven way”, Publica employees have experienced a wide-ranging program of reform. The formal program of Different Government revolves around three main pillars of change. These are (1) “improving service quality”, most closely tied to the implementation of IT infrastructure in government services, (2) “removing bureaucracy and decreasing the inclination to regulate”, most closely tied to the change program to remove the administrative burden on citizens, and (3) “improving the effectiveness of the government” (Voortgangsrapportage Andere Overheid Oktober, 2005), which concerns an assessment of current government organizations and changes in their internal organization. This latter pillar will be of most importance in this study, since it concerns the organizational change initiatives that directly affect the labor process of the employees within the ministries. However, the other two pillars are also relevant, albeit in a more indirect way. They draw on similar imagery, such as obstacles and impediments that are

in the way of getting to a certain destination (a “different government” in this case). They also reinforce the idea that the changes are demand-driven, in that they are taking place in order to serve the “customer” (i.e. the citizen) in a better way.

The structural organizational changes that are taking place are currently difficult to gauge. They are made possible by a large-scale assessment of the organizational functioning of each ministry, referred to as a “task analysis”. These have been carried out between 2004 and 2005, and they have resulted in a series of change programs and project groups. They have also led to organizational restructuring to “eliminate overlap”. Especially in Publica: “[Publica] uses the task analysis usefully to carry out internal reorganizations”. I suggest that to understand the conditions that give rise to these changes in organizational structure, we must turn to the level of discourse. It is on the level of discourse that these changes are engendered.

On the discursive level, the notion of the “different” is of prime importance here. Differently generally means less bureaucratically and more responsively to client/customer demand. Document analysis reveals the recurrence of a number of core themes that pin down the “different government”, including “modernization”, “taking responsibility”, “effectiveness”, “working differently” and “reducing bureaucracy”. To create this different government, employees of Publica, and government agencies generally, are exhorted to think differently, act differently and work differently. Publica employees are embedded in a discourse of public sector reform that provides a wide range of interlocking images of “different government employees” (Prinsjesdagdossier Andere Overheid, 2005). For example, young professional employees can be expected to want to use their talents fully; in return for receiving respect, room for exercising initiative and trust from the organization. Employees are naturally expected to accept more responsibility and accountability in order that citizens are better served; and employees who know what their added value to the organization is, and how best to use this, are those who ensure the achievement of organizational goals.

One of the most important discursive shifts in the organizational context of Publica has been to create a disjunction between the “new” and the “old”, in terms of management, organization and work. The resulting opposition of old/new equates the old with stereotypes of bureaucracy, which paint a picture of a rigid, highly ineffective organization with a strict adherence to rules and procedures, with an aging and uninspired workforce set in its ways. The “new” then takes the shape of managerial effectiveness, inspirational leadership, flexibility, organizational change which “shakes up the old ways” and invents better ways of doing things, and importantly, a HR-driven push for people development in order to create more value for the “customer”. The following excerpt clearly demonstrates the use that is made between the “new” as opposed to the “old”, evident in the use of the word “modernization”. It also exemplifies how the metaphor of a market (“need”, “shortages”, “surpluses”) becomes dominant in understanding organizational interrelations.

“The modernization projects for the Government are primarily aimed at the design and functioning of the organization. [...] The modernization operations will lead to shifts in qualitative and quantitative needs of competences in the staff, and thus to new shortages and surpluses [of competences].” (Actie Programma Andere Overheid, 2005)

The passage above, from one of the central documents in Different Government, already signals the importance for employees adapt their competences to the “needs” of the organization. The following statement makes that point more clearly:

“Culture change within the government is essential to a Different Government. A decisive government for citizens and companies needs a different way of working and a different culture. Being receptive to what is happening in society, working together towards results, having a customer-oriented approach, looking for practical solutions and driving out bureaucracy. But, changing well-worn routines can be difficult. It does not begin with talking, but with acting. Because that is what makes the consequences clear of a different way of working. [...] And find an answer to the question: “and where am I in that culture?” (Andere Overheid special over cultuurverandering, 2005)

Difference is action, being receptive, customer-oriented, results-oriented, non-bureaucratic. It is up to the individual to find oneself in this culture of difference. Because difference is necessary, after all. This image of culture can also be seen in a formal report where it is stated that “[k]ey ideas [for the culture of a Different Publica] should include a more external focus, an open, active communicative attitude, a willingness to work together and investing in people” (Voortgangsrapportage Programma Andere Overheid April, 2006).

In Different Government, attention is thus pointed towards the individual rather than the collective, such as the department, directorate or (sub) organization. The potential for change comes from an individual employee’s choice to “be different”, to stand out and leave the “old” way of working behind. Working “differently” is also equated with setting performance targets and making people and organizations accountable for them. Evaluating the task analyses that have been carried out in the ministries, one report states that “[i]mprovement is needed in the organization of work. And although work is already handled differently in many places, this should be vigorously expanded to make results visible to citizens, companies and institutions” (Conclusie takenanalyse Andere Overheid: meer optreden als een overheid, 2006). The signifier “difference” comes to stand for a new, non-bureaucratic way of doing things, one that is performance-oriented, individualistic and above all, responsive to the demands of society.

As can be seen in the imagery in the excerpts above, some of the main tenets of the discourses that make up the Different Government program are individuality and continuous improvement of performance. It also plays on notions of decentralization and a devolvement of responsibility for results. In this, it runs parallel to what has been identified in the literature as New Public Management (Aucoin, 1990). The modernization of public administration in the Netherlands has been elevated to a virtue in recent public discourse as the government aims to restructure the relationship between its own agencies, and between the government apparatus and Dutch citizens. Similar reform agendas of significance have taken place in other countries. In the UK for example, public sector organizations have found themselves confronted with profound change as their employees are expected to show high levels of client focus and entrepreneurial behavior (White, 2000).

Against this contextual background, the research interviews were carried out within Publica. They started out from the following questions: given these discursive shifts within Publica,

how does the notion of performance gain meaning for the subject? And what is the ethical and political significance of the performing subject that results? We can see, when looking at some of the statements from policy reports above, that the notion of Different Government (and therefore the organizational ideal that is put forward within Publica), is clad in a variety of terms such as “improvement”, “working together”, “functioning” and so on. These terms appear laden with meaning within their discursive arrangements. In this study, I will make clear the role that many of these terms, and others, play in discourse in order to understand how the field of performance is provided with a signification within the interplay of discourses that operate within it. When subjects venture to speak of performance, what signifiers do they draw on? What are the interrelations between these signifiers? Are some more central than others? And how can we understand the failure of language to fully account for the experience of subjects?

## 2.3 Methods

In this section, I will address the most important questions regarding the methods and the analysis employed in this research project. However, some of the methodological considerations that bear more directly on the Lacanian aspects of my approach will be dealt with later in this thesis (sections 5.2 and 6.2.1), after I will have introduced Lacan’s work in chapter 4.

### 2.3.1 *The research interview*

In this research project, I will conceive of the interview as a negotiated accomplishment, a social encounter in which a mutual account is produced. This does not obscure the multiple voices and the disjunctions and contradictions that are present within the interview account. This allows us to leave room for a productive analysis of these breaks and non-signifying elements later on, after having introduced some of Lacan’s ideas, in which these take on a special significance.

Alvesson (2003) elaborates on the theoretical fundaments of the research interview, and in doing so he categorizes the dominant approaches to interview research in three ways: neopositivism, romanticism and localism. Neopositivism employs interviewing as yet another tool in the pursuit of objective, universally valid knowledge. The focus here is on “avoiding bias” and very elaborate ways of controlling the interview situations in order to get at an “objective” and “neutral” account. Tools to obtain this include a tightly managed interview protocol and repeat interviews. Romanticist approaches, on the other hand, assume that interviews are most effective when they manage to gain access to a deeper core of the individual, by means of empathy and trust. This assumes a subjective inner state of the respondents, which may be painstakingly laid bare by the researcher if he or she manages to win their trust and connect to them emotionally. This can be seen in Fontana and Frey (also acknowledged by Alvesson), where they state that “each individual has his or her own social history and an individual perspective on the world. [...] Yet to learn about people we must treat them as people, and they will work with us to help us create an account of their lives.” (1994: 669). Localism, finally, largely does away with the status of the interview as a tool for obtaining information but considers it instead as an instance in which the identity constructions and discursive fragments that respondents draw on can be studied. Wetherell



and Potter's (1988) linking of interpretive repertoires to discourse analysis is an example of this.

These approaches vary in their success to capture the epistemological and political complexity of the interview situation. Alvesson proposes to go beyond all these three approaches by what he calls a reflexive pragmatist approach to interviewing. This entails viewing the interview situation as a process of mutual production, in which the resulting text cannot be attributed to the actors directly. Although largely subscribing to what he calls the localist view on interviewing, by putting forward his own approach Alvesson attempts to "save some version of a "tool" view on interviews" (2003: 17). A reflexive attitude can enable the researcher to survey the interview situation in non-exhaustive ways, reconsidering the empirical outcome from a variety of perspectives. Combined with a pragmatist will to make use of the material for research purposes and draw conclusions on the basis of it, albeit tentative, results in an approach that "calls for epistemological awareness rather than philosophical rigor" (Alvesson, 2003: 25).

Alvesson's remark provides a useful starting point for thinking about the ontological and epistemological status of interview accounts, since it foregrounds the role of researcher in coming to terms with the inherent ambiguity of the empirical situation, in relation to the production of scientific knowledge which places its own constraints and demands on the researcher (of which this thesis is a prime example). However, the question remains whether or not this needs to necessarily be in conflict with what he refers to as philosophical rigor. As I will address discourse analysis and subjectivity more directly in the following chapters, I will link back to the notion of the interview situation and the status that can be assigned to it within a Lacanian perspective. It is impossible to separate a methodological discussion from the more philosophical discussion of subjectivity that will follow in chapters 3 and 4. The Lacanian conceptualization of language, and the status of speech within this, will be of particular importance. Language operates on different levels at once, and the interruptions that occur in speech will prove telling of these different levels of language. Additionally, from a Lacanian perspective the presence of the researcher and the respondent has an influence on the dynamics in speech. They orient toward one another as others (or as Others), again on varying levels of language. The oscillation between these levels in any social setting makes any form of mutual understanding immediately problematic. I will return to this question in relation to interviews in greater detail in chapter 6, section 6.2.1.

### *2.3.2 Interview themes*

The interviews were conducted by means of an interview guide (Patton, 2002). This interview guide is specified in table 1. These themes were used non-sequentially, in order to address a list of topics in the interview situation.

Table 1 Interview guide

Conception of work (labor process)

- Tasks
- Relevance/social & economic
- Responsibilities
- Accountability
- Control processes
- Performance management (planning, supporting, evaluating)

Conception of self

- Recruitment, selection and assessment process
- Competences
- Outside of competences

Career and development

- Career expectations
- Career ambitions
- Development
- Work/life balance
- Training & Development

Organizational Context

- Culture
- Recent developments

*General specifying questions:*

1. **Language:** *what kind of language, what words are used to describe.....*
2. **Competences:** *what do you think your role is in..., how does that compare to your abilities/performance...*
3. **Performativity**

### 2.3.3 Access

The process of getting access was accomplished through an existent contact within the organization, who was able to provide me with the contact information of the personnel manager. Having contacted personnel management, I was given an interview with an internal consultant. I described the research project to him as an attempt to understand the relationship between performance management and identity, with a specific focus on the potential negative effects it may have. This was of special interest to Publica, which had been having problems with employee turnover (and young employees in particular). Having explained the research project to him, I was introduced to the trainee coordinator, who was also willing to be interviewed. After that, I was given free access to contact members of the organization as I saw fit, although the research project would not be officially endorsed by the organization. This meant that the ministry would not officially recognize the study and document it in terms of policy reports, nor give financial support. However, I was given free

reign to conduct my research, albeit on my own title and not as part of an official internal survey. Because I did not have direct access to the contact details of all organizational members, I initially relied primarily on the snowball technique of recruiting respondents. Eventually, I was able to get access to respondents more freely after having received two lists of trainees from one of the previous respondents.

#### *2.3.4 Sample selection*

I have focused on this group because I believe that the discursive changes within Publica as a whole are most clearly expressed within the programs in which they take part. This is congruent with the notion of theoretical sampling (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

#### *2.3.5 Sample description*

I carried out 29 interviews with a sample of Publica employees who were all linked to the organization's trainee program or general employee development program. Of the respondents, 22 were women, 7 were men. 27 were full-time trainees, former trainees or otherwise enrolled within an employee development program. They were aged between 24 and 35. The other 2 respondents were a trainee coordinator and an internal consultant. The aim of these interviews was to elicit respondent's accounts of how their performance was managed and on the basis of this to map key signifiers of performance management in Publica.

#### *2.3.6 Data obtained*

The following data was obtained in the course of the research project. First, 29 research interviews were held and recorded using a tape recorder. The respondents all gave their express permission to be recorded. The interviews were then fully transcribed, with a notation system for pauses, slips, fumbled words, as well as laughs and coughs. Sharp variations in intonation were also noted. After each interview, extensive notes were taken to capture non-verbal communication as well as the informal chats before and after the interviews. Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to two hours, with an average interview length of a little over an hour.

Second, internal organizational documents and public government reports were obtained. These were given by interviewees, in the case of internal reports, or downloaded from the official website of Publica and the Dutch government in the case of official documents.

Third, I have been able to attend and record two events at Publica. The first one was an organizational workshop on retention and motivation, aimed at young employees. Here, some 30 people attended and discussed for two hours on training, development and careers in Publica. The second was a one-day conference on the role of young employees in Publica. Speakers at this event represented a consulting company and top management (in the form of the secretary general and the vice-secretary general). Both events have been very valuable in interpreting the organizational context and discourse.

And fourth, I have had several meetings with a key informant, with whom I discussed my observations on Publica and its performance management. He has been able to provide an insider perspective and helped me follow up on important leads for the research.

2.3.7 Initial coding

I will discuss and illustrate the data analysis that lies at the heart of this study in chapter 5 (with regard to the Symbolic analysis) and in chapter 6 (with regard to the Imaginary analysis). These two methods of data analysis are strongly informed by the Lacanian theoretical perspective that I have pursued in this study. I will take the next two chapters to introduce this approach and situate it with respect to other approaches of studying subjectivity in organizations. Here, I will limit myself to discussing my preliminary analysis of the interview data. I will do this to allow for the possibility that some of the early steps I have taken in making sense initially of the interview data may have shaped my interpretation, even though I have not actively involved these early analyses in my study.

I started the process of analyzing the interviews by thematically mapping the topics that were discussed in relation to performance management. In table 2, I present a list of these themes.

Table 2 Initial coding themes

Strategic management
Leadership
Operational management
Employee development
Career
Competences
Skills
Accountability

These themes were aimed at mapping the ways in which people themselves structured their narratives, and the categories were therefore inductively constructed on the basis of my content analysis of the interview accounts.

In the next section, I will make a few qualifying remarks on the status of speech in Lacan’s work, and how this affects the way in which I will approach the empirical data in this study. Additionally, I will discuss the issue of translation of this material, which has been necessary to the representation of case study data throughout this thesis.

2.4 Before analysis

In order to take seriously Lacan’s psychoanalysis as a starting point for textual analysis, we must concentrate on speech above all else. Speech is the most important object for analysis for Lacan, as it provides the analyst with the means to interpret the unconscious formations to which the analysand is subject. As we start to explore the potential of Lacan’s work for organization studies, we should realize that for Lacan, speech has a central position in analysis. The twists and turns that we observe in speech are symptomatic of the profound, constitutive role that language has in subjectivity, and the complex ways in which it functions, on various different levels. In speech, this can be recognized and therefore analyzed.

#### 2.4.1 *Speech in analysis*

In order for the subject to make an utterance, it must rely on the signifying procedures of language to assemble. These in turn give rise to an effect of meaning which may become the object of a social interaction. Lacan draws here on the famous psychoanalytic concept of overdetermination. For Freud (1993: 310, 338), overdetermination signifies the multiple origins of a specific clinical symptom. This means that the symptom cannot be traced back to any one particular occurrence, but that it is the outcome of compounded phenomena that have all contributed to it (see also Althusser, 1969). When Lacan holds that meaning is overdetermined, he argues that it is not specifically tied to any one signifier, but is produced by the complete interplay of the entire chain of signifiers. Only by an implicit reference to the totality of signifiers can signification come about. Thus, meaning arises by virtue of the relation of the signifiers of a statement to the complete set of signifiers. Conversely, meaning is not contained by the statement in question, nor is it stable. It is overflowing with references to other signifiers, and it is in constant movement. (I will return to Lacan's conceptualization of signification at length in chapter 4.)

Therefore, for Lacan, speech always conveys more than it intends. Beyond the direct intentions of the speaker, language may end up saying something more, something that can be gleaned from what is said but which is not directly the intended message. Fink (1995: 3) speaks in this regard of speech coming from two different psychological places, the self and the Other. The self talk represents the subject's intentions, but the Other talk that occurs simultaneously may give away various things: identity work, inadvertently mixed-up words, contradictions of logic, and so on. These indicate a level of language beyond the conscious and rational image that the subject may have of itself, and that scholars of organization so often attribute to organizational actors.

Likewise, when a subject speaks, it draws on various different discourses, that are in turn made up of words and phrases with strong ties to a specific social context. As the subject speaks, it draws on these words and phrases beyond its direct intentions. The subject may delude itself into thinking that it has complete control over its use of language, but in Lacan's view this is certainly not the case. The subject must be thought of as empty insofar as it has its place within the structure of language as a whole, and identifications and assemblages of signifiers inhabit it temporarily. Nevertheless, Lacan maintains that "[o]ne is always responsible for one's position as a subject" (2006m: 729). The signifiers that make up speech, tied to the local context, are revealing of the determination of the subject in the sense that they convey the linguistic structures that are salient to the signification of the self at any particular point in time. This does not mean that the subject is fully determined by language, but rather that it is dependent upon the *structure* of language for its being. As I will argue in chapter 7, we can attribute responsibility to the subject by means of its decision whether or not to acknowledge its dependence upon this structure. We will also see later on that although the structure of language provides the condition of possibility of subjectivity, it contains considerable room for maneuver by virtue of the overdetermination of signification.

The unconscious dimension of language, as a determining influence in subjectivity, can be observed in speech:

"The rents that appear, thanks to which you can go beyond what he is recounting to you, are not an a-side in the discourse, they occur in the text of the discourse. It is

insofar as something in the discourse appears to be irrational that you can bring in the images with their symbolic value.” (Lacan, 1988b: 256)

Here we see the image of language as something that speaks above and beyond the rational intentions of the subject. Where speech becomes “irrational”, the Symbolic or unconscious nature of language can be seen. This is language in the way that it invades us, and structures our perception, beliefs and experiences. In effect, it provides us with the very structure that makes these possible. The categories of language that one draws on are already located within the Other. I will explore this greater detail in chapter 4 and further. Before moving on, I will make a few remarks on the notion of translation in relation to the empirical texts in this study.

#### *2.4.2 The question of translation*

Translation has been an indispensable part of the analysis and representation of the interview data as well as the contextual data of this empirical research. The translation of the interviews in particular has proved to be a useful tool in coming to terms with how meaning is attributed to certain signifiers. The significations are engendered within the course of statements, and to denaturalize this process, the translation from statements from Dutch to English has proven very fruitful.

I will make a few remarks here on the notion of translation, and how we can understand it with regard to the conception of language that Lacan puts forward. I have not been able to find explicit references to the work of translation in Lacan’s work, with the exception of countless admonitions against the French translators of Freud. However, we can assume that translation carries much weight for Lacan, since it deals with the equivalences and differences of signifiers and signifieds, between two languages. In the activity of translation, one deals with the role that signifiers have in conveying particular significations, and their correlates in another languages. This endeavor must always address the relationship between meaning and words, and is therefore pertinent to the problematic of language and being with which we are faced. To elaborate on this, I will turn to Walter Benjamin’s (1921) “The task of the translator” here, in which he discusses the difficulties that a translator faces in approaching the original text. According to Benjamin, the translation of a work of art is bound by a “vital” connection to its original. It is a question of “afterlife”, in which the original cannot be regained in its authentic state. But it allows the original to live on, in altered form, through the translation.

The translation touches upon the points of kinship that two languages share, and the work of translation therefore represents a “provisional attempt at coming to terms with the foreignness of languages.” (1921: 257). This kinship between languages is to be found, not in its structure, but in the intentions that language conveys. This is the *sense* of a literary work, referring to that which it communicates. However, for Benjamin, there is always something beyond this sense, which must be sought in excess of the prose. This is what Benjamin calls the “poetic” (1921: 253). It is here that the translator must struggle to locate the translation. This is something in the original that is beyond literal translation, enveloped in a unity of language and content. Although it cannot be directly captured by translation, it might nevertheless be made to pass into the text, as an overpowering and alien element (1921: 258). Benjamin therefore holds that a translation should not be evaluated in terms of the traditional criteria of license and fidelity. License describes the extent to which the translator can use verse freely to enclose the meaning of the original. Fidelity must be understood as

responsibility to the literal word of the original. Benjamin suggests that the essence of translation is not expressed in these two criteria, since they only aim at the communication of meaning. Since for Benjamin the singularity of a work of literature lies beyond the conveyance of meaning, these criteria are not productive for the evaluation of translation. A translation must only marginally touch on the *sense* of the original, in a tangential way, while “pursuing its own course according to the laws of fidelity in the freedom of linguistic flux” (1921: 261). It can take its freedom with the meaning of the original, as long as it stays true to what that original is in the poetic sense. One way to do this, according to Benjamin, would be to focus on a literal representation of the *syntax*, of the way in which the words are structured with regard to each other.

What does this entail for the task of translation in this research? Benjamin maintains that the singularity of an original work of art lies in its “poetic” dimension, what he says beyond the structures of language. It is the task of the translator to represent this extra-textual dimension in the translation. This must be done in what he calls a “reverberation” of the original in the translation. In this idea of something beyond the text that describes the essence of the original, one may notice a parallel with Lacan’s concept of the Thing, which can be understood as a signifier of lack or emptiness that is encircled by the work of art (1992: 130, 141). If we pursue this line of thought in light of the interview accounts, we can understand their text as structured around something beyond the immediate discourse. The way in which signifiers are structured in relation to each other bears on this “beyond”. They can be understood as organized around this poetic dimension. In Lacan’s terms, we can say that they “encircle” it. Benjamin’s point about the literal representation of syntax in translation must therefore be taken seriously. We can use the syntactical structure of signifiers in relation to each other to understand how the field of signification is arranged around an unrepresentable kernel. Furthermore, the syntactical relations between the signifiers are also central in constituting their meaning:

“In the individual, unsupplemented languages, what is meant is never found in relative independence, as in individual words and sentences; rather, it is in a constant state of flux – until it is able to emerge as the pure language from the harmony of all the various ways of meaning.” (Benjamin, 1921: 257)

Because of this, the interdependency of signifiers should be safeguarded within the translation. As we shall see in chapter 5, it is by means of these interdependent relations that we may begin to ascribe meaning to signification. Benjamin insists that a good translation also allows the original language to affect the secondary language. For him, successful translation from Dutch to English would not hesitate to let the Dutch affect the English, resulting in unusual English at times. In my own translations, this may be seen by means of the Dutch expressions that I have attempted to translate in such a way, as to allow the movements of the signifiers to be observed.

Translation introduces a barrier to the analysis of signification within the context of a statement, by means of the necessary compromises that must be made in terms of the literal equivalents of signifiers and the retention of meaning in the original. At the same, it throws light on the processes by which this signification is constituted, by means of the careful comparison of meanings necessary to the work of conversion. I suggest that this tension is at once productive and reductive.

## Chapter 3 Towards a study of subjectivity at work

“Your evidence, the evidence of the psychological experience which is your own, is determined by a confusion of the concepts of which you know nothing. We live amongst concepts far more than we think. Its mode of reflection is essential to the manner in which the being of a certain cultural era gains a sense of itself, and of the same token conceives of itself.” (Lacan, 1988b: 45)

### 3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will lay the groundwork for a Lacanian reading of subjectivity and performance in relation to the case study that I have previously presented. Before going into the theoretical contributions of Lacan, we must first establish the thematic of subjectivity in organization studies. In order to do this, I will explore some of the recent debates in the literature on subjectivity, power and resistance as well as some research on identity and identification in organizations.

Here I will focus mostly on research that has investigated the role that language and discourse have in processes of power, as well as the interpellation of subjectivities. This research has mainly drawn, implicitly or explicitly, on the postmodern orientation in Western philosophy which “proposes to dissolve the great construction of the nineteenth century to which we remain captive – the idea of the historical subject, the idea of progress, the idea of revolution, the idea of humanity and the ideal of science” (Badiou, 2003: 44). In order to dissolve these ideas, some theorists have drawn attention to the ways in which language and discourses function to construct certain phenomena as normal or pathological, rational or irrational, and so on. One way in which this has found expression in organization studies is by means of a de-centering of the subject, by acknowledging the diverse ways in which linguistic practices produce the possibilities for certain forms of consciousness.

Discourse analysis has become an important methodological and epistemological foundation for much of the field of studies into organizational identities and subjectivities. The work of Michel Foucault has been a central reference point with regard to discourse analysis, though a great many studies on discourse do not acknowledge their debt to his work. With regard to the work that has engaged directly with Foucault, it should be noted that certain influential readings have recently come under critique (Jones, 2002). Lacan has not been a major theoretical source of inspiration in organization studies, even though his work has the potential to greatly enrich the debate on organizational subjectivity. In order to set up a Lacanian approach, it is vital that we consider some of the ways in which a Lacanian discourse analysis would depart from Foucauldian and other poststructuralist approaches. This will be the main task that I will undertake in this chapter.

It will be structured as follows. First, I will review some of the recent contributions to the debate on subjectivity, power and resistance in organizations (section 3.2). I will interrogate the current debates with regard to the apparent centrality of Foucauldian-inspired approaches, to consider the possible contribution of a Lacanian perspective within this study. Second, I will introduce a Lacanian approach to the study of subjectivity (section 3.3). Here I will focus specifically on secondary literature on Lacan’s work, which has provided insight on the points at which it is sympathetic or discordant with the poststructuralist approaches. Third, I will



position a possible take-up of Lacan's work with regard to critique that has been directed at Lacan's work, most notably Deleuze and Guattari's (1997) *Anti-Oedipus* (section 3.4). Fourth, I will make some concluding remarks before turning to Lacan's work in detail in chapter 4 (section 3.5).

### **3.2 Subjectivity, power and resistance in organizations**

The study of the self in relation to discourse in organization has its roots in labour process theory (Knights and Willmott, 1990; Braverman, 1974; Burawoy, 1979; Kitay, 2004) and interpretive studies of work and organization (Van Maanen, 1998) in which the importance of talk and text for the construction of identities is foregrounded. After the linguistic turn in organization studies (Weick, 1993), post-structuralist perspectives have become dominant in critical studies of identity and subjectivity in organizations. Here, the thought of Michel Foucault (1977, 1990, 1970) has proved especially influential. This has invigorated the focus on subjectivity as a site on which organizational control plays out, with the subject becoming defined as an ontological effect of power (Gabriel, 1999).

Research that is characterized by such an avowedly Foucauldian approach has focused on disciplinary power as constitutive of discursive regimes, in which "[v]isibility functions to individualize, helps to create the individual and, in so doing, creates a narcissistic preoccupation with how one is seen and judged" (Townley, 2005: 643). Labor, as specified through the apparatus of organizing, may be conceived of as permeated by a logic of government that drives it towards performativity (Carter and Jackson, 1998). For example, Ball and Wilson's study of interpretive repertoires of call centre workers shows how computer-based performance monitoring gives rise to certain subject positions as part of "organization-specific genealogies" (2000: 562). This theme of electronic surveillance as an interpellative apparatus can also be seen in the work of Sewell and Wilkinson (1992) and Sewell (1998), among others. In addition to this research focusing on the possibilities of panoptic control through electronic means, several writers have also pointed out the potential of management discourses to subjectify and objectify employees. Townley (1993a, 1994) argues that HRM practices represent forms of power/knowledge that "render[...] aspects of existence thinkable, calculable and thus manageable" (1993: 236), leading to the perpetuation of asymmetrical power relations in organizations. Deetz (2003) explores how various discourses, unified under the signifier HRM, delineate and normalize identities to suppress potential antagonisms in the workplace. Grey (1994) shows how the discursive construction of careers in an accounting firm outlines specific subject positions and promotes certain identifications, with far-reaching consequences for the subjectivities of his respondents. This is evident in some respondents' comments on supervisors' perceptions of their marriage partners in relation to the career progress they have made. Hodgson (2002) demonstrates how project management constitutes itself as a disciplinary apparatus, in the form of a profession. In claiming neutrality through scientific status, the conceptual toolkit of project management becomes the only legitimate resource to approach any organizational process that is classified as a project. Similar analyses of surveillance and subjectification can be seen for instance in Weiss' (2005) treatment of employee assistance programs, Townley's (1995, 1996) and Hopper and Macintosh's (1998) reading of accounting systems, and Weiskopf and Loacker's (2006) critique of flexibilization in work organization.

The orthodox reading of Foucault, emphasizing the repressive effects of power, has been called into question by Jones (2002), who argues that what has been received in organization studies is a standardized and mechanical version that fails to properly engage with Foucault's work. Aiming to reclaim Foucault from the dominant appropriations of Townley (1993b, 1994, 1998) and Burrell (1988) among others, Jones traces Foucault's intellectual lineage back to Althusser. He shows that the connections between their texts are complex and multiple, ultimately leading to a relation of undecidability. This is quite different from the antagonistic image of this relation that has been put forward in organization studies. This example of undecidability has consequences for the way in which theory, like Foucault's work, is used within organization studies. Following Derrida, Jones argues that the practice of reading is always transformative, rather than merely descriptive or interpretive, and that management and organization scholars must therefore be careful not to foreclose their readerly work with regard to Foucault.

Foucault's work has also had a more indirect influence on organization studies in the form of the epistemology and methodology of critical discourse analysis, most often associated with the work of Fairclough (2000), though not exclusively (Wodak and Meyer, 2002; also see Hardy and Phillips, 2002). For instance, Zanoni and Jansens (2003), drawing jointly on rhetorical analysis and critical discourse analysis, show how power dynamics are produced through local discourses of diversity. Through these dynamics, "diverse employees are denied full subjectivity and agency", and extant power asymmetries and class relations are reinforced (2003: 70-71). Doolin (2002) describes the "contingently produced" power effects on clinicians' subjectivities in relation to enterprise discourse in the New Zealand health care sector. Here, the identities of the clinicians can be understood as representing three main subject positions with respect to enterprise discourse: identification with the manager's role, identification with the professional stance of the doctor, and (for clinicians who divide their time between public and private practice) a radical separation of one's conduct within public as opposed to private practice. In another study of health care workers, Halford and Leonard (2005) argue that the discursive effects on employee identities must be understood as temporally and spatially embedded within a particular context, in response to which employees can "locate themselves within particular configurations of subjectivity" (2005: 667). This formulation displays the relative resurgence of interest in practices of agency and resistance that can be seen in recent studies of subjectivity. This resurgence has taken place in response to the critique of a number of commentators that Foucauldian accounts of discursive determination of selfhood leave little room for the conceptualization of resistance, and in fact obscure the practices of resistance that employees do engage in, whether individually or collectively (Thompson and Ackroyd, 1995; Newton and Findlay, 1996). This perceived neglect of resistance has subsequently been redressed by a stream of studies that have highlighted practices of resistance specifically (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999; Ezzamel, Willmott and Worthington, 2001; Thomas and Davies, 2005).

In many of these studies, resistance is described in terms of a specific resource that employees draw on to subvert the effects of power. Brown and Humphreys (2006) describe a case in which the discursive resource of place becomes an important operative within the identities that employees construct. Employees invoke various aspects of the organization's housing, such as safety issues and faulty maintenance, as personifications of managerial failure. Symon (2005) explores rhetorical strategies of her respondents in an IT organization as contestations of discursive space, and demonstrates how their arguments undermine dominant

interpretations, posit new identities or perpetuate conventional roles to further their own interests. Fleming (2005) describes the practices of resistance that develop in a context of paternalism. These mostly employ cynicism and overidentification as a means of subverting the belittling rhetoric of paternalist discourse. Rather than be cast as “irrational children” under the caring supervision of their CEO, some employees instead ridicule the roles they are given. In so doing, they create an alternative identification that emphasizes the tougher aspects of their work. This kind of subversion is also theorized by Rosenthal (2005) who examines how management control techniques can come to function as resources for resistance in both supervisory and customer interactions. In Brown and Coupland (2005), the role of silence in organisations is explored. Here, the problematic of control and resistance becomes a way of understanding silence as either collusion or contestation of hegemony.

This focus on resistance has drawn strongly on the conceptualization of selfhood as identity, in order to cope with the ways in which employees appear to *consciously* subvert the purported aims in managerial discourses. In the theorization of identity and resistance, Alvesson and Willmott’s (2002) account of identity regulation has been influential, especially the Giddensian concept of “self-identity” (1993) (see for instance Ezzamel et al., 2001; Brown and Coupland, 2005, and also Collinson, 2003). Alvesson and Willmott present their reading of Giddens’ conceptualization of social identity in the form of a circular diagram that links identity regulation to identity work, which in turn linked to the aforementioned self-identity (2002: 627). Identity regulation refers to the ordering aspect of discourse, in which identities are constituted and ordered. Identity regulation gives rise to identity work, based on considerations of life interest, coherence, distinctiveness, direction, positive value and self-awareness. All of these criteria are in some way decisive in the decisions the subject takes in crafting its self-identity. These criteria portray identity as an ongoing project in which the subject tries to reconcile the shaping influences of discursive regimes with the continuity of its project of the self. However, this self-identity must not be thought of as a stable entity but rather a reflexively organized narrative (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002: 625).

This account of identity provides a detailed and rich way of understanding how the self is shaped and actively authored. In this, it is of prime importance in understanding how identification occurs within organizational contexts and how discourses within organizing processes may engender certain modes of being. However, I argue that it lacks an adequate account as to why this happens. Why do subjects engage in identification? Raising this question means that we address the failure of discourse to fully exhaust subjectivity, and the impossibility of uniformity, closure and coherence in discourse. Identification may precisely be seen as an attempt to regain such closure, to “suture” the structural gap within discourse. Identification is in this respect related to fantasy, in the sense of providing a promise of wholeness or fulfillment, in the form of an ideal to which one can aspire. Alvesson and Willmott go some way towards acknowledging the fantasmatic effects of an identity ideal when they state, following Deetz (1994) that “[t]he letting go of an illusory sense or ideal of integrity and autonomy creates space for enacting or exploring what has previously been suppressed, contained or ‘othered’” (2002: 637). I suggest that identification can be seen as an attempt to remedy the structurally fragmented nature of the self, based on a certain ideal image of the self. Identification then becomes a kind of “misrecognition” of what constitutes social reality.

We can recall here Fleming's philosophical exploration of resistance at work, in which he asks whether "ethical practices such as irony, cynicism or 'making out' truly challenge the power structure of late capitalism in any transformative manner" (2002: 204). In most accounts of resistance, it is still conceptualized as a dialectical process of repressive power and agential transgression, leading to romanticization of workplace resistance as such. Fleming argues that the act of resistance can more productively be seen as non-dialectical, as a development of subjectivity into previously un-inscribed areas. In this, Fleming draws on Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) conception of "lines of flight", which evokes the unorganized, disorderly aspects of being that escape the ordered strata of social life. To begin to think resistance along such lines, involves a shift from a defensive or military analogy of resistance to a nomadic one (Fleming, 2002: 200). Whereas in most studies, resistance is seen as a defensive stance against the infringements of power upon the self, Fleming proposes that it is more productively seen as a transgression of the organization of one's being.

This touches on much of the work that is being done on identity in organization studies, which I briefly sketched above. Here we see that the self is largely conceptualized as a conscious identity which is partly constrained by power, but has a discretionary room for resistance and self-styling or authoring of identity. This room for acting upon discourse is left opaque, however, and it remains unclear from whence the subject then undertakes its identity work.

The question must be asked whether this does not overstress the conscious aspects of subjectivity in favor of the unconscious aspects. Here, I do not only refer to processes of discursive determination, which occur unbeknownst to the subject. It also concerns the elements of being that are not captured, legislated and ordered by discourse. I suggest that language can be seen as characterized by a structural limit, which prevents it from fully capturing social life. This notion of something beyond the confines of discourse, such as the lines of flight that Fleming invokes in his analysis of resistance, is by no means an isolated concept. Instead, it is part of a wider theme within social theory, most notably in the work of Laclau, Žizek, Deleuze and Guattari, and Lacan. There have been some noteworthy contributions to the debate on subjectivity, power and resistance that have been made on the basis of these writers.

For instance, the theme of closure or hegemonization in discourse can be seen in the work of Laclau and Mouffe (1985). This entails a view of discourse that draws attention to the hegemonic processes that occur within the discursive field, and the movement by which these discursive formations aim toward closure of a structural gap of signification. This has been taken up within organization studies in the work of Contu (2002) and Contu and Willmott (2005), among others (see also Deetz, 2003). Other explorations of subjectivity can also be seen in organization studies. Hodgson (2005) draws on Judith Butler's (1990) concept of performativity to account for the complex ways in which disciplinary practices affect subjectivities, and the way in which subjects iteratively undermine the role patterns they are expected to fulfill. Newton (2004) draws on the work of Elias, and Hancock and Tyler (2003) use Hegel's phenomenology to theorize the subject at work. Fleming and Spicer (2003) draw on Žizek's (1989) conceptualization of cynicism as an imaginary resistance against the subjectifying effects of discourse. In drawing on cynicism, the subject distances itself from the symbolic determination, but it nonetheless reproduces the role that it is given within the social matrix. In Žizek's words: "they know very well what they are doing, but they are still doing

it” (1989: 33). The ironical distance that subjects take from dominating processes is illusory, insofar as it hides their own role in extending the very processes they appear to resist against. Fleming and Spicer highlight the ways in which this can be seen in organizational settings, where employees may dis-identify with organizational practices, through joking, sarcasm, irony and so on, but leaving intact the organizational practices. Fleming and Spicer argue that this illusory character of resistance may actually strengthen cultural forms of control because the dis-identification masks, to the subject itself, the more exploitative effects of employment practices (see also Hoedemaekers, 2007). Other explorations of Zizek’s work in organization studies can be seen in Boehm and De Cock (2005) and Contu and Willmott (2005).

Engaging more directly with the work of Lacan, Jones and Spicer (2005) investigate the extent to which it has been mobilized in organization studies to understand the subject in organizational settings. They highlight the relative underdevelopment of Lacanian theory in the field, and argue that the debate on subjectivity in organization studies escape its simplified Foucauldian coordinates, that run the risk of turning into a new orthodoxy. Outlining Lacan’s work, they point to the potential of the Lacanian register of the Real to describe the necessary, structural failure contained within language, discourse and subjectivity. Jones and Spicer then use this to scrutinize the category of enterprise and demonstrate how the discourse of entrepreneurship is structured around the signifier of the “entrepreneur”, which forms the site of fantasmatic constructions of what the field embodies, but is itself devoid of or “barred” from the field of meaning. In doing this, they provide a starting point for an analysis of the contradictions and non-signifying elements that are inherent in discourse as such, akin to Zizek’s (1989) reinvigoration of ideology critique. After this brief analysis, Jones and Spicer insist that their focus on Lacan’s work must not be understood as a critique of the pervasive influence of Foucault’s philosophy in organization studies, but rather that “[t]his effort to open out the question of the subject rests on a conviction that it should not lose its status as a *question*” (2005: 239, emphasis in original). In another account of Lacan in organization studies, Roberts (2005) focuses on the role that the Imaginary register plays in processes of control and resistance, with specific attention to how the micro-mechanisms in the mirror stage function through organizational practices. Boehm (2006a), on the other hand, foregrounds the relationship between the registers of the Symbolic and the Real, by discussing how the relationship of the fantasy of societal and personal transparency causes the subject to misrecognise how it is inhabited by language in its structuring form.

Arnaud and Vanheule (2007) also assert the importance of Lacan for studies of subjects at work, with a therapeutic thrust towards “psychoanalytic intervention” in organizations (p. 364). This intervention is aimed at the “professional symptom” (p.366) is exemplified in other studies by some of the authors on burnout (Vanheule, Lievrouw and Verhaeghe, 2003), “organizational diagnosis” (Arnaud, 2002) and executive coaching (Arnaud, 2003). These studies attempt to understand and ameliorate organizational processes and interactions through an implicit metaphor of pathology, without fundamentally questioning power relations in organizations. In this regard, they can be thought of as functionalist (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). (For a similar approach, see Driver, 2005).

This approach is decidedly different from the efforts of Jones and Spicer (2005), as well as others who have sought to draw attention to the potential of Lacanian thought to shed light on organizational subjectivity in relation to processes of control and resistance. This approach is much more in line with the methodology of cultural critique, and in my view broadly

sympathetic with the problem (rather than consensus) of emancipation within critical management studies. It is this approach that I pursue in the course of this study. In the next section, I will discuss some of the specific insights that a Lacanian theoretical approach to studying language and subjectivity in the workplace may bring, and how it differs from other views on subjectivity that have been prevalent in the field of organization studies.

### **3.3 Introducing a Lacanian understanding of subjectivity**

Parker (2003) provides a primer on Lacan's work for psychologists, positioning Lacan's work in relation to the "syllabus" of mainstream knowledge that has issued from the disciplines with psychology over the last few decades. Parker demonstrates how Lacan's work continues to subvert the assumptions and conclusions that have traditionally come out of psychology.

Cognitive psychology, for instance, conceptualizes the individual mainly by means of an information-processing or computing metaphor, and attempts to map its knowledge onto the functioning of the human mind. This assumes a separation between thinking and the body. For Lacan, thought is not limited to conscious life. In fact, conscious experience counts for very little in relation to the unconscious. The unconscious exists in language and it is here that thought occurs. The meaning that is experienced on the conscious level comes from this unconscious structure of language, but only as a product rather than a process. As such, this thinking is located outside of the individual (which is not identical to the subject in Lacan's view). Memory, which is a key research object for cognitive psychology, also takes place unconsciously within the chain of signifiers of language. The distinction that Lacan brings to the traditional understanding of the subject is that it is constituted, and exists within, the Symbolic function of language. Its conscious personality is an Imaginary side effect, a misrecognition, that obscures this.

In the same way, developmental psychology is also uprooted by Lacan's contribution. The conventional understanding in the discipline is that the individual develops through a number of stages into maturity. But again, when one proceeds from a Lacanian position, the self can only ever be seen in relation to others, and more importantly, in relation to the system of language (which is also necessarily Other to the subject). Furthermore, the relation that one has toward this Other is always retroactively framed, and can therefore not be seen as a constant development, but can only be viewed through the linguistic framework that currently defines us as individuals.

Another major psychological perspective, social psychology takes the split between the individual from the social as its starting point, and is generally aimed at the adaptation of the individual into social relations (Parker, 2003: 104). Lacan's work calls this dichotomy into question, by providing a much more complex interstice of the social with the personal. Lacan's subject comes into being within the social. The social is the condition for being to occur, and the only way into the social is by means of language. In this sense, the most personal core of subjectivity is already shared socially. The connection between this shared dimension of language and the identities that subjects construct are far from dichotomous. Lacan creates a number of spatial topologies to describe some of the ways in which these levels interrelate (I will return to this in chapter 4).

Parker argues that Lacan's work throws a lot of the conventional psychological theory on subjectivity into disarray, and that we must therefore consider Lacan a "barred psychologist". He is barred, removed, forbidden from the discipline of psychology and there is little common ground to be found between them in the way that subjectivity is theorized or studied, and his work can only function in psychology if it receives its own separate and rigorous treatment:

"If Lacan is read as a 'barred psychologist' [barred upsilon], someone who relentlessly disrupts what psychologists think they know, then his work may provoke a reinterpretation that constructs a space for work inside psychology that revolves around the questions he asked about the nature of the human subject rather than answers that usually function to foreclose enquiry." (Parker, 2003: 111)

Therefore, any approach that seeks to ask these questions must approach Lacan's oeuvre on its own terms. What Parker argues about Lacan's relationship to the field and discipline of psychology, can be extended to organization studies. Especially in mainstream studies of organization and management, psychological theories of the subject have been the basis for the conceptualization of employee subjectivities. This can be seen most clearly in the field of organizational behavior, but also organization theory more generally.

In critical studies, on the other hand, the linguistic turn has had an important effect on the way in which subjectivity is studied. We have seen above how the work of Foucault has been influential in critical management studies on subjectivity, power and resistance. This has resulted in a de-centering of the subject, and an interest in subjectivity (as well as identity) as something that arises within the confines of language. Although largely sympathetic, the Lacanian view of subjectivity has some important points of difference from the generally accepted poststructuralist view (even if such a thing is an impossibility). Alcorn (1994) discusses the most important differences, and describes some of the pitfalls that have been encountered in the way in which Lacan's work has been taken up in social studies. Alcorn uses the metaphor of containment to describe how poststructuralist and psychoanalytic take-ups of Lacan's work have tended to misrepresent Lacan's views in this relation between subjectivity and language. For poststructuralists, subjectivity is comprised of discourse. Alcorn uses the example of the "puppet made of wood". The subject consists of discourse, is made up by it.

Freudian psychoanalysis on the other hand, treats the subject as if it contained discourse, ready to be divulged and scrutinized in the analytic setting. Such a view of more akin to a "pool of water". The subject is a placeholder here, not characterized by a structure of any kind, but a temporary sedimentation of discourse. Lacan's view, argues Alcorn, escapes both these (decidedly oversimplified) characterizations: "Lacan's subject is structured by and upon self-division and this means that the subject can never purely be one thing." (1994: 40) This entails an implicit critique of the notion of subjectivity deriving from subject positions put forward within discourse (see for example Hodgson, 2002; Sewell and Wilkinson, 1992). Conflict is at the heart of the subject, and this is precisely why it cannot be reduced to the position carved out for it within the discursive realm of the social. It can accommodate conflicting discourses, and these subjective conflicts exceed the subject position one occupies. The specific collection of discourse in the subject creates new significations and productive tensions, which give rise to new forms of discourse production. This conceptualization is made possible by the Lacanian concept of "registers" of subjectivity. Language functions on several levels at once for the subject.

This focus on the organization of discourse within the subject allows for the theorization of individual differences in responding to power and ideology. The organization of various discourses in the subject is somewhat stable, albeit conflictual due to the division from the Other that is at the heart of subjectivity. These conflictual positions that various discourses within subjectivity will have with respect to each other give rise to feelings of suffering. At the heart of subjectivity is a traumatic lack of meaning, which emanates from these conflicts (see also Žižek, 1989). This core of the subject is in some sense excluded from discourse, but it plays an important role in how the various discourses within subjectivity operate in relation to each other. Alcorn argues that these discursive conflicts make the generation of new discourses possible:

“[I]deology is not created ex nihilo from a unitary subject. But subjects, driven by internalizations of social conflict and suffering from singular instances of discourse contradiction, can be the origins of new ideological formations.” (1994: 44)

The encounter with the repressed conflict between various discursive elements can prove to be such a jolt, by means of which ideology can be displaced. In this way, Lacan's subject can provide a way out of the problematic of control and resistance that has bogged down debates on subjectivity in organizations studies. In the next section, I will examine the potential of a Lacanian approach to studying subjectivity further. In doing so, I will engage with some of the social theory that has come in the wake of Lacan's own work and particular appropriations of his theory in social studies.

### **3.4 Positioning a Lacanian approach to subjectivity**

In this section I will explore some of the critiques leveled against Lacan and psychoanalysis more generally from the side of poststructuralist philosophy. This will allow me to position the theoretical direction of this study with more clarity. Lacan's work is vast and any study that claims to draw on his work will inevitably only address a limited number of the themes that can be recognized in it. Therefore, it is important to take notice of the more contentious or controversial elements in his theoretical enterprise. In considering these critiques, I hope that I can work them into a productive reading of his work that will allow new insights to emerge with respect to the study of subjectivity and power, the empirical case at hand and, more generally, the possibilities of textual analysis in social studies. Due to the limitations posed by this thesis, I will not be able to engage in a systematic analysis of the critiques made against Lacan. I will focus on some of the works that have proved to be influential in psychoanalytically inspired philosophy and social studies.

Here, I will explore one major reply to Lacan in particular, namely Deleuze and Guattari's (1977) *Anti-Oedipus*. This project forms one of the most concerted critiques of psychoanalysis, and Lacan's work in particular. At the heart of Deleuze and Guattari's work in *Anti-Oedipus* is the critique of what they call oedipalization. According to Deleuze and Guattari, psychoanalysis has managed to totalize a view of human beings as determined from within the familial setting. The Oedipus complex, as put forward by the late Freud, and especially the many followers who ran rampant with this concept, has proved to be a normative ideal for subjectivity. Any normal individual must come to being with respect to the triad of self,



mother and father. Deleuze and Guattari bemoan the central position that is being given to the familial apparatus in this conceptualization, and they argue that its centrality in philosophy and social studies has led to the obfuscation of what they call the “social production” and the ways in which desire is dammed in by and invested in social forms of organization, or in their own words, how desire is “territorialized”. Psychoanalysis becomes an instrument for producing and correcting suitable subjects for the societal machinery.

In this, capitalist relations of production are of central interest for Deleuze and Guattari. Life processes are thought to consist of flows, of constant movement and exchange, and these flows are “coded” into social forms of organization. All being is a processual movement. The principle of flows can be seen in all sorts of life process, such as language, travel, genetics in between plants, and so on (Roffe, 2005: 35). Capitalism, however, “decodes” these flows by taking them away from their naturalized context and commodifying it. Flows are detached from the former rituals and conventions of which they were an inherent part, but they similarly are incorporated into the exchange relations of capitalism.

In mounting their critique of psychoanalysis, Deleuze and Guattari argue that the Oedipus complex is coded into social production, rather being constitutive of subjectivity and social relations. In seeing the Oedipus complex everywhere, psychoanalysts are deluded to the actual nature of the economic and social forces of production. Subjectivity arises first from capitalism, which is channeled into and reproduced by the form of the family triangle (Holland, 2005: 236), with the family simply being “the form of human matter or material that finds itself subordinated to the autonomous social form of economic reproduction” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1977: 285). Deleuze and Guattari critique the role that this particular representation of the family has in maintaining and reproducing certain forms of subjectivity, since they argue that “[t]he Oedipal triangle is the personal and private territoriality that corresponds to all of capitalism’s efforts at re-territorialization” (1977: 288/289). They continue, asserting that

“It is only in the capitalist formation that the Oedipal limit finds itself not only occupied, but inhabited and lived, in the sense in which the social images produced by the decoded flows actually fall back on restricted familial images invested by desire.” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1977: 289)

The relations of the family, held dear by traditional psychoanalysis, must therefore be understood as permeated by capitalist social relations. Desire, which is understood by Deleuze and Guattari as an affirmative force of life, can now only take shape within the margins that are created for it in the normalization of social life. The Oedipal relation, in which the subject is cast, is not the condition of subjectivity to arise (as it is in the psychoanalytical orthodoxy), but it is a normative ideal that has a very specific function in the organization of the relations of production. It stifles differences and possibilities, and channels and orders subjectivity in line with the “social production”. These ordering mechanisms bracket the ongoing, processual flow of becoming, and give the appearance of being static and enduring.

Deleuze and Guattari describe this production of subjectivity in terms of three different kinds of syntheses: connective, disjunctive and conjunctive syntheses. These are the ontological operations by which the socius, the field of social relations, is constituted. These procedures work in very specific ways to create the Oedipal situation.

The first procedure, connective synthesis (or association) creates a series of phenomena by linking them up into a relationship, an “assemblage”. In the case of Oedipus, this takes a global, all-encompassing shape to lay the groundwork for a totalizing narrative that explains everything in terms of oedipal relations.

The second procedure, disjunctive synthesis, instates relatively stable relations between the elements of the series. In the case of Oedipalization, Deleuze and Guattari assert that psychoanalysis has created the opposition between the Imaginary and the Symbolic here (or the conscious and the unconscious), and that the knowledge of the subject, to itself and to others, is reduced to these two dimensions and becomes readable in terms of psychoanalytic expertise. The subject is given a coherent narrative, by psychoanalysis, along the lines of the oedipal triangle of mummy-daddy-me. The authors call this an “exclusive, restrictive use” of disjunctive synthesis (1977: 120). This obscures the potential dimensions of subjectivity that traverse this conscious and unconscious realm of subjectivity. Deleuze and Guattari suggest that this restrictive synthesis must be replaced by more inclusive, less dichotomous conceptions of subjectivity.

The third procedure, conjunctive synthesis, makes referral between the elements of an assemblage possible. Deleuze and Guattari argue that the Oedipal complex functions through a “segregative and biunivocal” use of conjunctive synthesis, which means that the criteria for referral become established in a one-sided fashion, overstressing the familial determinations. This overshadows the capitalist social determinations that are much more important in producing the subject, “thereby making possible and inevitable the reduction of libidinal investments to the eternal daddy-mommy” (1977: 121). This gives rise to very one-sided version of subjectivity, in which the complexity of determining forces is reduced to the illusory image of unconscious sexual desire for one parent. And the subject is reduced to a singular narrative, in oedipal terms.

Against this centrality of the Oedipal complex in psychoanalysis, in our thinking about ourselves, subjectivity and social relations, Deleuze and Guattari propose their method of schizoanalysis, which seeks to “overturn the theater of representation into the order of desiring-production” (1977: 294). Schizoanalysis seeks to open up the closed representations of social production, privilege the obscured terms behind sedimented truths, regain difference and go beyond with dichotomous relations. The schizophrenic becomes emblematic of this strategy. The schizophrenic lives outside the confines of the normalized social order, and embraces multiple ways of being at once:

“It would seem that the schizo liberates a raw genealogical material, nonrestrictive, where he can situate himself, record himself, and take his bearings in all the branches at once, on all sides. He explodes the Oedipal genealogy.” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1977: 86)

In this way, the schizophrenic comes to symbolize the possibility of traversing the exclusive categories of social determination. Schizoanalysis takes it as its task to break down these categories and assemblages, to “decode” and “deterritorialize” them (Deleuze and Guattari, 1977: 417).

The critique that the authors put forward in *Anti-Oedipus* can be read as consisting of three different, but related points. All of these will have consequences for my subsequent reading and appropriation of Lacan's work.

First, subjectivity must be dissociated from consciousness, life histories and individuals. Under the oedipal interpretations of psychoanalysis, subjectivity is seen as somehow whole and coherent. For Deleuze and Guattari, there can never be such a thing. The subject is not the "I" of discourse (Braidotti, 2005: 239). Instead, the schizophrenic subject is held up in *Anti-Oedipus* as an exemplar of the nature of subjectivity in relation to the structuring forces of social production, and the potentiality that lies in going beyond or outside the dominant modes of determination. The schizo is pathologized and deemed unfit to function within society. Deleuze and Guattari do not glorify this as an act of resistance in itself. They do point toward the possibilities that lie in going beyond the structuring forces that code the flows that make up our lives. They insist on subverting these, rejecting linearity and exclusion. The disjunctive synthesis divides up an ontological series of flows, and Deleuze and Guattari argue that this can take place in immanent manner or a transcendental manner. Where they accuse psychoanalysis of pursuing such a transcendental disjunction through the discourse of Oedipus, they propose an immanent disjunctive synthesis, allowing one to occupy several positions at once and thereby subvert the matrix of social production. Deleuze and Guattari are careful not to equate Lacan's work with the tendencies they observe in psychoanalysis as a whole, but their critique should nevertheless alert us to the dangers of falling into a reading where subjectivity is too easily equated with individual persons. In approaching Lacan's work, I will therefore carefully expound Lacan's registers of subjectivity. Any thorough reading of this topology of the subject makes the reduction of subjectivity to identity, personal narratives or even consciousness very problematic. For Lacan, the conscious sensation of being-subject is strictly a by-product, a mirage that causes us to misrecognize the way in which our selfhood is produced.

The second point in Deleuze and Guattari's critique of Oedipus concerns the nature of desire, and the way in which psychoanalysis has conceptualized it. The authors feel that psychoanalysis has put forward a negative conception of desire, mainly related to the child's desire for transgressing the Law that prohibits incest. In classic psychoanalytic terms, this brings into play the fear of castration and opens the way for a normal, neurotic subject. Desire is related here to lack: the lack of satisfaction, the lack of power to transgress the Father's commandment, and so on. Deleuze and Guattari reject the idea of desire as based on lack. For them, desire is positive and life-giving, something that arises within the organization of the flows. Desire can take shape anywhere along the coded organization of these flows. It is not tied specifically to any structure or assemblage. For Lacan, desire is tied to lack. However, this lack is not specifically linked to the Oedipal triangle. It represents the loss that each subject suffers as it enters within the Symbolic order, the structural network of language. The lack that results from this initiation symbolizes the insufficiency of language to fully account for the subject, to fully capture its being. The subject comes into being in relation to language, which to some extent always remains strange and Other to it. Lacan re-interprets the Oedipal triangle through this relation of the subject and the Other of language, and the unbridgeable gap that remains between them. In this way, according to Deleuze and Guattari, Oedipus is "carr[ied] to the point of its autocritique". For them, Lacan goes some way towards the decentralization of Oedipus, but not far enough, stating that "[t]he three errors concerning desire are called lack, law and signifier" (1977: 121). This is a contentious issue, since Lacan's

elaboration all three of these concepts differs from how they are described within *Anti-Oedipus*. In the next chapter, I will expand on these notions as they appear in Lacan. In the course of this study, I hope to show how Lacan's later work, and especially the concepts of the traversal of the fundamental fantasy and the subject of the drive, overcomes some of the objections that Deleuze and Guattari place against Lacan's (earlier) structuralist conceptualization of the subject.

And third, in their critique of Oedipus the authors reassert the importance of the capitalist system of production in the determination of subjectivity. They argue that psychoanalysis has reduced subjectivity to a product of the family setting, and has extrapolated this to the field of social analysis. In this way, all social behavior becomes the territory of psychoanalysis and all conflict becomes Oedipal. But, as Deleuze and Guattari remind us, "it is not the father who is applied to the boss, but the boss who is applied to the father" (1977: 114). Subjectivity is far from limited to the familial setting, it is rather produced within the ordering processes in social relations and this in turn falls back on micro-settings such as the household. The temptation to produce an Oedipal reading of Lacan, of which Deleuze and Guattari cite numerous examples, is not unknown in organization studies (see for example Arnaud, 2002). Here, organizational dynamics are read in terms of mother-father relations. But this is a misappropriation of Lacan. The realm of Symbolic exchange, that structures the subject and provides it with the means of relating to others, is not in any sense separated from the system of economic and social production. The study of organizations provides a unique perspective on how organizational discourses affect the subject within a capitalist mode of production. Taking Deleuze and Guattari's point into account here means that we consider the subject as something that comes into being in relation to a big Other that is permeated with capitalist discourse. This claim provides the starting point for this study.

Before moving to an explication of Lacanian concepts in the next chapter, I will touch upon another appraisal of the merits of Lacan's psychoanalysis as a resource for the study of subjectivity. Butler (1997) undertakes a "psychoanalytical criticism of Foucault" to provide insight into the Foucauldian conceptualization of subjectivation. Butler argues that the notion of becoming a subject under disciplinary practices cannot take place without the subject's own attachment to these practices. However, Foucault provides little in the way of theorization of these processes. Following Foucault, the subject may be understood as repeatedly subjected, and it is in the repetition of these subjecting processes, of these "interpellations" to use Althusser's term, that the subject is constituted. It is a continuous process of being constituted, rather than a single occurrence in which the subject is fully determined by discursive practices. The main question that Butler struggles with here is to what extent there is a "suppressed psychoanalysis" in Foucault's work. She shows how resistance remains a problematic concept in Foucault's work. Noting the discrepancy between the concept in earlier and later works, Butler argues that the concept of resistance appears in two distinct varieties. First, it can be seen as a "reverse-discourse" that exceeds the aims of discursive determination. Second, it appears in Foucault's as an unexpected side-effect of discursive complexity. It is thus in the very repetition of a discursive subjection that resistance can occur for Foucault, Butler argues, be it in the form of a subversive counter-discourse, or as an unexpected creative effect in the nexus of various discourses.

"The Foucaultian subject is never fully constituted in subjection, then; it is repeatedly constituted in subjection, and it is in the possibility of a repetition that repeats

against its origin that subjection might be understood to draw its inadvertently enabling power. From a psychoanalytic perspective, however, we might ask whether this possibility of resistance to a constituting or subjectivating power can be derived from what is 'in' or 'of' discourse." (Butler, 1997: 94)

Butler maintains that the Foucauldian conceptualization of power does allow for resistance to come from within power. The constitution of the subject is an ongoing process, that is fragmented, conflictual and incomplete, and that carries within itself "the subject's de-constitution" (1997: 99). Having "hailed" the subject in an interpellation, discourse comes to function as a moral Law and becomes the object of erotic investment. Correspondingly, the desire to transgress this Law also becomes stronger. Here, resistance arises as the "reverse-discourse" that I mentioned above. This form of resistance, as well as the second form that originates as an unexpected discursive by-product, are located within the realm of the signifier. The final question of the previous quotation is therefore answered negatively by Butler. Elsewhere in the same book, she already forecloses this very question of the "outside of discourse" as a potential resource for resistance:

"[I]s the resistance upon which psychoanalysis insists socially and discursively produced, or is it a kind of resistance to, an undermining of, social and discursive production *as such*? Consider the claim that the unconscious only and always resists normalization, that every ritual of conformity to the injunctions of civilization comes at a cost, and that a certain unharnessed and unsocialized remainder is thereby produced, which contests the appearance of the law-abiding subject. This psychic remainder signifies the limits of normalization. That position does not imply that such resistance wields the power to rework or re-articulate the terms of discursive demand, the disciplinary injunctions by which normalization occurs. To thwart the injunctions to produce a docile body is not the same as dismantling the injunction or changing the terms of subject constitution." (1997: 88, emphasis in original)

In this passage, Butler addresses the concept of the Real. She sees little political potential in this radical limit to discursive determination, as it cannot be directed by the subject in any direct manner. If we view this failure of discourse to fully constitute the subject as the only possible form of resistance, then there remains very little hope for any attempts to overthrow or subvert the discursive apparatus that defines us.

However, discursive fields are characterized by a very specific structure, and correspondingly, discourse develops itself in very specific ways because of this. Following Lacan, we can understand discourse as structured around an impossibility, around a core that is itself devoid of positive content. This is a paradoxical situation, since the discourse depends upon this very term. Discursive structures move in various ways to close this empty core. The discursive fragments assemble continually to account for the central term, to make it seem as if it has a physical presence. In Lacanian terms, this is a fantasmatic construction that aims to cover over the lack within the master signifier. However, the Real limit that Butler describes above makes the operations of discursive closure essentially a failure. It cannot help but fail. This "unharnessed and unsocialized remainder" interrupts the attempts at ideological closure that occur in discourse. In the case at hand, Butler overlooks the role that critique can play in exposing the impossibility of ideological utopias. I will argue in this thesis, drawing from the

case research, that it is exactly the fantasy of closure and its subsequent failure that provides a political possibility.

Butler ends up her discussion of Foucault's "suppressed psychoanalysis" by putting forward the idea that the subject comes into being by means of an injury done it by the act of interpellation, and that its dependence upon this injurious "hailing" cultivates an attachment. It owes its own status as being to the injurious term. Therefore, any attempt to resist the forces of subjection must come from the place of this same term. For Foucault, subjection occurs as the body becomes a site of power, opened up to investments by means of division, classification, dressage. In this process, these procedures are dependent upon the location of the subject within matrices of power. The subject is brought into being with respect to very specific procedures, and Butler argues that its being-as-subject remains tied to these procedures. Similarly, for Lacan, the subject arises within a structural discursive order, in which place has already been carved out for it, so to speak. In the Symbolic order of language, the subject comes to be signified by all the other elements in the set, in a differential relationship. It gains its status as subject by virtue of all other signifiers that are alien to it. The subject comes into being in relation to what is Other to it. We see here the commonality of the subject as irrevocably tied to certain signifiers. Re-signification of a subject position can then only proceed from within the very interpellation that brought it into being. This is a valuable point to take into account in approaching Lacan, especially because Lacan has no explicit political concept of resistance. Butler's notion of the subject's attachment is therefore useful in any attempt to grasp the possibilities of resistance from within a signifying structure.

### **3.5 Toward a Lacanian approach to subjectivity**

In this chapter, I have provided an overview of the current debate on subjectivity, power and resistance in organizations. The influence of Foucault has been vast in studies of subjectivity and control, and earlier critiques that stressed the difficulty of accounting for resistance have been addressed by a considerable stream of research that sought to specifically draw out the practices of resistance that employees engage in. Yet on the theoretical level, many of these accounts are still drawing on a dialectic of control and resistance, in which resistance functions as a transgression of the normative injunctions of management. Whereas earlier Marxist accounts would have emphasized the way in which employees defend their interests against managerial control, now the concept of identity has become an important topic of study in organization studies.

Resistance is described as a way to protect one's identity against the subjectifying effects of management discourses. Fleming (2002) rightly points out that this has led to a romanticisation of any kind of transgressive workplace behaviour, even though it may have little effect on the extant power relations. Some of these practices, such as cynicism, may even work to perpetuate management ideologies (Fleming and Spicer, 2003). Therefore, understanding resistance as an intentional act to defend one's identity against managerial efforts to shape it has severe limitations. I suggest here that the concept of subjectivity, and specifically Lacan's, provides a more useful avenue for pursuing this line of enquiry.

However, the aim here is not to view resistance merely on the level of the subject, but to also provide an account of how the subject becomes inculcated in managerial practices, and where

this determination fails, break down or proves incomplete. A parallel can be made here to Fleming and Spicer's reliance on the concept of struggle to describe modalities of resistance (2007), in which a clear division between power and resistance is relinquished and the subject is always implicated in both.

I argue that it is in this tension between determination and its failure that we can locate a future for collective forms of resistance. The study of power and resistance on the level of the subject is therefore not a "fatal distraction" (Thompson and Ackroyd, 1993), but a necessary part of the critique of exploitative managerial practices. Lacan's notion of subjectivity has its basis precisely in the social, rather than in a personal history or a specific set of discursive practices, and can therefore serve as an account of subjectivity within a broader framework of power and resistance in work organization.

I have suggested that we need to move beyond a conceptualization of resistance as wholly conscious, to also include unconscious aspects. It is perhaps more productive to conceive of resistance as something that escapes the organized aspects of subjectivity, as the failure of structuring processes to fully grasp subjectivities. Although language provides us with the signifiers, interrelationships and categories that we use to make sense of the world around, there is not simply a relationship of determination at work. Desire does not allow itself to be captured by language; it exists by virtue of it, but it aims at exactly the excess of the structure of language. It is here that Lacan's work can prove to be illuminating for organization studies, namely in capturing this tension between structure, representation and the unrepresentable limit. Lacan's subject is divided between the unconscious and the conscious, and exists in nothing more than a split. It becomes the site on which desire deploys, a body that is organized by language and driven by momentary glimpses of enjoyment. At the same time, this subject fundamentally misrecognizes its embeddedness in language and its dependence on the Other, losing itself in Imaginary fantasies of a transcendental self. Through Lacan's conceptualization of this Imaginary unity and its deluding effect on the subject, we can begin to formulate a critique of the ways in which ideological fantasies are structured (see also Žižek, 1989, 1997). A critique of the functioning of collective ideological fantasies provides an impetus for political action.

In approaching Lacan, we can take our bearings from Deleuze and Guattari's critique in three ways. First, subjectivity should not be reduced to consciousness, personal narratives or individuals, but rather be seen as a trajectory of subjection and desire. Second, desire should be viewed as affirmative and productive, rather than tied to negativity and lack. Third, the determination of subjectivity by the Symbolic occurs first and foremost in social and economic relations of production, rather than in the family. Furthermore, we should take Butler's point that resistance must always occur from the confines of the term that has originally introduced the subjection. With these critical comments in mind, I will now turn to the work of Lacan.

## Chapter 4 A Lacanian approach to subjectivity

“No praxis is more oriented towards that which, at the heart of experience, is the kernel of the real than psycho-analysis.” (Lacan, 1977: 53)

### 4.1 Introduction

Lacan’s work proceeds from the clinical realm of psychoanalysis, but in the course of his seminars and writings he touches upon fields as diverse as literature, philosophy, linguistics, mathematics, topology, cybernetics and more. His work is, however, always pertinent to the question of what constitutes subjectivity, inside clinical practice and outside of it. As such, it has had an enormous influence on debates on what constitutes the human subject and how we can conceive of notions such as language, agency, determination, the Other, just to name a few. It has had an impact far beyond the psychoanalytical community. Many major French philosophers (poststructuralist or otherwise), such as Althusser, Derrida and Deleuze, have directly engaged with Lacan’s work. And it has resonated far beyond the confines of French academia, with an enduring influence in various disciplines of the social sciences and philosophy.

Most of Lacan’s work has come to us via his weekly seminars, given from 1953 to 1976. This seminar was attended at first mainly by an audience of psychoanalysts in training, but grew from the mid 1960s onwards into a larger format whereby the topics that Lacan addressed also started venturing far beyond the psychoanalytic debates of the time. Many of the seminars have been transcribed, but there remains a considerable amount of unpublished material. This makes it often difficult to orient oneself in the Lacanian theoretical corpus. In addition to the seminar, there is a collection of writing by Lacan called the *Ecrits*, and a number of articles and interviews.

One thing that has severely hindered the spread and take-up of Lacan’s ideas has been his very particular style. Much has been said on this, and I do not wish to reiterate the debate here, because of the focus of this work and the limited space available. However, it will suffice to say that I believe that Lacan has made an intentional choice to convey his thoughts in this particular way. His style is performative of his assertions that language gives rise to overdetermined meaning (Fink, 1995, 1997, 2004; Tavor Bannet, 1989), and that if one is to understand this in a clinical context (or elsewhere, for that matter), one should read and listen very carefully and not simply take words at face value. The style that characterizes his spoken and written word must therefore be seen as indicative of the audience he was addressing, for which such a careful understanding of language is very important. In his own words: “the style is the man [...] one addresses” (2006a: 3).

This chapter will proceed as follows. First, I will provide some introductory remarks on Lacan’s notion of subjectivity. This will serve as a first move to examine its premises on their own terms. Second, I will discuss the subject as situated between being and thinking. I briefly touched on this in chapter 1, but will link it more closely to Lacan’s work in this section. Third, I will elaborate on the three registers that make up the Lacanian subject. Fourth, I will focus more specifically on the register of the Symbolic, which stands for the structuring influence that language holds for the subject. Here, I will also go into the mechanisms that characterize the process of signification, metaphor and metonymy, as well as the particular



signifying position taken up by the quilting point or *point de capiton*. Fifth, I will discuss the Imaginary register of subjectivity, which describes the conscious dimension of subjectivity. Here, I will discuss the concept of secondary identification as conceptualized by Lacan, as well as the notion of the “mirror stage” or primary identification. Sixth, I will provide a number of different glosses on the final register of subjectivity, the Real. Here, I will use the concept of *jouissance*, the Graph of Desire and Lacan’s excursions into topology as a means of exploring this register.

## 4.2 Concerning subjectivity

It is particularly difficult to conceive of a logical starting point for a discussion on Lacan’s notion of the subject, since all of its aspects are highly interrelated to each other, and one would have a hard time introducing any of them without a thorough discussion of many others. As we will later see, this aspect of his theory mirrors some of the characteristics of his conceptualization on subjectivity itself. But I would venture to say that one way of introducing it would be by means of two statements.

First, *subjectivity is heavily dependent on language*. For Lacan, the subject only takes shape at the moment that the child is introduced into language. This is a process, rather than a temporally distinct moment, and it is absolutely crucial to any understanding of being. As Lacan so often repeats, “the unconscious is structured like a language”:

“The unconscious is constituted by the effects of speech on the subject, it is the dimension in which the subject is determined in the development of the effects of speech, consequently the unconscious is structured like a language.” (Lacan, 1977: 149)

The subject gains access to being by means of the instating of the signifier. At the same time, this instating of the signifier implies an irrevocable loss for the subject, of a wholeness that will haunt it throughout its existence. The loss gives rise to desire. But still, it is tied to language, or more precisely, the failure of language to fully capture the subject’s experience.

Second, *subjectivity functions at different levels at the same time*. These levels are called registers within Lacan’s theoretical model, and are closely related to one another. Language is a complex structure for Lacan, and one that functions in various ways at the same time. As such, it impacts the subjects in various different modes. Roughly speaking, language functions in three ways. It fulfills an unconscious role for the subject, and as such it gives an underlying system of categories to the subject that allows it to come into being. In addition to this, it works on a more conscious level, and gives meaning to the speech and acts of the subject. And third, language gives rise to a desire for something more, something that cannot be caught in words. These three facets are conceptualized by Lacan in the form of three registers, to which I will return at length in this thesis. This forms the basic structure of the Lacanian subject. And it will also be the most basic heuristic of my exploration of subjectivity in Publica.

### 4.3 Between being and thought

Before discussing the registers in more detail, I will devote some attention to how the basic assumptions of Lacan's notion of subjectivity differ from more commonly seen ideas about human nature. In the social sciences, one will often encounter the self either implicitly or explicitly in the form of the Cartesian subject. That is, a subject that finds its existence within the coincidence of thinking with being: I think, therefore I am. This preoccupation to the conscious side of subjectivity, and moreover, the total reduction of subjectivity to consciousness, has led large areas of social studies to cast a blind eye towards how particular forms of consciousness come into being (Foucault, 1970, 1977) and how factors outside of consciousness influence thought and action. As we have seen in chapter 3, Parker (2003) has argued that social psychology has created and supported a view of subjectivity that is modeled mainly on a fit with the existing social order, and that promotes a role for psychology mainly in terms of adapting the subject to this social order.

In contrast, the Lacanian notion of subjectivity emphasizes the disjunction between the unconscious and consciousness. Lacan follows Freud in giving the unconscious centre stage. In fact, Lacan's re-reading of Freud is aimed at correcting the underplayed role of the unconscious in the dominant psychoanalytic debates of his time, and emphasizing the fundamental unconscious processes in the human mind at the expense of the ego.

In this respect, it can be instructive here to draw out a few passages from Lacan's (2006g) article "The instance of the letter in the unconscious, or reason since Freud", written in 1957. In this piece, Lacan outlines some of his ideas on the nature of subjectivity and the role that language plays in it. He also discusses his ideas in relation to the Cartesian cogito, which is especially interesting here. In relation to Descartes' "I think, therefore I am", Lacan posits *his* version of the subject: "I am thinking where I am not, therefore I am where I am not thinking" (2006g: 430). Lacan posits here a relation between being and thinking that is the exact opposition of the Cartesian subject. Whereas the Cartesian cogito is contained in the coinciding of thought with being, the Lacanian conception is everything but this coincidence. Elsewhere, Lacan states that "[t]he discordance between knowledge and being is my subject" (1998: 120), as well as his play on the Cartesian formula that I have already discussed in chapter 1. In addition to the passages I provide here, I am indebted to the insightful interpretation offered by Fink (1995) of Lacan's formulation of the being/thinking divide.

Lacan attributes the term "thought" to the unconscious. This connection is based on the character of the unconscious. The unconscious exists in the form of language, as we have seen above, and for Lacan, language has a formal, objective character. It operates in the form of certain movements, and these movements in turn give rise to meaning. This meaning, however, is always partial, incomplete and insufficient. The movements of language itself produce the only fundamental structure that the subject has. This is why knowledge, for Lacan, must inevitably be knowledge in the unconscious. Anything outside of it is just an effect of an underlying, fundamental force.

"Being" is the word that Lacan attributes to the conscious dimension of subjectivity. But, he hastens to add, this is always already "false being". The conscious self is a type of construct that aims to rationalize the processes of the unconscious that define us. The unconscious

engenders the meaning that a subject experiences, and the identity that the subject forms. This conscious dimension is always subordinate to the unconscious dimension.

The dimension of being and thinking are radically split from each other. The subject can never find itself in both planes at once. That is to say, it can never *experience* both planes at once. It may find itself caught up in the conscious realm most of the time, and a fragment of the unconscious may endeavor into its discourse. But it can never situate itself there. The unconscious stays mostly hidden to the subject, while at the same time producing and driving its speech and actions unbeknownst to it.

“This signifying game of metaphor and metonymy – up to and including its active tip that “cotton-pins” my desire to a refusal of the signifier or to a lack of being, and links my fate to the question of my destiny – this game is played, in its inexorable subtlety, until the match is over, where I am not, because I cannot situate myself there.” (Lacan, 2006g: 430)

What Lacan discusses in this passage, is that the game of signification and desire is played where the subject “is not”, that is, at the position of the unconscious. Language is in the same place as not-being. He thus equates the subject of the unconscious with a lack of being in this passage. The rhetorical tropes that he refers to in the beginning of the passage, metonymy and metaphor, are the main mechanisms of the process of (unconscious) signification. I will discuss those in more detail below. What Lacan emphasizes here is the emptiness of subjectivity. The subject can be thought of as a sort of empty placeholder, a gap of sorts. It is an in-between of language.

We can think of the subject as vacillating between the regions of being and thinking, between the conscious and the unconscious, with the caveat that there is no coincidence possible between the two. Instead, there is a space of lack where neither language (of the unconscious) nor the ego (of consciousness) is present.

Lacan makes a connection to this lack in the passage above: he links language to desire. Desire is beyond language – it arises at the point where the signifier is refused, as Lacan puts it here. In the realm of language and the beyond of language, the subject cannot “situate [it]self”, that is, it has no knowledge of itself. It is not transparent to itself. Elsewhere, Lacan restates this as follows: “[d]esidero is the Freudian cogito” (1977: 154). The Lacanian subject is split between being and thinking, and exists within that split. The pure lack of that split brings forth desire. “Desidero”, I desire, can be understood as the place wherein the Lacanian subject exists. It is the place between the realms of being and thinking, in the gap where the subject is separated from the Other. In order to clarify the notions of the conscious and the unconscious, and how language figures in all this, I will now turn to a discussion of the Lacanian registers of subjectivity.

#### **4.4 The registers of subjectivity: Symbolic, Imaginary, Real**

It must be clear by now that Lacan’s concept of language is far removed from that prevalent in much of the social sciences, where it appears in the guise of a self-evident, transparent tool of communication. Language has strong constitutive, structuring effects on both social

relations and the subjects within them. Language exists as an unconscious condition for the subject to come into being. The subject, in Lacan's view, is not contained within itself. While some readers of Freud have interpreted his notion of the unconscious as belonging to the subject, there can be no such misunderstanding of the Lacanian subject. The subject is invaded by language. Language is an overpowering force for the subject, and it does many things at the same time. It allows the subject to come into the social realm, and take its place in social relations. After all, for Lacan, as for Lévi-Strauss, social relations are structured through linguistic codes largely unbeknownst to the people subject to them.

As such an unconscious structure, language can be understood as speaking through the subject. When the subject speaks, it draws on the signifiers and relations that are provided to it by language. But its control of language itself is never whole, and as such the words spoken are "overdetermined", implying that the subject in some sense always lets on more than it intends to reveal.

At the same time, language has a fundamentally altering effect on the nature of subjectivity. From the moment it is instated, the subject's relation to itself changes. Whereas before, it was an undifferentiated mass of sensations, after the entry into language it can only conceive of itself in relation of what is Other to it. This process has a distorting role on the subject's original demands. The feeling of being removed from itself, that it is lacking something, will haunt it. This feeling of lack creates a desire for wholeness. Lacan formulates these various roles of language in terms of the three registers of subjectivity. These are the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real.

The Symbolic can be thought of as the unconscious dimension of subjectivity. This is language in its constitutive, structuring form. The Symbolic register of subjectivity is the most important one for Lacan (although he became more interested in the Real in his later work). The Symbolic order, as it is often called, consists of language as a set of signifiers, ever shifting and intersecting. This functions as a kind of layer below the everyday consciousness of the subject, occasionally breaking through in the subject's discourse, but mainly unknown to it. However, this situation is what Lacan would call a "misrecognition" of the nature of subjectivity. This is because the subject is totally dependent upon the Symbolic order – the very words that the subject uses to express its demands, desires and intentions are all derivative of the Symbolic order. The Symbolic order is the full set of signifiers, and Lacan always places emphasis upon the formative characteristics of language in how we come to be subjects. However, as subjects we do not see ourselves as constructed by language (and therein lies our misrecognition), and we view expressions of the unconscious as something Other to us, something we do not take responsibility for.

The Real, on the other hand, represents the unsymbolized part of the subject. It is the remainder that has resisted the incorporation into language. The register of the Real is one of the main defining elements of Lacan's thought. It is at the centre of many of his concepts and it is thus of utmost importance. The term is misleading in the sense that it has nothing to do with reality. It refers to the point at which language is exhausted, the point at which it fails to account for the experience of the subject. It is the result of the introduction of the subject into language, or what Lacan would call the process of "alienation". The Real is what remains of the subject before the division from the Symbolic Other, and is bound up with desire and what Lacan calls *jouissance*, a very specific kind of enjoyment.

The Imaginary, finally, is the conscious register of the subject. It is the dimension in which the ego resides, and where identifications are located. The Imaginary, as the name suggests, is also bound up with the image, the visual. The subject's ego is an image of how the subject construes itself, so to speak. It is ensnared in a relation of narcissism with itself, in what Lacan calls the mirror stage. This mirror stage is the process by which the ego continually readjusts itself, and gives itself a (erroneous) status of autonomy. As the domain of the ego, the Imaginary must also be thought of as the possibility for the subject to relate to others like itself. That is, to alter egos. This means that the Imaginary is the site at which the subject (or rather, the subject's ego) compares itself against others and engages in rivalry. All these aspects of comparison, narcissism and rivalry are part of the Imaginary. Together they serve to prevent the subject from having to face the reality of how language underpins subjectivity, and how the subject has little more than its status of emptiness.

The registers are bound together in a way which makes it impossible to say where the subject begins or ends; Lacan spends a lot of his time presenting various topologies in order to demonstrate how the interior/exterior dichotomy is inadequate to provide an account of how subjectivity relates to what is Other to it. Instead, argues Lacan, what we experience as intimate in our subjectivity is something that actually profoundly alien to us. He coins the neologism "extimacy" to refer to this phenomenon. I will return to this issue in section 4.7 when I will provide some examples of how Lacan topologizes the registers of subjectivity.

#### **4.5 The Symbolic order**

In this section, I will discuss some of the major concepts of the Symbolic order. This order is the unconscious dimension of subjectivity, the paramount area for subjectivity in Lacan's view. In the Symbolic register, language operates as a continuous stream of signifiers that the subject mobilizes into speech at various times. The Symbolic order provides the structure of language through which the subject can come to exist in the social world. The Symbolic order, at the same time, is imbued with the socio-cultural codes, demands and expectations that the subject must come to embrace as part of that social world. In this, Lacan takes seriously the contribution of Lévi-Strauss, who has done a great deal of research of how social life is structured by unspoken codes, often even unknown to subjects themselves. Lacan emphasizes even more strongly that these codes and demands are embodied within the system of language. As it enters within language, the subject must come to define itself in relation to the whole of rules and expectations, and it is here that Lacan speaks of the Symbolic order as an *Other*. This Other functions as the guarantor of the subject being; the subject is always in need of validation by this superior Other.

This equivalence that Lacan makes between the Other and the Symbolic order is one of many of such equivalences found in his work. It serves to emphasize that language is not only imbued with far-reaching structuring properties in the social realm, but that it will also continue to feel somehow alien to the subject. Under the sway of a largely unconscious structuring force, the subject often finds itself taken by surprise by the workings of language. In the next section, I will consider some of the major operations of this Symbolic register.

4.5.1 *The signifier and the signified*

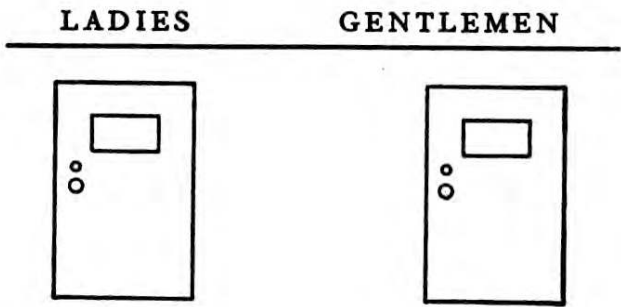
The Symbolic order is what Lacan would call the “treasure trove” of signifiers. It is the locus of language. Before we can explore the workings of the Symbolic order and how it determines the subject, it is important to take a closer look at how Lacan views language as such. For this, it is important to consider how Lacan interprets the conceptualization of the sign by Saussure. Lacan provides a reading of Saussure’s concept of the sign that diverges substantially from the more accepted reading offered by modern linguistics. Rather than viewing the sign as a coherent entity in which the signifier and the signified are linked to each other, Lacan holds that they are radically separated from each other. The sign, for Lacan, does not exist but is instead to be thought of as follows:

S  
s

This is Lacanian shorthand for “the primordial position of the signifier and the signified as distinct orders initially separated by a barrier resisting signification” (2006g: 415). In short, it means that the signifier is barred from the signified. The signifier is the most important entity in language. The signified, or meaning, is a function of the signifier for Lacan. Whereas for Saussure, the sign consists of the signifier and the signified in a coupled form, this connection is entirely broken here. The signifier gives rise to a signified that is inescapably incomplete (2006g: 418).

This supremacy of the signifier is consequently elucidated by means of an example. Above the bar, we see the signifiers “Ladies” and “Gentlemen”. Below it, Lacan places the signified exactly like he did in the algorithm above. Here, we see the picture of two doors.

Figure 1 Lacan’s example of the doors, taken from Lacan (2006g: 416).



Presumably, one would be able to read one of the signifiers on each of the doors. Lacan invokes the signified of the toilet by combining the opposed signifiers “Ladies” and “Gentlemen” with the two doors. By doing this, he demonstrates that there is no inherent connection between a signifier and its signified. The signified is rather produced by the opposition between the signifiers. The juxtaposition of the signifiers on the doors produces

the meaning of “private stall offered Western man for the satisfaction of his natural needs when away from home” (2006g: 417).

This example is indicative of the nature of the signifying process. Signifiers are the primary material of the unconscious, of the Symbolic order. The Symbolic order can be understood as a constantly moving network of signifiers, that underlies the conscious sensations of the subject. Meaning is completely decoupled from this by Lacan. Meaning arises out the position that signifiers take with regard to each other in a particular utterance. Rather than meaning as belonging to a certain signifier, it is more appropriately thought of as an *effect* of the signifying chain.

This also means that we have to think of the signifier and the signified as existing in different orders; they are, after all, barred from each other. Whenever the subject ventures to speak, signifiers assemble in a particular way. The structure of speech is given by the Symbolic order in this moment: the signifiers that the subject draws on are all part of the Symbolic order. The way in which these signifiers appear with regard to each other, their constellation, becomes defining for what meaning effect is created in the utterance. Meaning, as we will see, is always part and parcel of the Imaginary register. In order to understand more thoroughly how meaning is created within the context of speech, it is important to consider Lacan’s conceptualization of the signifying process: by means of his use of the terms “metonymy” and “metaphor”.

#### *4.5.2 Metaphor, metonymy and the nature of signification*

The mechanisms of metaphor and metonymy represent the basic operations of the unconscious. The system of signifiers assembles into speech by means of these two concepts. Lacan takes his cue from the linguist Roman Jakobson here, but gives them a slightly different spin.

Lacan describes the Symbolic order here as a chain of signifiers, in order to draw out the movements within it. We have seen above that this chain of signifiers is radically barred from the signified, from meaning as it becomes knowable to the conscious subject. By means of these two concepts of metonymy and metaphor, Lacan draws out his view on how signification occurs within language. As a psychoanalyst, he has a special interest in speech, so he directly relates these procedures to operations that would occur in real-time when one would be speaking.

Metonymy is the basic procedure of the chain of signifiers. It can be understood as the relation of words to words within this chain. It is the process of referral by which signifiers come to position themselves in relation to other signifiers in the context of an utterance. As I have already mentioned above, the position of a signifier in relation to the whole set of signifiers available to the subject, is the determining factor in the meaning effect that is created for that utterance. This meaning effect is ultimately contingent, and only produced in a particular format by means of the specific make-up of a statement. Lacan refers to the procedure of metonymy as “[o]ne thing [being] named by another that is its container, or its part, or that is connected to it.” (1993: 221). In this description he emphasizes the process of referral that occurs when a signifier is brought into play: the signifier is compared to the entire system of language, be they synonyms, related terms, signifiers that refer to a part of the

original signifier, the signifiers of a group that the original signifier belongs to, and so on. This process of comparison constitutes the metonymical movement of the Symbolic.

Lacan holds that there is an “incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier” (2006g: 419). We can understand this by means of the bar between the signifier and the signified: a certain signifier cannot be fixed to any particular signified underneath it, but instead is only awarded a meaning effect in relation to the signifiers in a statement. This relational positioning is what constitutes the operation of metonymy in the Lacanian view of language. It is exactly the same as what we saw in the example of the doors that I discussed above: the signification that is created (“toilet meant for members of the female gender”, for instance) is entirely dependent upon the opposition between the plaques found on the doors. Had there been only one door with a plaque, meaning would not have appeared as self-evident to us. And furthermore, the signifier “Ladies” here has no inherent connection to our concept of what a toilet is. Hence, the oppositional position of the signifiers structures the produced signification.

In a sentence that is uttered by the subject, the words that are used are uncertain of their signifying effects until the sentence is *punctuated*. This moment of punctuation gives the words their final position with regard to each other, and as a group of signifiers with relation to the whole chain of possible signifiers (the Symbolic order). After this moment of punctuation, the sentence is provided with a signification in a *retroactive* manner.

Here, Lacan describes the notion of retroactive signification in terms of the grammatical tense of the future anterior:

“I identify myself in language, but only by losing myself in it as an object. What is realized in my history is neither the past definite as what was, since it is no more, nor even the perfect as what has been in what I am, but the future anterior as what I will have been, given what I am in the process of becoming.” (Lacan, 2006e: 247)

Signification only works in a backwards motion – once something has been completed, only then does it take on its signification for the subject’s history. Whereas the subject is always in the process of becoming, its present experience can only take on meaning by means of significations that are to come. Its past experience only becomes known to the subject by means of the incorporation of this into real-time significations. This also means that all past significations are subject to retroactive re-inscriptions.

This is a key element of the Lacanian conceptualization of signifying effect. The meaning will appear to the subject as inevitably belonging to the signifiers in the statement, as if it had always belonged to them, and this obscures the very contingency of meaning in relation to the signifier. The signifiers in a sentence could in fact have taken on any number of meanings, depending on the context of their use. These signifieds “slide under” the signifier, until the moment of punctuation draws out one dominant signified for that signifier. However, the signifieds that are repressed in this procedure, will remain present to some extent in the meaning effect that is created. Just as a note played on a stringed instrument will have barely audible resonating notes from other strings, sympathetically ringing out as the note resounds, the repressed signifieds will still be silently present within the meaning ascribed to the statement. Meaning, in this sense, is always “overdetermined”.



Metaphor represents the other major procedure of language. Unlike metonymy, metaphor implies that the bar between the signifier and the signified is crossed. Metaphor occurs when one signifier comes to take the place of another signifier. It substitutes the other signifier in the metonymical chain of signifiers. However, this leaves the other signifier somewhat intact, creating a new effect of signification. Lacan describes it as follows:

“Metaphor’s creative spark does not spring forth from the juxtaposition of two images, that is, of two equally actualized signifiers. It flashes between two signifiers, one of which has replaced the other by taking the other’s place in the signifying chain, the occulted signifier remaining present by virtue of its (metonymic) connection to the rest of the chain.” (Lacan, 2006g: 422)

This effect of metaphor does succeed in crossing the bar, since a completely new signification is produced, something that presently not possible. The repressed, “occulted” signifier comes to inhabit the meaning effect of the new signifier. The two signifiers become convoluted and a whole new meaning effect is the result. “Meaning has ripped the signifier from its lexical connections” (1993: 218), as Lacan puts it. He argues that this is often the case in poetic uses of the signifier, that it brings forth a “poetic spark” (2006g: 423) and that “where metaphor ceases poetry ceases also” (Lacan, 1993: 218).

In one of his last seminars (2005, also see 1998: 37), Lacan traces the movements of the signifier in the writing of James Joyce and here he runs into many examples of metaphor. For instance, one may consider the example of “how bootifull and truetowife of her” (Joyce, 1975: 11). Here we can see how two (or more) signifiers come to take the place of another signifier while still retaining the signifying characteristics of the former placeholder. However, there is a great deal of new meaning injected into these signifiers and they evoke various other words, which come to color the meaning effects created. This is what Lacan would refer to as the operation of metaphor in the signifier.

The operations of metonymy and metaphor are central to understanding how speech (and therefore discourse) results in a signifying process. In chapter 5, I will elaborate on how these two mechanisms can be understood in the analysis of interview transcripts. Metonymy describes how signifiers relate to each other in an endless process of referral, thereby positioning themselves in relation to each other. One could say that metonymy affords to a signifier the possibility to mark it off from everything it is not. By means of this procedure, meaning effects can result for the Imaginary. Metaphor, on the other hand, allows a signifier to temporarily take the place of another signifier, thereby taking on characteristics of both. One signifier crosses the bar here, and inhabits the space of the signified for the other signifier. In this move, a “poetic spark” occurs that gives rise to a whole new meaning.

We have seen above how meaning forms a sliding field under the chain of signifiers. However, this sliding is not infinite: it is bounded by means of certain immovable points in the Symbolic chain of signifiers. These points are called “*points de capiton*”.

#### 4.5.3 *Point de capiton*

The *point de capiton* must be understood as a fixed signifier, with very particular effects. This signifier affects a whole group of signifiers, a field of signification, by inhibiting the sliding of

the signified under them. It limits meaning to shift around under that chain of signifiers. The metaphor that Lacan draws on here, is that of a particular stitch that furniture makers use, to tie the fabric of the upholstery. In the same way this stitch ties down the fabric around it, so the *point de capiton* ties down the signifiers grouped around to a field of meaning, keeping them in place. Originally coined as “anchoring point” in the first English translation of Lacan’s work by Alan Sheridan, *point de capiton* has later been more faithfully translated as “button tie” (Fink, 2004) and “quilting point” (Grigg in Lacan, 1993). I will use the latter translation here. Although Fink’s translation is technically more accurate, I find “quilting point” more instructive and less prone to misunderstanding. In addition to this, this translation has also found more resonance in the field of Lacanian studies.

The quilting point provides the signification belonging to a chain of signifiers with a particular gloss. This happens in the same way that signification takes place, in a retroactive way. When the quilting point is instated, signifiers become part of a constellation with bounded significations. The quilting point itself is fixed and empty in its meaning, but it regroups signifiers in such a way that it affects the meaning they can evoke to a speaker. The group of signifiers becomes re-signified in the process of this “quilting”, in a retroactive swoop. They are given a specific status within that field of signification, a gloss that emanates from the quilting point. The coherence of the signifying effects is guaranteed by the move by which this signifier pins down the signifying chain.

To give it another spin, one could say that the signifiers that are affected by the quilting point are in fact grouped around this point. For Lacan, the meaning of the quilting signifier is empty. The quilting point is central in the process of referral, from signifier to signifier. It becomes the central point of reference by means which signifiers gain their position relative to the entire signifying field. However, when one looks hard enough at the central signifier of that field, the quilting point, it returns an empty value. Its meaning is fickle and ever-changing.

Lacan first formulates the quilting point in his discussion of psychosis and its treatment (Lacan, 2006h, 1993). Essentially, he argues that psychosis occurs when the paternal function is not instated into subjectivity at an early age. In this stage, the subject is overcome by the Other, or invaded by the Other, to paraphrase Lacan. At this point, the moment of separation should take place. The paternal function should be instated in a metaphorical manner. The subject is eager at this point to be and do anything the Other requires, being overwhelmed by language and the Other’s presence. It tries to situate itself completely at the level of the Other’s desire. What should occur at this point, is a substitution of the subject, in this space of the Other’s desire, with the Name of the Father (sometimes referred to as the Father’s No). This signifier comes to take the place of the Other’s desire for the subject, lodging it out of place. This is the process of separation, one of the three logical moments in the development of subjectivity (to which I will return at length in chapter 7). This is also the Lacanian reformulation of the Oedipus complex: the subject is relegated from the (m)Other’s desire by the Father’s intervention. The main difference here is that for Lacan, all this happens on the level of the signifier. The actual events and roles played in the process can be embodied in a myriad of ways, not limited to an idealized nuclear family in any way.

The quilting point is thus the concept that Lacan uses to describe the fixing of the Symbolic order to the subject. Without this point of stabilization, the subject has no place within the Symbolic and cannot locate itself there. It needs a stable signifier to which it can address its

desire, and by means of which it can relate to the Other's desire, the quilting point represents the instatement of this signifier, it opens the space and removes the subject from there. It substitutes the subject. Therefore, it is a metaphorical procedure in this sense.

The metaphorical nature of the quilting point implies that the signifier that instates itself will carry with certain traces of the signifier that was dislodged in the process. The new quilting point comes to stand in for an older, previously central signifier. However, these traces will retroactively become re-inscribed in the order of the new quilting.

#### 4.5.4 *The Symbolic as Other*

Lacan puts his conceptualization of the Symbolic order through a great number of costume changes, in the sense that he seeks to emphasize different aspects of it at various times. It takes on the role of the signifier when Lacan seeks to stress its primarily structuring capabilities, simultaneously devoid of meaning. Similarly, he describes it as a stream of unconscious thought that may penetrate speech at various points. Here, the Symbolic order has connotations of a force, unbeknownst to the subject, but nonetheless largely determining its behaviour. This may for instance be seen in the detailed comments Lacan makes on the nature of the language of the unconscious (2006b: 30-48; 1988b: 191-194).

The concept of the Other should be understood as another one of these glosses on the Symbolic order, although it is perhaps the most important one. It highlights the subject's relation to the unconscious and in doing so, the process of *being subject* to the Symbolic order comes to the fore. The subject comes into being in the process of language acquisition, but this does not diminish its experience that language is in some sense always alien to it. The subject is overwhelmed by the Symbolic order. In relation to the Symbolic Other, the subject always has to cede, it can never face it full-on. As we shall see below, the Imaginary subject creates a simplified image of the Symbolic Other, in order to be able to respond to it. This simplified image becomes an object to which the conscious subject directs its attention.

As the Symbolic provides the subject with the language it draws on in order to speak, the Symbolic is always already present within the subject's discourse. But the unconscious thought, the logic contained within the signifying chain, can sometimes interrupt the subject's flow of speech. The interconnections between the signifiers, along with the processes of metonymy and metaphor, allow for the assembling of speech, but at the same time they may convey meanings beyond the intentions of the subject. The unconscious speaks through the subject, in this sense. This unconscious carries in it a certain knowledge, a certain form of memory. This is embodied within the signifying chain – by means of the things it has made impossible for itself (in the opposition of signifiers), the signifiers it has equated (which causes one to resound in the other), and so on. Signification goes beyond mechanical compilations of signifiers with set meaning, and it is here that the overdetermination of meaning comes into play. This is the nexus of the Symbolic and the Imaginary.

#### 4.6 The Imaginary

The Imaginary concerns the conscious rather than the unconscious of subjectivity. This is where processes such as the mirror stage and identification take place. The Imaginary is the dimension that Lacan equates with the ego, the conscious agency in subjectivity that falsely

attributes speech to itself. However, the subject that speaks is still the subject of the unconscious. The Imaginary register is mainly a misrecognition of where the locus of speech lies. When the ego convinces itself it is what speaks, it is in fact the unconscious that speaks above and beyond it. As we shall see, Lacan's discussion of the Imaginary is heavily bound up with the debates in psychoanalysis at the time. Although he states that the Imaginary is an inherent and necessary part of human subjectivity, he feels it is also its most misleading aspect. It leads the conscious subject to overlook the more important unconscious aspects of being a subject.

In the following, I will discuss the main concepts of the Imaginary register. These include the mirror stage, the ideal ego, the ego and the ego ideal. I will also touch upon the concept of identification, in both its primary and its secondary form. But before I start discussing these concepts, I will make some more general remarks on the Imaginary register.

#### 4.6.1 *Misrecognition: the nature of the Imaginary*

“The unconscious is the unknown subject of the ego, [in] that it is misrecognised by the ego, which is *der Kern unseres Wesen* [core of our being]” (Lacan, 1988b: 43, emphasis in original)

Lacan devotes a lot of attention to the Imaginary in his earlier work, most notably in Seminar II, which is strictly on the functioning of the ego. In this section, I will review the main concepts here in order to develop my subsequent analysis of the empirical case. Much of what Lacan says about the ego and thus about the Imaginary is bound up with his critique of the dominant currents of psychoanalysis (and psychology) of the time. He reacts strongly against what he refers to as “ego psychology”; an Anglo-Saxon current in psychoanalytic thinking that places strong emphasis on the ego as the most important force in clinical analysis. The key proponents of ego psychology argue that the strengthening of the analysand's ego is the best way to overcome the symptom. This way, the analysand can learn to control the impulses emanating from the unconscious. The analysand should model her ego on that of the analyst, in order to make it stronger and more resilient.

Lacan abhors this approach and feels that it perverts the original ideas of Freud. For Lacan, the focus on the unconscious is the defining characteristic of psychoanalysis. It is this idea that first came to Freud in the analysis of his patients and he spent the rest of his career elaborating its mechanisms. In his reinterpretation of Freudian thought, Lacan is adamant that analysis should focus its efforts on the unconscious, and not on the level of the ego. In his own formulation of the Symbolic/Real/Imaginary triad, he places the basis of subjectivity in the Symbolic register. The signifier provides the structure of subjectivity, or in his own oft-repeated words, “the unconscious is structured like a language”. The Imaginary is always secondary to the Symbolic register. It provides the subject with consciousness but does not have a significant role in the operation of subjectivity. Rather, Lacan argues, it serves the function of masking the reality of the dominance of the unconscious (Symbolic) realm to the subject itself.

In the analytic situation, the analyst must always be cautious of occupying an Imaginary position. The key to getting the subject to access unconscious processes and resolve the symptom, is to situate oneself as analyst in the position of the Symbolic Other. By taking the

place of a Symbolic Other, the analyst hopes to arouse the desire of the analysand (see Fink, 1997: 28-41). This can restore the working of desire and re-arrange the chain of signification for the subject (which is was previously distorted by the symptom). By avoiding the role of expert and “subject supposed to know”, the analyst manages to divert potential Imaginary thwarting of the cure. The subject will try to relate to the analyst on the level of meaning, to ask for advice, to pry into the personal affairs of the analyst, to compare itself with the analyst, etc. These tendencies belong to the Imaginary, which is full of aggression, rationalization, posturing and conflict with others.

In seminars I and II, Lacan sketches (and re-interprets from Freud) the main concepts of the Imaginary, and he explains how they work. He demonstrates how meaning is always radically overdetermined and how it always expresses more than the conscious subject intends to reveal, thereby breaking up the ego’s isolation and misrecognition. The identity constructions of the subject are continually disrupted by the workings of the Symbolic order, and one need but pay close attention to the movements of language in speech to come to this conclusion. In this spirit, Lacan gives the following definition of the ego:

“The ego is a means of the speech addressed to you from the subject’s unconscious, a weapon for resisting its recognition; it is fragmented when it conveys speech and whole when it serves not to hear it.” (2006f: 355)

Lacan raises quite a few issues in this passage. Let’s consider some of them. The subject, when speaking, proceeds from the confines of the ego, its rational agent. However, as the ego ventures to make a statement, it is really the unconscious that is speaking. Any intentions from which speech has proceeded, are superseded by the meaning evoked by the utterances. The meaning that is created within the process of signification is radically overdetermined. The unconscious provides not only the structures through which speech becomes possible (that is, the Symbolic network of signifiers), but it also gives rise to the meaning that speech conveys to the addressee. It is in this sense that Lacan here call the ego “fragmented”: it fails in its intentions, as speech ends up revealing more than it was meant to.

But the ego has another very peculiar role for the subject in this process: it protects the subject from seeing the machinations of signification. The empty nature of language is hidden from it by the ego, resulting in *méconnaissance*, the misrecognition of the nature of the subject in relation to language. In this role, the ego is “whole”. In Lacan’s view, the ego is self-obsessed, and closed off to the realm of unconscious thought. This finds its expression, among other things, in the concept of the bar between meaning and the signifier. Meaning is not accessible in language, but is a product of language as I have discussed above. The ego is captivated in a relation with its mirror image, its specular other. This is where narcissism springs from, the ego’s perception that it is wholly conscious and in control.

At the same time, this relation of the ego to an alter ego gives rise to aggressiveness, as Lacan argues in his essay on the mirror stage (2006c, also see 2006d). The flipside to narcissism is aggressiveness, and that finds its expression in the social by means of the rivalrous behaviour the subject may display to others. The subject relates to other subjects on the level of the Imaginary, and on this plane the other is not that of the Symbolic, of the signifier. The Symbolic Other is, as we have, imbued with authority, acting as a guarantor of the subject’s

being as it speaks. The Imaginary other, and the other hand, is an other like one self. It is another ego, against which the subject's ego measures itself up.

#### 4.6.2 *The mirror stage and primary identification*

The mirror stage is generally considered to be Lacan's most famous theoretical advance, but at the same time it has often been misinterpreted or overstressed within his theory of subjectivity. It can be thought of as both a developmental phase in early childhood, as an Imaginary process, which is to some extent always part of subjectivity. It is the first cut of subjectivity, in the sense that it is the process by which the child comes to look upon itself as a discrete entity for the first time, as marked off from other beings. It can be thought of as a kind of proto-subjectivity, that precedes the child's coming into being as a subject in language, "it prefigures its alienating destination" (Lacan, 2006b: 76).

The mirror stage consists in the moment whereby the child first views itself. This means that it gains an image of itself for the first time. The classic example that Lacan gives is the child seeing itself in the mirror, although it has been argued that it might just as easily occur within the gaze of a parent (Fink, 1997). The interplay between the conception of an identity and its mirror image gives rise to feelings of selfhood and control. The movements of the mirror image correspond to the child movements, and it comes to look upon itself as *that*, as the reflected other. This fleeting experience of being some-one is the moment at which the Imaginary is set into motion. The child comes to view itself as the self-contained image in the mirror, and by means of this it develops an identity for itself.

The mirror stage can be thought of as a dialectical process. This dialectic is between the child as a collection of impulses and impressions, that does not yet perceive itself as such, and an image which bundles these sensations together and makes them into a coherent whole by means of a specular mirror image.

"The entire dialectic that I have given to you as an example under the name of the mirror stage is based on the relation between, on the one hand, a certain level of tendencies which are experienced – let us say, for the moment, at a certain point in life – as disconnected, discordant, in pieces – and there's always something of that that remains – and on the other hand, a unity with which it is merged and paired. It is in this unity that the subject for the first time knows himself as unity, but as alienated, virtual unity." (Lacan, 1988b: 50)

The mirror stage posits the twin entities of the ego and ideal ego. These two form the relation central to the mirror stage. They are brought into existence by the child's encounter with the mirror. The specular image translates itself into the ideal ego, an alter ego. The ego needs the constant support of the ideal ego, to prop it up, to give a kind of consistency. This relation provides the illusion of a constant, relatively unchanging core or personality. This is one of the many illusions that the Imaginary throws up, and it creates the ego into an object that fulfills the Imaginary function for the subject (1988b: 44). The ego is a fledgling thing, an object caught in the "fascination" with the mirror image (1988b: 50) that would be without direction and "paralytic" without its specular opposite. The consistency of the ego, it seems, lies within the relation of the mirror stage, and not within the ego itself.

“This jubilant assumption of this mirror-image by the little man, at the *infans* stage, still sunk in his motor incapacity and nursing dependence, would seem to exhibit in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the *I* is precipitated in a primordial form, before it is objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject.” (Lacan, 2006c: 76)

Lacan here argues that the mirror stage represents a construction of the ego before identification and Symbolic alienation. The Symbolic or secondary identification, which Lacan refers to here, takes place between the ego and the ego ideal. The Symbolic concerns the way in which the signifier is established into subjectivity, but in the mirror stage, one is on the level of the image, not language. The image of one’s “self” is “jubilant[ly] assum[ed]”, and this creates a sense of identity.

While it marks the first instance in which the ego instates itself, the relevance of the mirror stage extends beyond early childhood. It is not only formative for subjectivity; it is part of the constant operation of Imaginary processes for the subject. Every instance in which one confronts oneself with regard to an other, the relationship between the ego and the ideal ego is in play. It is the specular reflection of one’s actions in someone else’s judgment (whether true or imagined) that gives the subject a sense of self. In the approval or disapproval of an other (an Imaginary other), the subject experiences itself as a whole and coherent person. The interplay between the subject’s ego and its mirror image produces this reification.

Lacan defines the ego as caught between two roles. First, it functions as the “nucleus of consciousness”, that makes sense of the “lived experience of the passions”. Second, it works as something that opposes the subject’s realization within the unconscious, thus giving rise to the fundamental misrecognition of the Imaginary (Lacan, 2006c: 89). I will return to this problematic below, in the section on “False Being”.

The ideal ego, also referred to by Lacan as the “semblable”, retains its function of propping up the ego after early childhood. This relation is constitutive of the subject’s experience of itself as a conscious being, as a cogito. The interplay between this “semblable” and the ego can be a productive way of looking at various everyday interactions (which I will explore in greater depth in chapter 6). While the ego is more profoundly shaped by the ego ideal in processes of Symbolic identification, as I will discuss below, the ego derives its stability from its relations of assurance with the ideal ego.

#### 4.6.3 *The ego ideal and secondary identification*

The ego ideal emerges in the Imaginary when the Other is added to the fold. The ego, in the support it gets from its relation to the ideal ego, comes into its own as a stable entity. At this point, the Other makes itself felt to the conscious subject. There is something outside the relation between ego and semblable, something that commands the attention of the ego. The parent that holds the child up to the mirror, or in whose eyes the child comes to perceive recognition, is that Other in the first instance. The child learns to realize that the Other desires things of it, a desire that it wants to live up to.

This is where the ego ideal comes into being. It is the gaze of the Other, in its most elementary form. The conscious subject can never fully know what it is the Other wants from

it; it infers this from the signals it receives from the Other. In early childhood, this Other is embodied by (one of the) parents. Later in life, the Other comes to stand for an assemblage of social pressures and demands, still infused with one's upbringing but much more complex in its structure. The ego ideal becomes an internalization of this gaze of the Other. The Imaginary subject creates an image of what the Symbolic Other wants from it, what it desires, and this constitutes the ego ideal. It is an ideal, in the sense that the ego models itself on this example. The ego ideal can thus be understood as a point of identification for the subject, a connection point between the Imaginary and the Symbolic. This is the point where the subject identifies with a particular simplification, a certain representation of the Symbolic. The Symbolic order structures the subject's place in the social, and provides the signifiers by which it cannot help to define itself. The Imaginary, in its quest to rationalize the working of the Symbolic, models itself on the demands of the Symbolic Other. This is another way of understanding the basic misrecognition that the Imaginary engenders.

The Imaginary internalizes this gaze of the Other. Lacan speaks of introjection in this regard. This introjected image comes to stand for an inspirational ideal for the subject, as it models its ego on the ideal's images. Lacan dubs it a "guide beyond the imaginary, on the level of the symbolic plane" (1988a: 141). As the ego is shaped and reshaped in the process of identification, it comes to take on certain aspects of the ego ideal. These tenets of the ego ideal come to figure as deep-seated assumptions the Imaginary subject has of itself.

In addition to this shaping function within the process of identification, the ego ideal also has a function as point of reflection. Lacan writes in his essay "Subversion of the subject and the dialectic of desire in the Freudian unconscious" (2006k) that the mirror relation between ego and ideal ego is observable by means of the ego ideal. The ego ideal becomes a kind of vantage point from which the conscious subject can look upon itself. It is a kind of crystallization of the Other's ideals for the subject. Fink refers to it as "a point outside of the ego from which one observes and evaluates one's own ego as a whole or totality, just as one's parent observes or evaluates it" (2004: 117). In a sense, the gaze of the Other gives rise to a constant re-appraisal of the ego on the basis of the introjected ideals. The question that plagues the ego is this: "What does the Other want from me?"

#### *4.6.4 False being*

Based on the discussion provided above of the mechanisms of the mirror stage (Imaginary primary identification) and the ego ideal (Symbolic secondary identification), we can draw a more detailed picture of how the illusion of being is maintained in the ego, however temporary it may be.

The mirror stage locks the ego into a relation of correspondence with its ideal ego, its semblable. This functions as form of reassurance, in the sense that it creates an effect by means of which the ego looks upon itself as a whole, a something self-contained. Seeing itself reflected in the reactions of Imaginary others, the ego constructs an image of itself that it holds for a truthful representation of itself. The Imaginary subject is susceptible to glances, remarks and other forms of interactions with others and constructs on the basis of them what it believes to be a truth about its selfhood. Lacan maintains that this is a form of narcissism, and that this self-love is at the basis of the rivalry and aggression that are predominant in the Imaginary register.



The ego ideal takes the illusory nature of the Imaginary one step closer to the Symbolic order: it reflects a distilled image of the Symbolic chain toward the ego. At the same time, this creates the rationalization for the ego that the Symbolic network resides in the conscious domain. Rather than perceiving subjectivity as derivative of the Symbolic, the ego creates the impression for itself that it is in full command of language and that it has chosen its own pathways in the Symbolic. This obscures the way in which the Imaginary identity is modeled on aspects of the Symbolic.

In the following passage from one of Lacan's writings, we can see him addressing exactly this process of mystification of the Symbolic.

"Thus, if man comes to think about the symbolic order, it is because he is first caught in it in his being. The illusion that he has formed this order through his consciousness stems from the fact that it is through the pathway of a specific gap in his imaginary relationship with his semblable that he has been able to enter into this order as a subject. But he has only been able to make this entrance by passing through the radical defile of speech, a genetic moment we have seen in a child's game, but which, in its complete form, is reproduced each time the subject addresses the Other as absolute, that is, as the Other who can annul him himself, just as he can act accordingly with the Other, that is, by making himself into an object in order to deceive the Other." (Lacan, 2006b: 40)

Here, Lacan addresses first the sensation of false being that I just discussed. The "illusion that he has formed this [Symbolic] order through his consciousness" is exactly the misrecognition that marks the Imaginary register. Not only does the subject misrecognise its own dependence upon the Symbolic order, it even allows the ego to subvert its perception to such an extent that the order of the signifier is seen to stem from consciousness itself. Against this subversion by the ego, Lacan places the phenomenon ("the radical defile") of speech. Speech will always succeed in making one's utterances *subject* to the Symbolic order – this is the register in which it has to occur or pass through, by virtue of the language it draws on. So each and every time, one is made subject to the Symbolic upon speaking.

Speech implies an address to the Other, for Lacan. Every attempt to utter something means that the Other emerges, and that the subject addresses a demand for validation at the Other. The Symbolic Other embodies the social and cultural rules and expectation that guide subjectivity, and every speech act inevitably occurs within the materiality of language. That language embodies this Law, these rules and expectations. It is in this sense that speech is always addressed at the "Other as absolute" and all encompassing. At the same time, Lacan says here, the ego can "annul" the Other by denying him, by not acknowledging the fundamental role of the Symbolic order. This is the dimension of misrecognition again, the refusal of the ego to account for the structuring aspects of the chain of signifiers.

The inherent role of the ego, thus, for Lacan, is to cover over the lack that is the subject, displaced as it is by the Symbolic order: "For this ego, distinguished first for the imaginary inertias it concentrates against the message of the unconscious, operates only by covering over the displacement the subject is with a resistance that is essential to discourse as such" (2006g: 433). The Imaginary fulfills the role of protecting the ego from the structuring properties of

the signifier. It works to create the “cogito ergo sum” of the Cartesian subject, and by doing this, it gives rise to the *méconnaissance* of the unconscious as constitutive of subjectivity.

But this illusory sense of self is continually interrupted by the machinations of the Symbolic order. At this stage, it may be useful to cite Lacan on the ego: “From the moment I think about myself [*moi*], no destruction of me [*moi*] is possible. But when I say I, not only is destruction possible, at every instant there is creation” (Lacan, 1988b: 292). In this very rich passage, Lacan highlights (as he does continuously in Seminar II) the radical break between the Imaginary and the Symbolic. It should be noted that “*moi*” is the French word for “me” as well as “ego”. The first sentence refers to the Imaginary as self-contained – it succeeds in giving the subject the illusion that it is a whole person, intentional in its actions and speech. The Imaginary cannot call itself into question, because its main reason for being there in the first place is to hide the truth of the letter from the subject.

But the interruption in the Imaginary comes every time the subject starts to speak, of itself, and of others. Here, the Symbolic dimension of subjectivity will shine through in slips, in saying more than one wishes to reveal, more than one even knew, in the specific words uttered. This is not accidental, but it belongs to the structuring nature of the signifier. In these interruptions, the contingent nature of meaning breaks through and it is in this sense that Lacan speaks of “destruction” and “creation”. It is the hegemony of the Imaginary in the subject’s consciousness that is destroyed, and re-assembled. There is also creation in the knowledge the subject may gain of itself. This creation and destruction is inextricably part of the Imaginary. This iterative construction of the Imaginary will play a large role in any formulation of an ethics based on a Lacanian view of discourse and subjectivity. In his later work, Lacan indicates that the subject can eventually go beyond the totalizing effects of the Imaginary “misrecognition”. I return to this in chapter 7.

## 4.7 The Real

In his essay on “The Freudian Thing”, Lacan illustrates the dominant interpretation of the ego, as opposed to his own, by means of the Freudian formulation “Wo es war, soll ich werden” (2006f: 347). This formulation has been translated as “Where the id was, there ego shall be”. Lacan deplores this translation and feels it misrepresents Freud’s work. He suggests that it is indicative of the way certain ego psychologists have selectively used Freud’s work to strengthen their own theoretical perspective. Lacan indicates that ego psychology has marginalized the role of the unconscious in psychoanalysis, and he sets out to rectify this bias in his own reading of this Freudian formulation.

He proposes to translate it as follows: “Where it was, it is my duty that I shall come into being”. Rather than suggesting that the unconscious become replaced by the ego (as the ego psychologists do), Lacan suggests that the subject must come into being in the place of the lost object. This lost object refers to the unity that the subject sacrificed to become integrated into the Symbolic order. This wholeness is something it can never fully recover – it is the lack at the very basis of its subjectivity. However, the subject must “subjectivize” this lack, and come to place oneself in the position where it embodies that lack. What emerges from this lack, is the desiring subject.

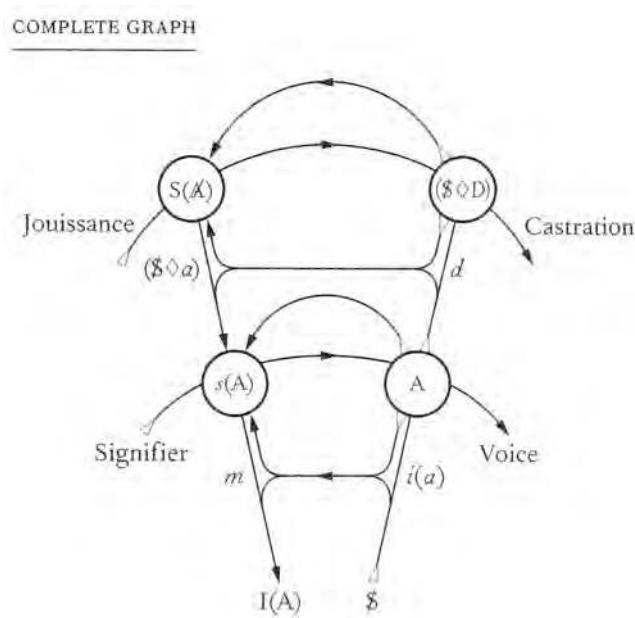
In order to shed more light on this point, I will now elaborate on the concept of desire, and its object, object *a*. I will explore these concepts by means of the Graph of Desire, an attempt Lacan made to model the dialectic of desire in relation to the registers of the Imaginary and the Symbolic.

4.7.1 *Desire*

The answer to the question “who is speaking?” (2006k: 677), the Graph of Desire is a map of the subject of the unconscious (see figure 2). It encompasses the subject of the signifier (Symbolic and Imaginary) and the subject of jouissance (Real). The bottom part of the graph plots the themes of the Symbolic and the Imaginary, referring to the processes of identification and signification.  $s(A)$  stands for meaning in this graph, and  $A$  is the Other, the full set of signifiers that speech draws upon. Therefore, the relation between  $s(A)$  and  $A$  is the signification process in speech. One can see the retroactive arrow of signification traveling from the chain of signifiers  $A$  to the meaning effect  $s(A)$ . This is the retroaction implied in signification, occurring after a statement is punctuated and meaning can assemble from the differential positions of the signifiers.

We can also see that there is a straight arrow from *barred S* (barred subject) to  $A$ . This can be read as the Symbolic relation, of the subject inhabited by the entire chain of signifiers. Out of this relation comes the impetus to bridge the gap between the subject and the Other, to cover over the lack of inherent meaning within the chain of signifiers of the Symbolic. The subject does this by means of the Imaginary.

Figure 2 The Graph of Desire, taken from Lacan (2006k: 692)



The mirror stage is mapped out below this axis of signification.  $m$  refers to the ego here, caught in a mirror relation with  $i(a)$ , the ideal ego. The Symbolic identification process is mapped in relation to  $I(A)$ , the ego ideal. The relation of (secondary) identification runs from *barred S*, the empty subject within the Symbolic order, through the speech relation and the creation of meaning ( $A$  to  $s(A)$ ), inflecting upon the ego ( $m$ ) down to the ego ideal  $I(A)$ . We can read this as the introjection and internalization of the image of the Symbolic, compiled from cumulative significations. The ego gains its directionality from the ego ideal (as seen in the arrow traveling down from  $m$  to  $I(A)$ ).

The ideal ego is therefore supported or propped up by the empty subject (*barred S*), that tries to cover over this traumatic lack of meaning, by filling it in with identifications. This can be understood in the following way. *Barred S* stands for the alienation of the subject, its radical emptiness in the face of language. It is nothing more than a placeholder within the Symbolic order, which embodies everything that is Other to it. The subject is divided from all other signifiers, and can only relate to itself as such, as divided. This emptiness, for Lacan, is something that the subject cannot face, that overwhelms it, traumatizes it, and is therefore relegated to the unconscious thoughts of the subject. This is where the impetus to fill in this emptiness comes from. The Imaginary functions as a temporary narrative by which the subject assigns itself the place of the one who is in control. But the upper graph demonstrates that this dynamic does not fully account for subjectivity.

This upper part of the graph refers to that which escapes the Symbolic and the Imaginary registers. The arrow that goes up from  $A$  designates the movement of desire ( $d$ ) beyond the confines of the signifier. This is what escapes the structural foundations of the Symbolic order. The subject is left with a remainder that resists signification. Somehow, language fails to fully capture the subject's experience and something escapes. The question comes up: what else is there? The question that Lacan places in between the two arrows emanating from  $A$ , the Other, is "*Che vuoi?*" What do you want?

Here, the Other as the Symbolic set of all signifiers, fails to fully account for the being of the subject. The subject encounters "a lack in the Other's very function as the treasure trove of signifiers" (2006k: 693). The subject itself has an empty place within this Symbolic order, and it seeks to give substance to this emptiness by means of the question of what the Other wants from her. One way to understand the Other's desire, is to regard it as the subject's willingness to conform to behaving in a socially desirable way, from the point of view of each subject. Every subject becomes socialized in particular ways in the course of its upbringing. This is the process by which the Symbolic Law is instated, as we have seen above. Furthermore, for Lacan this socialization is located within the acquisition of language. In order to come into being as a desiring subject, one must submit to the Symbolic. This induction into the Symbolic is dubbed "castration" here by Lacan, and with it goes a sacrifice of *jouissance*. Some of this *jouissance* is later reclaimed by the subject in the satisfaction it obtains from desire: "[c]astration means that *jouissance* has to be refused in order to be attained on the inverse scale of the Law of desire" (2006k: 700).

The subject's introduction into the Symbolic has left it with a loss of unity, the lack as we have seen it above. This lack gives rise to desire, a fundamental urge to obtain satisfaction. Desire springs from the gaps that the Symbolic Other leaves; the subject constantly seeks to supplement the lack in the Other, it wants to fulfill the Other's desire. This is the basic

Lacanian formulation “Man’s desire is the Other’s desire.” The split arrows indicate this equivalence between the subject’s desire and the Other’s desire for the subject.

The instatement of the paternal metaphor has ensured that the subject can never situate itself in the lack in the Other, the subject having been dislodged from it by the Name of the Father in a metaphorical substitution. The signifier that comes to embody the place of the lack in the Other is what Lacan call “object *a*”. Object *a* is the focal point of the subject’s desire. As a signifier, it grafts itself onto different surfaces and displaces itself continuously. It takes shape in various guises. Object *a* thus takes shape in natural objects and people that temporarily come to personify the lack in the Other. It holds out a promise to the subject, a promise of satisfaction and a rejoinder with the Other. It comes to stand in for a wholeness that will complete the subject. However, as we shall see, this promise is never completely fulfilled.

The subject can for instance become fascinated with another person. The idea of being close to this person becomes exciting; the subject believes that being together with the other person will prove to be completely satisfying. It is what it desires, what it seeks above all else. In Lacanian terms, the other person comes to stand in for the object *a*, they embody that lost object that promises a return to the mythical unity with the Other. However, upon the encounter with the object *a*, the promise is only met in part. The other person may be lacking that which the subject ascribed to her. In the trajectory of desire, satisfaction always falls short of the promise. This does not mean that satisfaction always disappoints: we can still gain enjoyment beyond our expectations, but not in the context of the relation of desire. This is because desire puts forward a specific promise of enjoyment, which dissipates with the displacement of the object *a*.

The subject’s relation to object *a* is structured in what Lacan refers to as *fantasy*, which is the relationship that “cannot be written” (1998: 120). The subject is fixed in its relation to the object *a*. Although the object displaces itself constantly, and can never be fixed by the subject, the subject’s attachment to the object remains constant. This is also what constitutes the Lacanian gaze – it can be seen as a screen upon which the subject sees itself reflected, but beyond which it also imagines the Real object (Copjec, 1994). This beyond, as we have seen, is desire. Desire functions at the heart of subjectivity as a continuous process of displacement of this gaze. The signifier of desire, object *a*, constantly grafts itself onto another surface. Jouissance, then, can be seen as what the subject *gets off on* when it encounters the object *a*.

#### 4.7.2 *Jouissance*

Jouissance is the Lacanian name for the enjoyment that the subject encounters in its continuing brush with object *a*. The subject’s desire to complete the Other, to fulfill the Other’s desire, is never successful. However, it obtains some kind of satisfaction in this encounter, and that satisfaction is jouissance.

The object that the subject has invested with its desire, inevitably turns out to be not exactly what the subject had hoped. Whereas before, the subject had recognized the signifier of the Other’s desire in a particular object, when the subject finally gets to enjoy that object, it does not yield the promised satisfaction. It fails to complete the Other. This disillusionment is described by Lacan in the following way: “‘That’s not it’ means that, in the desire of every demand, there is but the request for object *a*, for the object that could satisfy jouissance” (1998: 126), and that it is this “[t]hat’s not it” is the very cry by which the jouissance obtained

is distinguished from the jouissance expected” (1998: 111). This formulation of jouissance highlights its role as a side-product of the subject’s encounter with the Real. The promise of jouissance, that object *a* extends, is the promise of the One (1998: 6). The subject enters in a relationship of love with object *a*, and its promise of the One, the rejoinder with the Other (object *a* is, after all, the signifier of the Other’s desire). But it is not fulfilled. It falls short, and does not deliver upon the expectation of the subject. Rather, the desire of the subject becomes metonymically displaced and invested in a new incarnation of object *a*.

That is not to say that it is entirely pleasurable. It is tinged with both pain and pleasure, because it hits the traumatic core of subjectivity, the Real. The lack stands for the subject’s separation from the Other, and in this sense the subject is reminded of its dependence upon the Other for its being. When confronted with the gap that removes it from being desired by the Other, the subject is overcome with anxiety. A more language-focused reading of this would be that the subject will grapple at times with the inadequacy of signifiers to symbolize its experience.

Jouissance, Lacan states, “is what serves no purpose” (1998: 3). This expression emphasizes how enjoyment transcends the plane of the Symbolic. Desire is always to some extent subservient to the Symbolic order; it goes there where the Symbolic does not cover it. It defines itself in opposition to the Symbolic Law. Jouissance, on the other hand, has no such restrictions. It simply emerges when the subject encounters the Real.

Jouissance is particularly prevalent in speech. As Lacan states, “where it speaks, it enjoys” (1998: 115). As the subject speaks, it draws on all registers at once. The Symbolic provides the material of speech, by supplying the very signifiers that make up the utterance. The ego directs speech by means of an intended meaning, but as the statement resolves, the signification is produced. This signification subverts the intended meaning of the Imaginary subject, by playing on alternate meaning, by means of slips, slurs, metaphorical allusions, and all sorts of other tricks. Speech reveals an unconscious dimension of thought, at work on the level of the Symbolic order. But speech also hits on the Real: the subject may stumble onto non-signifying elements in its speech. Or alternatively, it may find itself unable to express certain sentiments in language. Or perhaps the speech circles around some traumatic fissure that becomes over-coded, surrounded by signifiers that aim to symbolize it. This notion of a non-signifiable element within the Symbolic gives rise to the desire for something more. In trying to approximate this Real object, the subject enjoys.

#### *4.7.3 Topographies of subjectivity*

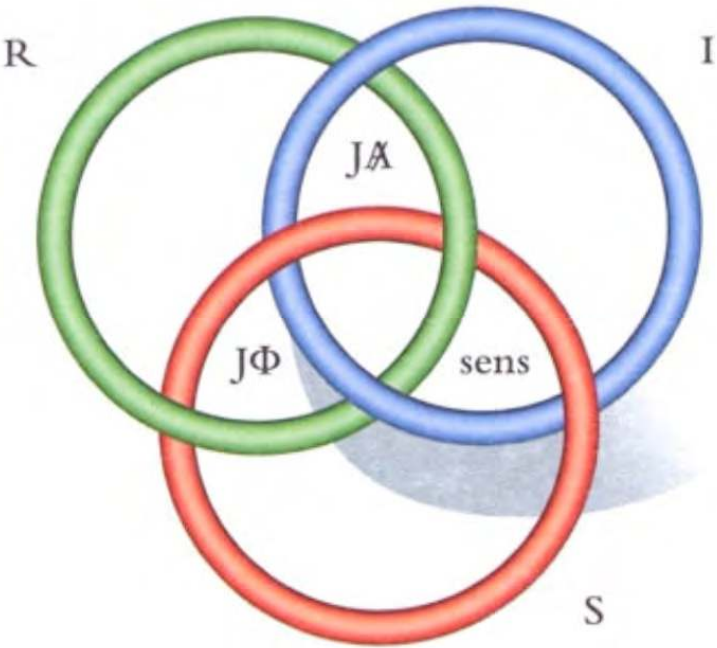
In his Seminar XX, Lacan discusses topology as a way of understanding the interrelations in subjectivity. He states here (as he has done before) that there can be no such thing as a metalanguage. Defined by the Symbolic network of signifiers as we are, we do not have access to a language that can exhaustively describe the workings of subjectivity.

As purveyors of knowledge, we are inadvertently caught in the tricks and movements of language itself. In the end, language is bound to fail to account for being. Language, as Lacan shows, is always coupled with desire and enjoyment. Lacan asks his audience, therefore, to “refuse what I am offering you, because that’s not it” (1998: 126). His theoretical expositions of subjectivity may be taken for truth by his audience, but he stresses that they are no more than an attempt to map the complicated workings of language and desire within the clinical

setting. The signifier of desire, object *a*, grafts itself onto any truth claim and holds out the promise of the Absolute, the One, to a subject. Lacan asks his audience to be mindful of the working of desire with regard to knowledge.

It is in this light that Lacan turns to topology in order to make a point about subjectivity. As I argued in chapter 1, there is no metalanguage: truth cannot be total, transcendental or universal. It is always partial and something inevitably escapes. It must always fail within the confines of the signifier. Topology, on the other hand, can make a point by means of *metaphorical* effect (1998: 127). It presents us with images that resonate with Lacan’s theoretical apparatus, and as such it provides a compelling picture.

Figure 3 The Borromean knot, taken from Lacan (2005: 55).



The Borromean knot is the most important example of this (figure 3). This knot is formed by means of three perfect rings of string. The ring of string is an apt symbol here because it is a representation of something that encloses a hole (Lacan, 1998: 127; Lacan, 2005: 83). This is a reference, of course, to the concept of lack that takes up such a central position in Lacan’s thought. Another aspect of the Borromean knot is that it forms a chain of rings. (Lacan shows how such a chain could be extended, to make this point more clearly.) In this sense, it is also a metaphor for the way in which the chain of signifiers is built up.

The three rings are connected, not in a knot that ties them down, but they are folded together in such a way that *when one ring is cut, the other two are set free*. The rings of string, representing the

three registers, relate to each other in this way. This point is the most important one to make about the Borromean knot; the registers are dependent on each other in order to complete subjectivity. If one fails, the structure of the subject falls apart. This has bearing, for instance, on Lacan's discussion of the clinical diagnosis of psychosis; the failure to instate the paternal function leads the psychotic to become barred from the Symbolic order, leaving them vulnerable to being invaded by the Real and the Imaginary (Lacan, 1993). What's more, the registers are not tied together at any point, but they are mutually dependent on each other nonetheless.

The Borromean knot is one attempt to map out certain aspects of Lacanian theory into topological form. In another example of topology, Lacan uses the figure of the Moebius strip to convey how the commonly posited dichotomy between inside and outside is insufficient in understanding his thinking of the subject. The Lacanian subject is radically "extimate": its most intimate being is derivative of the Symbolic Other. In the next chapter, I will explore this Symbolic Other and how it can be understood for subjectivity within Publica.



## Chapter 5 The Symbolic network of performance

“The point is for the subject to get to know what he’s saying, get to know who’s speaking from there, S, and to this end, to become aware of the essentially imaginary character of what is said in that place when the absolute transcendent Other is invoked, this Other to be found in language each time speech endeavours to be uttered.” (Lacan, 1988b: 268)

### 5.1 Introduction

A Lacanian conceptualization of the subject puts emphasis on the structuring role of language. Language can be thought of as a Symbolic order, a network of signifiers that embodies certain social norms, rules, and cultural expectations. Such a Symbolic order is shared across different subjects; it is something that they are in the literal sense subject to. Language comes to figure as the structure through which their demands are filtered. Language, for Lacan, is something that fixes, mortifies and distorts the original demand of the subject. From then on, it is inescapably part of subjectivity.

In this sense, language alienates the subject. But this alienation is fundamentally necessary for the subject’s entry into the social. Language provides the building blocks that make human life knowable to oneself and to others. Language is not at the subject’s disposal, as much as the subject is at the disposal of language, in the form of the Symbolic order. It is at one and the same time the necessary condition for subjectivity to emerge. The subject’s integration within language is what lays the basis for all forms of human activity and experience. After all, for Lacan the subject is that which is originally subverted by the system of the signifier (Lacan, 1977: 48).

Lacan’s conceptualization of the Symbolic order is far from a strictly linguistic one. It encompasses socio-cultural rules, norms and expectations which are closely tied to the signifiers that make up language. However, language as such has no direct relation to meaning of any kind. This connection is arbitrary, in the sense that it always shifts, slips or drops out from under the conscious experience of the subject (see also Saussure, 1973: 73). As I have argued in the previous chapter, the Symbolic order functions in a very particular way. It can be thought of as a network characterized by a continuous interplay of signifiers. In Lacan’s conceptualization, the signifier and the signified are radically separated from each other – they have but an arbitrary connection. Signifiers get their meaning not from some transcendental connection to the signified, but by virtue of their position in relation to the totality of signifiers. The relative positioning of a word to others will provide it (temporarily) with a specific meaning to the subject.

The Lacanian subject can therefore best be understood as *being spoken by* the Symbolic order. The Symbolic provides the necessary material for the subject to relate to itself and to others, but is by no means freely at the subject’s disposal. Language is an overwhelming presence for the subject, something that keeps it always once-removed from the Other. The signifiers that subjects use to account for their experiences are the material that structures their subjectivity, but in some sense these signifiers are alien and unwieldy. They never feel like one’s own words – they belong to the Other.

When we look at organization from a Lacanian perspective, we can conceive of it as a signifier that binds a field of signification to it, as I have argued in chapter 1. Here, we must understand the language of organization as something that appears as Other to the subject and therefore has a formative effect on subjectivity. This does not imply that subjectivity is caught in a strict relation of determination by this discursive Other. As we have seen in chapter 4, Lacan's subject can be understood as engendered by but not wholly subsumed by the Symbolic Other. The Symbolic order in the organization is the condition of possibility for the performing subject, and the machinations of this Symbolic order will largely determine how the meaning of work arises for the subject. At the same time, we should realize that this meaning is always unstable and tentative, because of the radical *bar* between the signifier and the signified. In this chapter, I will draw out the most salient language of performance in an attempt to map the Symbolic network of performance. I will do this by drawing out the most relevant signifiers in the speech of respondents on the topic of performance management at Publica. I will analyse these by using Lacan's main concepts associated with the Symbolic, such as the bar between the signifier and the signified, metaphor and metonymy and the quilting point.

On the basis of four weighted criteria, I have selected 13 signifiers from the interview accounts that play a central role in the discourse of performance in Publica. After carefully analyzing all instances in which they are used in the interviews, I describe these signifiers in terms of their position within the signifying network. This allows me to trace the particular significations that are being produced, by the interplay of the signifiers, within the ongoing signification of performance. These separate significations that are associated with the key performance signifiers will provide insight into the rules and norms that come to figure as a part of subjectivity in Publica, as well as allowing for an exploration of the lived experience of employees within this context. At the end of this chapter, the most important aspects of the shared language of performance in Publica will have been made clear. In addition to this, I hope that the reader will also have gotten insight into the mechanisms that cause this discourse of performance to reproduce itself on the level of subjectivity. However, it must be kept in mind that the significations that I present are not totalizing in nature. They are *dominant* significations that win out over alternative meanings in the signifying process. This is a crucial point. When I discuss the notions of ethics and politics in relation to this account of subjectivity in Publica (chapter 7), I will insist that resistance must be located in a reclaiming of the diversity in the signification process. Presently, we see a situation in which specific identifications work to foreclose the signification of performance. Therefore, the dominant significations that I will discuss are indicative of this foreclosure. In chapter 6, I will go into more detail with respect to the identifications that are prominent in Publica.

This chapter will be structured in the following way. First, I will present the criteria that have been the basis for selecting 13 key signifiers of performance (section 5.2). In this section, I will link back to my earlier discussion of the literature on subjectivity, power and resistance in organization studies in chapter 3, as well as the case description that I provided in chapter 2. Second, I will present an analysis of the signifying effects of the key signifiers of performance (section 5.3). These signifying effects result from the metonymic interplay between signifiers in a particular statement, and by means of their differentiation from each other in the totality of signifiers (or what Lacan (2006k: 693) calls the "treasure trove" of signifiers). The types of signifying effects particular to each key signifier will be illustrated by means of fragments from interview accounts. Third, I will further pursue the analysis of key performance signifiers by

grouping them into themes, and tracing their interplay throughout the interview accounts (section 5.4). In this section, the metonymic play of the signifiers will be analyzed from a higher aggregate level, by analyzing them as a group of signifiers rather than single signifiers. Finally, I will discuss the most important insights from the Symbolic analysis (section 5.5).

## 5.2 Key signifiers of performance management

As was previously discussed in chapter 2, Publica has seen large restructuring operations, following the government-wide change program “Different Government”. The practices associated with this program have led to changes in the discourse of work and performance within Publica. By way of the discourse of “Different Government”, the desirable worker is framed in the language of strategic management and HRM, yet the signification of these signifiers is far from straightforward. In the remainder of this paper, I will provide insight into how performance management discourse maps out onto the organizational context of Publica. This means to take seriously Lacan’s work on how signifiers work together to provides subjects with meaning: by means of the differential positions between the signifiers.

Meaning is contingent on signifiers in the Lacanian theoretical project. It arises within a register that is separate from that of the signifier, and is therefore radically separated from it. The signifier is of the order of the unconscious; it maneuvers in ways that are mostly unknown to the subject and that the subject cannot fully account for. This represents the basic structure of the unconscious for Lacan, as we have seen. It is structured like a language. The movements by which language ventures to be understood operate within this unknown Symbolic, and by means of these operations a temporary meaning becomes established. As the subject speaks, the words assemble in a particular way, and their relative position with regard to each other and to the total set of signifiers will determine what sense they take on within the context of the utterance.

The specific mechanisms of how meaning is created, hinge heavily on Lacan’s formulations of *metonymy* (referral) and *punctuation*. As I have argued in chapter 4, the concept of metonymy describes the process by which signifiers relate to each other. Signifiers relate to each other in a chain, whereby their relative position in the chain brackets off their possible meaning. This chain of signifiers is always in movement, and thus meaning can never be stable. The process of metonymy or referral describes the referring back of signifiers to the chain in order to establish their relative difference from the other signifiers. Punctuation is the process by which the meaning effect of a particular statement is created. The order, the intonation and the situation in which a statement becomes uttered, all grant the signifiers a more or less defined position relative to each other and hereby evoke meaning for the subject. In a sense, punctuation represents a contextualization of a set of signifiers grouped together in speech. While metaphor is also a very important aspect of signification (see Lacan, 2006k: 671-702, and Lacan, 1993: 214-230), it is of much less importance in the interview accounts than metonymy and the more micro-process of punctuation. As we have seen, it pertains to the “inhabiting” of one signifier by another, by which the meaning effect of that signifier becomes stuffed with the other signifier’s meaning. More generally, it can perhaps be said that when trying to map a local network of signification, one has to chart the metonymical movements of signifiers first before any transgressions of the “bar” between signifier and signified could

be observed. I have indicated in section 5.4 where processes of metaphor may be observed in the speech acts of subjects.

In table 3, I have listed all signifiers that were drawn from the interviews as “signifiers of performance”. These signifiers emerged as part of the narratives on performance that made up the interview accounts, and I have noted these down for further search using the Nvivo software. This allowed me to search out every occurrence of these signifiers. All these instances were coded.

*Table 3 List of all signifiers analyzed*

Adaptability  
Added value [*toegevoegde waarde*]  
Added value [*meerwaarde*]  
Affinity  
Analytical ability  
Assertiveness  
Assessment  
Challenge  
Chance  
Communication skills  
Competence  
Consequence  
To coordinate  
Courage  
Criteria  
To develop  
Effect  
To expect  
To evaluate  
Feedback  
To fit  
Flexibility  
To function  
To grow  
To hear back  
To hold accountable for  
Initiative  
Insight  
To invest  
To judge  
To learn  
To measure  
Motivation  
Motivation to perform  
Organizational sensitivity  
To organize

Personal meeting  
Personality  
Priority  
Product-minded  
To realize  
Resilience  
Responsibility  
Responsive  
To score  
Signal  
Skill  
To stimulate  
To take advantage of  
To take care of  
Visibility  
To work together  
To write  
To write down  
Work experience  
To yield

Out of this set of signifiers, I have made a smaller selection of *key performance signifiers*, to allow for a more detailed analysis. These key signifiers were selected on the basis of four criteria. These criteria are (1) frequency, (2) distribution, (3) contextual resonance and (4) literature-related resonance. The criteria are weighted equally.

The first two of these criteria are related to the occurrence of signifiers (within and across the interviews respectively, to be precise). They pertain only to the interview accounts. Accordingly, these criteria are quantifiable in terms of the number of coded passages. Table 4 provides an overview of the relevant information. The latter two criteria are interpretive in nature. They designate the resonance of a signifier with my experience as researcher in Publica on the one hand, and with my reading of the literature on organizational subjectivity on the other hand. I will explain each of the criteria in more detail below.

### 1. Frequency

The criterion of frequency refers to the number of times a signifier has occurred in total, in other words, how often it has been used in all interviews. Frequencies appear in Table 4, Column 2. The importance of the frequency of signifier use is directly related to Lacan's conceptualization of the process of metonymy. The frequency of use of a particular signifier can point to its centrality within a signifying network. As I have already discussed, the meaning of signifiers derives from their relative difference in a statement (or a series of statements). If a certain signifier is used often in the context of discussing performance at work, it means that its presence in an enunciation is necessary for the relative position of other signifiers. This makes it of comparatively greater importance than other signifiers,

because it is apparently instrumental in maintaining the coherence of this local signifying network. The criterion of frequency is closely related to that of distribution.

## 2. Distribution

The criterion of distribution refers to the number of interviews in which a particular signifier appears. Distributions appear in Table 4, column 3. Just as the frequency of a signifier occurring in speech might be a sign of its centrality in the chain of signification, so does the level of distribution of the signifier across interviews point to the extent to which it is shared among subjects. In other words, it denotes its importance within the Symbolic register of subjectivity. Inasmuch as a signifier is shared between statements by different interviewees, it has a stronger shared basis within the Symbolic register of subjectivity within Publica.

## 3. Resonance with the discursive context of Publica

This criterion describes the extent to which a signifier came up in the contextual data I have collected in my research activities within Publica. By contextual data, I mean the conversational interviews I conducted, the speeches and meetings I attended (and often recorded), and organizational documents I managed to procure. Signifiers that were abundant in the organizational reports, and speeches by senior officials in and around Publica (ministers, secretary-general and directors), and were also found across the interviews in sufficient frequency and distribution, have been taken into consideration for the list of key signifiers. “To work together”, used by many respondents, is an important example of this: a signifier that was highly central to organizational reports and memos, as well as a speech by the secretary-general. Additionally, instances where respondents use signifiers that play on prominent contextual metaphors were of interest. An example of this is the use of the metaphor of the market for organizational relationships, such as in the signifier “to deliver”.

## 4. Resonance with previous studies

This criterion describes the extent to which a particular signifier, or variations thereof, has been prominent in previous research on subjectivity, discourse and control in organizations. In Chapter 3, I have outlined the literature in organization studies that this research touches upon and speaks to. Much of this work concerns issues of language and power in organizations, with a special concern for the ways in which particular forms of subjectivity are constructed through discursive practices. Two sub-fields in this critical literature stand out in particular. The research on enterprise culture (DuGay & Salaman, 1997), in particular, is interesting in the light of the case study under analysis in this study. The impact that the spreading of these discourses has had in the public sector in particular, in the UK and elsewhere, makes it salient to the present concerns with subjectivity and performance in the Dutch public sector. Examples of this are signifiers such as “opportunity”, “challenge”, “investment”, that can be seen as similar to the language described by various commentators under enterprise culture. Another field that is of interest to the selection of key performance signifiers is that of critical HRM. As Keegan and Boselie (2006) argue, and the work of

Townley (1994), Keenoy (1997, 1999) and Francis (2005) among others demonstrates, HRM discourses have the potential to construct particular images, identities and forms of subjectivity in ways that privilege managerial interests and are detrimental to the position of employees in the employment relationship. From my description of the change discourses in Publica, it should be apparent that these changes are not specific to just this organization or even to the Netherlands, but that they are part of widespread changes to the organization of work in society.

*Table 4 Key signifiers and their occurrence*

Key Signifiers	Frequency	(Paragraphs coded)	Distribution
To develop	89	64	21
To improve	79	59	22
Responsibility	75	51	20
To work together	65	48	24
To function	53	41	20
To start/go to work on	42	40	16
Feedback	39	29	16
To take care of	35	30	17
To deliver	35	31	18
Initiative	31	27	10
To encourage	30	22	14
To yield	26	22	12
To organize	13	13	11

In table 4, as noted, I have listed the key signifiers that have been the basis of this study and that have been selected on the basis of the criteria specified above. I have put the barrier at a frequency of 10 and a distribution of 10. This is a hermeneutical threshold, based on my reading of the interviews supported by my observational and documentary analysis. Additionally, this minimum threshold was also informed by time constraints. I will now turn to a discussion of the signifying effects of these signifiers.

### **5.3 Analysis of the signification of key signifiers**

In this section, the emphasis will be on trying to trace the significations that are created within the textual interplay between signifiers in the interview accounts. In analyzing the interview accounts, I have followed a procedure by which all occurrences of a particular key signifier were examined in detail in its surrounding text. By surrounding text, I mean the complete utterance of the interviewee in which the signifier occurred, between two of my questions. Although this sometimes entailed wading through extensive narratives, which were seemingly



unrelated to the use of the signifier, I felt this necessary to safeguard the possibility of earlier signifiers influencing the signification of the signifier under evaluation. As I have discussed above, it is important to keep in mind here how the Lacanian concepts of metonymy and punctuation provide passages with signification. Metonymy describes how the signifiers are imbued with signifying effects by means of their place in a chain of signification. Punctuation finalizes meaning, because it represents the “cut” of discourse. The particular order of signifiers, and their beginning and ending, retroactively provides the statement with a signification.

I have chosen to present the signifiers and their signifying effects by means of textual *illustrations*; these are excerpts from the interviews in which the signifier is used in a manner typical for a particular signification. These illustrations provide exemplary instances of the use of the signifier in relation to a particular signification. I have refrained from providing elaborate introductions to the background, job description and hierarchical placement of the respondents in question. This is because my focus here is on the Symbolic Other: that which determines subjects collectively, and that is reflected as such in their speech. By drawing out the most salient signifiers to this collective signification of performance, we gain insight into the big Other that provides the subjects in question with the infrastructure, so to speak, of social relations. The Symbolic dimension of subjectivity precisely defies the particularities of each subject, since it is that which they share collectively. With regard to the Imaginary, on the other hand, these particularities are much more important. I will therefore focus more strongly on biographical descriptions when discussing Imaginary identification with performance in chapter 6.

In presenting the following illustrations of signifiers in use, I have pursued the strategy of highlighting the *convergence* of signification rather than the more discordant, non-signifying or overdetermined aspects of signification. I wish to present an overview here of how I have interpreted the signification of performance as it is constructed across the chain of signifiers. This allows us to gain insight into what signification is shared with regard to performance management in Publica, and how it may impact upon the (Imaginary) experience of subjects.

The question may be raised whether I, as a researcher, claim to have crossed the bar between signifiers and meaning here – I do not. In drawing the crucial signifiers of performance to the fore, I have tried to make clear their role in the signifying network. Rather than describing their meaning, I draw out their associations with other signifiers (since my explanations are invariably bound to the very structure that I am trying to describe). The following text should therefore be read as a set of linkages, of references between signifiers of performance to clarify the detailed function that these have in denoting aspects of “performance” in Publica.

Though the nature of signification cannot be transparent to me, as a subject who is implicated in it, I nevertheless present this analysis. As I have argued above, I have drawn implicitly and explicitly on my familiarity with the signifying network of Publica, and the meaning that it has evoked for me, to make my argument. It is my hope that even in its partiality and paradoxical nature, it draws out salient aspects of the movements of and interdependencies between the signifiers that make up the field of performance in Publica. To say anything at all about the constitutive role of language, one must attempt to cross the bar between the signifier and the signified. Hence, this analysis is in some sense caught up in a necessary failure to do so, but hopefully, a productive failure nonetheless. I will remind the reader of my earlier discussion of

this failure (chapter 1), in which I highlighted the importance to recast the relationship between subject and Other. It is therefore vital that we consider the signification of the subject's speech, which takes place in the locus of the Other.

The work in this chapter will lay the groundwork for my subsequent exploration of identification, and the way in which it is appropriated for organizational purposes (chapter 6). In section 5.4 (and even more so in chapter 6), I will take a closer look at many of the following signifiers and I will draw out the more idiosyncratic occurrences within the signification process, in keeping with Lacan's insistence on the importance of analyzing the twists and turns of speech.

### 5.3.1 On "to function"

The signifier "to function" is used by many of the interviewees as a way of referring to their performance at work. However, as we shall see in the discussion below, it is not always clear where the evaluation of this performance lies. The signifier is often preceded by the possessive adjective "my", indicating a kind of ownership and responsibility.

The signifier "function" has connotations of a mechanism, or a machine. The etymology of the verb "to function" lies in the field of engineering. It has its origins in the French verb "*fonctionner*", where it described the operation of subsystems in relation to each other. Only from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards was it used to refer to social processes (Philippa et al., 2003). It can therefore be understood as invoking a machine metaphor.

Such a metaphor of "functioning" as a part of a machine implies that the whole system is dependent on the smooth operation of all parts. If one does not "function", the working of the machine suffers. While one may well imagine a machine that can function without loss of performance when a particular part stops working (such as a clock with spare batteries), I suggest that this is not relevant to the creation of the meaning effect in this instance. This is because on the level of the *metaphor*, the analogy still holds. The possibility of an exception to a norm does not necessarily impede its working. In this sense, the term "functioning" is instrumental in holding down the normalization of performance; a level that must be attained by all employees in order to allow the machine, i.e. the organization, to run. Here is a typical example of how "to function" comes up in the interviews:

"Well I thought, uhm, I have only been there for a short while, but it was, when I got there, it was already agreed, when my functioning, even though I was only there for a short time, when that would be discussed, and whether or not that would happen in intervals, and how, and on what basis. And uhm, you just notice that that was embedded into the process for the regular employees, that such an appraisal interview would take place two times a year. So a lot of attention was given to that."  
(RuS: 233)

Here is another example of how "to function" comes up:

"Yes, I think you shape your traineeship to some extent, and that it really differs what you get out of it. Some people are more active, others are more passive. Yes, I think it really differs. Absolutely. And some people, you notice they have reflected a lot more on themselves, especially when it comes to intervention [group counseling

sessions], that is a bit like a mirror, you know. What kind of person am I, what makes me tick, how do I function, why do I do things the way I do them. You really notice a difference, some people are ahead of other people, or you notice that some people are more open to it than other people. I think there is a real difference between what people got from it. I mean everyone has grown, but you can see the difference, you know, some people have their career plans laid out and know where they are going, and some people are, well, this is what I'm doing now, and that is very different." (NN: 105)

What can be glimpsed in this fragment is the way in which the subject associates her "functioning" with the attributes of her self, of her Imaginary construct. The respondent describes her experiences with "intervision", a series of group employee counseling sessions given to trainees in Publica. She uses the word "mirror" to refer to the images the sessions have given her of her identity; these images concern the "kind of person I am" and "how [...] I function". There are some clear implications of the intervision sessions for the identity construction of the subject. The signifier "to function" refers her to her performance, and is mentioned along with signifiers describing her personality and her motivations. What is more, the signifiers "difference" and "to differ" come up repeatedly throughout the quote. The respondent creates a narrative that links her performance, personality and motivation to one particular group of trainees (the "different" trainees). She perceived this "difference" through the "mirror" image of the intervision sessions. She creates a dichotomy here between two types of people: people who "know where they are going", and people who do not. This foreshadows the role of this signifier "difference" in upholding the signification of performance in Publica. I will return to this in section 5.5.

What is important about the signifier "to function" is the ownership awarded to one's performance (by means of "my" preceding it) and the machine-metaphor it draws on. This later aspect connects one's "functioning" to the performance of the group, department or the organization. Within the current constellation of signification in Publica, "to function" frames the signification of performance in these particular terms. The centrality of this signifier as a means of referring to performance, makes possible its specific effects: the determination of individual performance by means of organizational performance, and the subject's identification with its own "functioning".

### 5.3.2 On "feedback"

Feedback is a signifier that is left untranslated, since it was used in English. The Dutch equivalent [*terugkoppeling*] was occasionally encountered, and its use is virtually identical. Feedback is a term that is related in all instances to the supervisor's perception of the subject's performance. In many cases it connects "appraisal", which can be seen as an extension of the disciplinary apparatus, to "development" or a related signifier, which is bound up with the self-image of the subject. Here is an example of it:

"Some feedback, is that what you mean? Yes, I talk..., I get along really well with my supervisor, it is a small department, there are three four of us here, we give each other feedback and keep each other on our toes. When he thinks, something is wrong then he will say so. Or rather, uhm... But up 'til now that hasn't happened very often. But I will ask for active feedback once in a while, there have been

conversations where I think, uhm, I don't know if this and this was the best thing to do, and I will just ask him." (ZR: 83)

In this excerpt, "feedback" is first equated with "keep[ing] each other on our toes", which can certainly be construed in a disciplinary sense. Here, it signifies a kind of peer review process. Later on in the fragment, the signifier "feedback" is more closely linked to the supervisor's role. The use seen here is quite typical for the other interviews, where the main signification of "feedback" references the supervisor's judgment.

### 5.3.3 On "to develop" and "development"

The verb "to develop" (and related signifiers such as "development") has very subtle variations in the signification it produces. In the interview accounts I have examined, it is used roughly in three ways. First, it appears as an expression of *personal growth*. The following excerpt is an example of such use:

"I always get the idea that uhm, I make sure that I do things I like. And I'm the kind of person who naturally, who always wants to develop herself, just like I imagine other people do. That makes you subconsciously, go through some kind of subconscious development. You kind of, you kind of control that. But not very consciously, because I don't envision very clearly yet, I want to go there, or there. Or I want to be in that spot, or I have to follow that course to get there." (FAt: 188)

"Development" is presented here as an ongoing movement that is more or less part of human nature; references to "other people" invoking universality in this case, and "naturally" suggesting normality. This meaning was encountered in some cases, and when it was, it was often indirectly linked to a discussion of personal career goals and prospects.

More prevalent was the second signification, which focused more on *formalized learning processes*.

"For two years I was very busy, you would think I have some kind of potential for being a good employee here, right? Because that is what the trainee program select us on, and for two years a lot of money is invested in me. I have to do all sorts of things, develop and develop, and think about what I want to do with my future, you know, and I really like that. And after that, when you're applying for jobs you notice that there not much available anywhere. I was lucky that this department was just being started up, but my department head told me once or twice before he didn't have any openings, so that wasn't much help." (IZ: 97)

Here, the respondent relates her trials with finding a job after finishing the trainee program in which she spent two years "develop[ing] and develop[ing]" herself. Because she draws on the signifier "invested" here, the statement is retroactively glossed with something of an institutional emphasis on the concept of "developing". It appears to be more closely related to the training courses that the trainees were taking during those two years, and the formal requirements they were tested and evaluated on, than to the signification that was described above. This type of signification could be seen in other instances with a variety of punctuations, and must therefore be seen as a relatively stable reference of the signifier "to develop".

The third and final signification associated with “to develop” comes in the form of *adaptation of the individual to organizational demands*, such as tasks or competences. Here is an example of such a case:

“Yes. Definitely, that’s no more than logical. There are simply requirements within Publica that you have to meet. Uhm, being a civil servant, you will be judged on that, on those competences, competences for the department and for your job. You will really be judged on that. How do you develop yourself on that?” (LO: 145)

In this fragment it is quite clear that “develop” does not carry the connotation of either personal growth or participation in formal trainings. It is more closely related to the competences on which the individual in question is evaluated in appraisal situations. This particular signification for the signifier “to develop” comes up quite often in the interview accounts. This signification is especially relevant with regard to performance management because “development” oftentimes becomes equated with living up to organizational requirements on the level of personal competences.

The signifier “to develop” or “development” is in this sense quite important to HRM discourse. It plays a central role in justifying HR practices, by connecting employee development to discretionary efforts, and thus to organizational outcomes. It is made into something desirable by this. Local symbolic constellations provide a more definitive signification to signifiers, by means of the aforementioned concept of metonymy. In the chain of signifiers of a particular context, the signifier “to develop” may carry with it certain very specific implications. In the case of Publica, personal “development”, as a socially desirable good, often becomes infused with the organizational “judg[ment]” as to what constitutes it.

In the first type of signification presented above, the more commonsensical association of the signifier results in the course of the signification process. It is a very basic notion of human learning and accomplishment. In the second signification, “development” comes to be equated with the training courses sanctioned by the organization. If one takes part in a course, one “develops” oneself. This already provides quite some justification for the subject’s Imaginary to become disciplined in line with particular forms of discourse, that are dominant in the organization. This is taken one step further in the third signification, where the subject equates the supervisor’s judgment of her shortcomings with the necessity of adapting her selfhood in specified ways.

The signifier “to develop” carries quite a lot of weight within the signification of performance, especially with regards to the articulation of the subject’s Imaginary. It signifies, in many instances, the justification for the subject’s attempts at re-authoring itself in response to organizational discipline.

#### 5.3.4 On “initiative”

“Initiative” is a formal competence in Publica, and it is one on which most respondents are evaluated. Much of the occurrence of this signifier is prompted by a general discussion of competences. It is therefore an important point of evaluation during the respondent’s performance appraisal.

But aside from the use of this signifier as a means of referring to the formal competence of “initiative” (as a part of the system of competences), it is also used as a means of discussing a form of agential behavior that respondents engage in. It appears in narratives that outline actions that the respondents have put into motion. In these cases, it is often collocated with verbs such “to take” and “to show” initiative. Here is an example:

“What I had to develop? Uhm, what I still had to learn, was to write in a civil-servant-kind of way and to take the initiative to do a bit of research yourself, because you do research things, but to go and think, okay, I can do that here as well.” (LO: 169)

Moreover, respondents often refer to a norm that suggests that such “initiative” is to be expected of all employees. Here is an example of such a passage:

“Yes I have made a draft of that. That’s really something you have to say yourself, I want to draft that now. Because when you are participating in Young Development, you have to make a personal development plan, but it is expected that you take the initiative, well, it is not the case that your manager says “we are going to do this”. But if it takes too long he will point out, you know, you have to do this.” (LO: 153)

“Initiative” is often used by participants while they are discussing development-related instruments such as personal development plans (PDP) or appraisal interviews. The example above makes clear how “initiative” seems to be expected of her, but the responsibility for undertaking the actions she refers to is hers. “Initiative” has a specific place in the chain of signifiers that address performance in Publica that imbues it with this signification. In this and other passages in the interview accounts, the signifier seems to denote a particular form of proactiveness, but one that is clearly expected of employees. There is an insistence on carrying out such prescribed actions on one’s own accord, within strict parameters provided by the organization, but framed in terms of individual choice and responsibility. This makes the signifier “initiative” important in the process of the self-disciplining of the subject, in ways similar to what Foucault (1986) refers to as technologies of the self. The subject is expected to take certain actions, display certain behaviours but despite the normative pressure to do so, the actions are retroactively signified as one’s own “initiative”.

The following passage provides a further illustration of how the signifier “initiative” can play a role in self-disciplining.

“Yes, uh, [hesitates], that was more about self-confidence, taking initiative yourself, uh, not avoiding things anymore. So really consciously thinking to yourself, just do it. I wanted to improve my writing skills at a certain point, My writing skills are really terrible, so at a certain point I really said, give it to me, I’ll do it. By not avoiding things anymore. By taking them on. For me, that is the way to deal with it. And also, asking for them. Asked me, my opinion, give me your opinion. That’s what I let my manager know, you know, ask me, or involve me in this. So that I will have to. Not avoiding things anymore that I found scary. For me that was, you know, like turning a switch and going to work on that.” (NN: 197)

In this fragment the respondent talks about improving her writing skills. Writing skills, for civil servants, are considered to be very important. The respondent places the signifier “initiative” alongside others like “not avoiding things anymore” and “self-confidence”. The latter signifier works as a synonym here, as a different way of expressing what she means by “initiative”. “Not avoiding things anymore”, repeated twice more in the excerpt, serves to introduce an antonym here: it posits the opposite of “initiative”. It marks off those who would “take initiative”, from those who would choose to avoid it. The repetition of the “avoiding” phrase clearly fulfils the role here of differentiating the subject’s Imaginary from something, from the people who are not eager to “take [things] on”. The subject aligns herself with other proactive, enterprising workers. The final sentence of this fragment draws on another signifier that is important in signifying this theme of enterprise: “going to work on that”.

#### 5.3.5 On “to go to work on”/ “start work on”

In the previous excerpt, the last sentence contains the signifier “to go to work on”, perhaps also to be translated as “to start work on”. This signifier is most commonly used to signify the occasion of starting a new job or task. However, upon inspection of the interview accounts, it also seems to have two other types of use. These are more interesting for the question of performance. In the instances where these significations are created, this signifier provides a very active and emphatic gloss to performance and the creation of particular forms of identity. The first signification works as a sort of *glorification of high performance* at work. The second signification refers to a *conscious re-shaping* of the Imaginary in response to hierarchical judgment. I will discuss these two significations below.

First, “going to work” appears when respondents are stressing the difficulty and size of a particular task at hand, but the signifier becomes a means of expressing that they have no problem with this. It has implicit undertones that are bold, muscular and somewhat macho. Subjects use it to highlight how they are going to take up some challenging task (or have done so in the past). This is an example of such a form of use:

“Uhm, and the project that I had worked on before this, that’s the [name] project. Uhm, a part of what we came up with there will be further developed by a group of people that I am part of at the moment. For me, that was a reason to say, I like this a lot, let’s say I could get a job here, and really start work on things that we came up with in an earlier stage, you know.” (IZ: 41)

The second signification that is prevalent in the interview accounts is that of “going to work on” particular competences or other aspects of the self, as the subject has construed them. This signifier is sometimes used in the context of performance appraisal interviews, and the outcomes for competence evaluations. Employees are often given specified schemas for improvement after these interviews, with regard to the competences on which they fall short. When “to go to work on” is used in such a context, most often the resulting signification in the process is that of a re-adjustment of the Imaginary construction of the subject in response to this disciplinary mechanism. The following quote is an example of such a situation in which “to go to work on” has connotations of “working” on the self.

“Uhm, well, you’re supposed to write down the three core competences of your job, and then uh, I will pick out three of them that I would like to improve. In the end I

will go to work on three of them, because otherwise it will be too much in too short a time span. Would you like to know which ones I will start work on?” (LC: 97)

This is a good example of a respondent talking about competences that have been singled out for improvement during an appraisal interview. She talks about “start[ing] work on them”, to the end of “improv[ing]” them. Another example of such use is this:

“Yes, there is a book of competences and I also started uhm, I also read that and talked about it with my mentor. And it has, you’ve got Publica competences, you’ve got them in front of you, for Young Development, for staff employees. Well, some of those overlapped. Looked at others like, is that right, and well, do I have to develop them further. And I thought to myself, are there any competences outside of this that I would like to have. So I started work on that in a very focused way.” (RuSnd: 113)

Here, a nice example can be seen of how “I started work on” retroactively frames the harsher aspects of competence management as a agential process. The respondent coins the phrase “do I have to develop them further”, which can be read as having a coercive element to it. Later, the signifier “to start work on” re-frames the signification in terms of individual choice once again.

“To start work on” or “to go to work on” adds an active dimension to development, or emphasizes the heroics of performing well. On the level of the signifier, it provides an intersection between employee development-related discourse, and the more utilitarian domain of strict performance management on output.

### 5.3.6 On “to encourage”

This signifier is used in nearly all instances in the context of employee development. The most typical use of it relates the role of the manager to the “personal development” of the respondent. It appears to describe the manager’s support for the subject’s attempts at self-development. In the interview accounts, the signifier “to encourage” is often combined with development concepts such as competences and PDPs. A good example is the following:

“The manager, who was there at the time, and there another manager now, who greatly valued this. Which competences have you been working on, what have you learned, can you give an example, you know. Situation, task, action, results. Uhm, what score would you give yourself, well I think you have learned on this aspect, I will score you higher on this, I think you should work on this, so, I will leave at three there. But I think you are improving. You know, to try and encourage me to take it up in that way.” (AO: 42)

This means that “to encourage” functions in relation to other signifiers to evoke a particular signification. It connects the manager’s pressure on employees to “work on” certain aspects of their performance, and the employees’ conceptualization of themselves in terms of competences, and how they can “improve” them. Additionally, from much of the discussion above it has become apparent that a proactive attitude in such self-development is expected, operating as a normative injunction. “To encourage” connects with the signifiers that ground these notions of self-development and an enterprising, proactive attitude. It becomes the



organizational validation of the subject's behavior, personified in the manager's "encouragement".

### 5.3.7 On "to yield"

This signifier "to yield" can be said to have three more or less distinct usages in the text. What unites them is that they all connect the signifier to a signification that references the production of a particular result. What they differ on is the *process* by which this happens and the perceived *intentionality* behind it.

The first signification that arises from the use of this signifier in relation to others is one that presents the process by which an object is "yielded" as something *inevitable and autonomous*. An example will help to demonstrate this use:

"Yes, there are of course all sorts of policy areas that the minister has emergency debates on. That alone, the incident as such, yields a tremendous amount of work. And consequently he has all sorts of compromises that require a lot of work too. And in such a crisis situation that has to happen really fast, so colleagues of mine will be walking around with beards and dark lines under their eyes." (EA: 198)

In this fragment, the signification that is constructed suggests that a workload *results from* the incident. This process appears as autonomous, disconnected from anyone's personal responsibility or actions. The produced workload is a natural outcome of the process. This particular connotation was most often seen in the text, but it markedly differs from two other functions that were also encountered.

The second signification arises as a less neutral, detached one. It describes the verb "to yield" as the outcome of a certain effort, in *instrumental* terms. It is on the basis of the outcome that the effort is undertaken, with the pay off as something that would ideally be maximized. Here is an example of how this particular use of "to yield" is put into play:

"No, I don't experience it as a burden, it is always the case that people have to get the hang of it. But, uh, no... Of course you invest, of course you will... But it yields so much, I won't focus on the cost side of things, at least, I really don't try to think that way. I can imagine, if you're going to go to a different situation, and everything is under pressure, well you know..." (LuG: 241)

Another example is this one, where a respondent talks about organizational change:

"I think, you know, it's not that it has to happen in a different way, but it's just about asking yourself the question, why do you do things in this way? And what does it yield? I think there are just some well-worn patterns, and those are things that you have to re-evaluate once in a while." (SGK: 265)

In these fragments, "yield" is used to refer to something that is produced in a particular process, but it is distinctly positively valued. In the first fragment, it refers to the "pay off" that arises from organizational practices. In the second fragment, this signification can also be seen with respect to organizational practices and how change might be able to improve the pay off they currently "yield".

The third and final signification of “to yield” must sharply distinguished from the former two, which function quite close to each other most of the time. In instances where “to yield” is used below, a signification is evoked that expresses the *subject’s work output*. Here are two examples:

“So what we are [doing] now, personally I think it is bit exaggerated, but what I am doing now, is to inform my supervisor about, you know, this is not on my task list but I am working on this and this at the moment. So that he doesn’t think at a certain point, well I don’t know what [name respondent] is doing here all day, but she has two tasks and they’re not being finished. And I didn’t feel this same tendency to justify myself as I did at the last place I worked. Because there, well, I was working one on one for someone, and that is quite different. But the argument was, we are doing it together, I will see what you yield in the end. And he asked me very matter of factly, well, Wednesday this and this has to be done. And then, until Wednesday that was the only thing I would be working on, and here I told them very specifically, I don’t like it that way. I like having my own accounts and to be able to work on more long term things, not just working on ad hoc things. Well, I got that now, but the ad hoc things still come up, you know.” (IZ: 69)

“But I know about people that are like, in about five years, ten years, I want to be there and there and there. They have a certain position in mind, are working on that. Whether they do that by education, or networking, or by being visible in the organization in whichever way, by what you yield, a plan, a product or whatever, I don’t know.” (JI: 237)

In the first fragment, the respondent uses the verb “to yield” in the second person, but the phrase in which it figures is supposed to convey the supervisor’s position. She is speaking with his voice, as it were. She brings it up in the context of discussing the issues around performing short-term assignments compared to long term assignments.

In the second excerpt, the respondent uses “to yield” as an example of being “visible” in the organization, which in turn can be a strategy to achieve certain career goals. The individual can make itself stand out among others, by the “yielded” performance.

In both these examples, the respondents refer to the process of their performance at work by means of the signifier “to yield”. They use it in active sense, with a person as the subject of the sentence. This sounds quite unusual in English, as well as in Dutch. Nonetheless, oftentimes this signifier was used with this signification being the most apparent one. This is particularly interesting because of the connotation it has (clearly seen in the second signification, discussed above) of a return on investment, a pay off. I would suggest that this secondary signification is nonetheless present to some extent in this use of “to yield”; this meaning rings out, above and beyond the primary, dominant signification. As we have seen in the previous chapter, meaning is always overdetermined, and this is a good example of this. It functions here as what Lacan has called a metaphorical substitution. I will return to this issue, with respect to this particular signifier, in section 5.4 below.

### 5.3.8 On “to take care of”/ “to arrange”

“Taking care of” is the closest I have been able to come to finding a translation for the Dutch verb “*regelen*”. However, what escape this translation are the active, managerial connotations that this signifier evokes to a Dutch speaker. Additionally, it incorporates the Dutch noun for “rule” [*regel*], and turns it into an active verb. The signifier is used by interviewees as a way of announcing actions they have taken to make things happen in their direct environment. It implies a type of agency and room for decision making, which means that the actions “taken care of” are the result of the subject’s own choice. Furthermore, it implies that some difficulties have to be surmounted in order to achieve said action.

It is this signification that gives this signifier the entrepreneurial connotations it has. In the signifying network of Publica, it epitomizes the actions of the proactive *new* government worker, who strives to be employable and is solely responsible for his or her own success or failure. Here are two examples of this signifier:

“And I’m really, you know, in the beginning I was really counter dependent, you know, if it’s going to be like that. You know, let’s stop here, because I won’t be able to do it anyway, I don’t need you to do this, it’s a waste of your time. I will take care of it in another way. Thanks just the same.” (MJ: 357)

“I am really surprised about that. That although the opportunities were ample I thought, and still do..., that people don’t seem to be able to take full advantage of that. Of the trainee program, of self-development. And I have also wondered how people got through the selection process, apparently initiative, or being able to make big decisions was not one of the important selection criteria. Or not many people who took the test scored well on that, I don’t know. Because I really think, and other people have made fun of me for this, other trainees have made fun of me for this idea, that if you put energy in that program and if you really want to, you can take care of it. And I, I’m surprised about the possibilities that people [inaudible]. For example, we weren’t supposed to take on assignments abroad, and I just said, screw this, I am leaving. I want to go to an embassy. So I just took care of that. So, that worked.” (ER: 129)

In the first fragment, the respondent talks about the difficulties she encountered when she made a suggestion for improvement. The signifier “take care” serves two purposes here. It connotes the subject’s behavior as strongly individually motivated, and in that, it serves to set the subject apart from the others (whose presence is not marked by a signifier in the narrative). It is particularly interesting to notice the strong occurrence of how agency is emphasized in this fragment, notably by “I don’t need you to do this”.

In the second excerpt, a former trainee speaks about how he took advantage of the courses and internships made possible by the trainee program. The signifier “take care of” is used here again as a way of outlining agency, judging from the phrase that precedes it. And here one can also see the function it has in setting the subject apart from others. It works here to demonstrate how the subject is responsible for the development of its own career.

This particular signifier often signals the identification of the subject with enterprise discourse, and functions to align the speaker with the “new” way of management in Publica, a more instrumentalist managerial approach.

### 5.3.9 On “to organize”

Most of the time, this signifier is used in one of two ways. First, it can be used to denote the activity of setting up a meeting or any type of other instance that requires the cooperation of other employees. This meaning is relatively straightforward and not of much interest for performance management in a discursive sense. Second, “organizing” is also a formal competency at Publica and often the use of this signifier referred simply to this competence as such (i.e. the competence as a tool, not what that tool is meant to correspond to).

But apart from these two rather straightforward functions, this verb is used in certain cases in a way that resembles that of the signifier above, “to take care of”. When this is the case, it also appears with a group of signifiers that works together to signify enterprising and proactive behaviour in a particular situation.

“You have to go and get it yourself. I agree fully on that with [FA]. I think he said it well, if he said it like that. That’s right, and that brings me back to that whole story about the general manager, and the development of the employee. Which could and should be organized a lot better, if you ask me. Yeah. Yeah, that brings us to, to stick with competences, to endurance, initiative, assertiveness and courage. To go and organize that yourself.” (ER: 145)

If you look at the fragment above, you can see that the signifier “to organize” is used twice, and the significations are very different from each other. The first use of “organize” evokes the setting up of institutional procedures for employee development. This is very different from the signification put forward in the second occurrence of “to organize”. Here, it is used in an active sense, in the sense of procuring something for oneself. The entrepreneurial character that this signifier can have in the context of Publica, is also visible in the following excerpt:

“Well, I, when you’re talking about a Different Publica, then cooperation is important,[being] trustworthy is important, being results-focused, being customer-focused, and uhm, well I think you should really do those things, and that they shouldn’t be empty words. That would make it one big joke, you know, what are we doing here? It’s nice that I can make a small contribution to change in Publica. I want to confront people with that. For instance, for that ‘Frontlines’ project we are going to go to the shop floor, but we have to send a letter to head office first. To the secretary-general. That really gets me, you know. I mean, we’re all colleagues here, aren’t we? Deep down I don’t want to do it that way. But fine, okay, a letter is sent. But it will be, kind of, collegial in its tone. You know, how are we going to organize it, and not too formal, and detailed, three pages long with all sorts of appendices.” (JI: 277)

In this fragment, the respondent talks about practices and routines that she does not believe to be in line with a “Different Publica”. In the context of an internal research project on shop floor activities (“Frontlines”), the respondent will interview people at various sites, and for

this, formal permission needs to be asked from the highest organizational echelons. Her way of initiating “change” is to draft the letter in a very direct way. In her formulation, she uses the signifier “to organize” as an example of the mentality that she proposes; she juxtaposes it with the signifiers “formal” and “detailed”. Again, “to organize” embodies here a meaning of proactive behavior, of initiative, entrepreneurship. In the fragment, the respondent equates it with the new way of doing things in Publica, a “Different Publica”.

#### 5.3.10 On “to work together”

Translation poses a slight difficulty here, but attention should nonetheless be drawn toward the verb “to work together”. This signifier is most commonly used as a means of referring to the formal competence “cooperation” (in Dutch, the root of these words is the same) or alternatively, as a means of referring to joint activities between people and/or departments. The importance of this signifier has been boosted by the reports, memos and speeches by the secretary-general, in which he designated the improvement of “working together” as the most important hurdle to achieving a “Different Publica”. By pointing the collective attention towards it, the signifier has been imbued with a more central position within the discourse of Different Government in Publica.

In some of the interview accounts, “working together” arises from the interplay of signifiers with a signification that emphasizes mutual responsibility for organizational goals, and the importance of achieving them. So the notion of cooperation starts to encompass themes of performativity and unitarism. This is illustrated in the following fragment:

“Uhm, ... I think that I, uhm, what I just said, about working together and finding the right channels, I think that I really know how to find those quickly. And those stay fast too, people know how to find me fast too. And uh, in that sense... I don't know if familiar is the right word, but uhm, I can make sure people are willing to do things for me, to increase their efforts. Uhm, and I will do that for others as well. You know, .... Yeah you understand what I mean.” (MJ: 301)

In this fragment, the respondent links the signifier “working together” to accomplishing things with and through other people. Not only this, by means of its link to the phrase “increase their efforts” a sense of instrumentality becomes part of the more commonplace meaning of joint undertakings. This can also be seen in the following fragment:

“From spending time in a support function I have learned that, when you talk about working together, which is one of the main themes for Publica at the moment, that as a hands-on department we are a bit more used to that. And uhm, that things like working efficiently and effectively and all that, that that's already part of our job, and that we don't first have to make some plan or do research about it, but we just do it.” (JI: 29)

In this fragment, the signifier in question is also linked to “working efficiently and effectively”, and is furthermore associated with the expression “just do[ing] it”. This latter phrase invokes both a naturalization of the workload and a means of setting oneself apart, compared to those who need a “plan” or “research” before they do what needs to be done.

Much like the signifier “initiative”, “to work together” goes beyond its role as a mere designator of formal criteria of performance. It takes a central place in the signification of an ideal of performance, imbuing it with instrumental and unitarist overtones.

#### 5.3.11 On “responsibility”

“Responsibility” as a signifier (or variations thereof) encompasses various different significations, all closely related and usually combined in a particular use of the signifier. As such, it is difficult to tease out the various tenets because they so often appear woven together. Nevertheless, it is important to sketch some of these strands of meaning because the signifier “responsibility” is so central to performance management. One may even say that this is compounded by the fact that this is a government context, and hence organizations have to answer to the political arena for their achievements and faults. In politics, the meaning of responsibility has much to do with answering to parliament and other democratic bodies. The significations gleaned from the interview fragments can be put into three categories.

First, “responsibility” can be used to express an *organizational requirement* of some kind, something the organization has entrusted upon the subject. This implies a personal link of the subject to organizational demands, combined with expectations of performance and delivery. Furthermore, it implies sanctions that depend on the extent to which the requirements are met. A good example of this type of signification is the following:

“...and my problem is, I have agreed to have those texts here at a certain point in time. So what does that mean? I will be writing those texts in the evenings or at the weekend, because it’s my responsibility, to have those texts done. Because this has been my first big project. But you could also say, it wasn’t even my responsibility to get them to produce those texts, that’s true. But yeah, those texts weren’t there, and I am held accountable for whether or not those texts are there, and saying ‘they’re not there because this and this person didn’t do his job’, people don’t care about that. I think we are really in the kind of role where you.... I think I have the right training for this job as a business major, we’re not really doing things ourselves so much, as managing things. We are responsible for the end product and we have to make sure that people who are supplying part of the product do their job, and that they all do that with the same issues in mind. That they all work from the same concepts, and that all those parts come in on time.” (IZ: 77)

A second signification that can be seen in the interview accounts is that of *moral obligation*. In these cases, “responsibility” is used to express expectations that are presented as almost universal (they are generally not discussed in great detail). What is central to this signification is that it is differentiated from organizational requirements or goals, and presented as a commitment to something broader. Here is an example of a respondent speaking on personal development:

“Because, how is it possible that those others, uhm, that the other trainees don’t, or, have that to a lesser extent, how is that possible? Because for instance, you all start at the beginning, you’re all more or less equal, the heavy assessment will make sure of that. You’ve got the same starting point, the same starting position. And then, one and a half years in, there are differences in the levels of people that really surprise

me. That's the level of personal development and career stage, you know, the extent to which you have realized the competences in your personal development plan, that development. And when I think about that, I come back to things like initiative, courage, persistence when you look at the responsibility of the trainee." (ER: 133)

The third signification that may be observed is that of "responsibility" as *empowerment*. This means that responsibility is framed to a certain extent as something positive, that provides opportunities and freedom for the subject. It is generally signaled by links to career opportunities, power or other perceived rewards. In any case, when "responsibility" comes to be used in this sense, the autonomy it brings is foregrounded. Here is an example of a respondent describing her job:

"Uhm... A high work load, lots of freedom, lots of responsibilities, especially for an employee who just got out of university. Uh, but that's the challenge for me. So I'm happy that it is this way. It's just that I need to find a balance between not overdoing it and letting go, uhm, drawing the line. So uhm, that's still a bit tricky." (ZA: 237)

These different significations can be seen at several moments in the interview accounts, and often overlap or play on one another. But the various connotations that may be attached to the signifier "responsibility" nevertheless make clear the complex position that it has within the signification of individual performance.

#### 5.3.12 On "to improve"

The signifier "to improve" appears in three different variations: the actual verb "to improve", "improvement" and the collocation "points for improvement" [*verbeteren*, *verbeterslag* and *verbetering*, and *verbeterpunten*]. These vary in terms of the context in which they were used and in terms of their significations.

"Improvement" is mostly used by subjects to refer to changes on the wider organizational or institutional level. Its occurrence is generally prompted by a discussion of the need for change within government, and "improvement" is used in this context to justify such organizational changes. Here is an example of a trainee program coordinator speaking on the topic of trainees in Publica, making use of "improvement". Also, note how the signifiers "to deliver" and "cooperation" appear in the text. The beginning of the passage is a bit disorienting; he is speaking on the differences between the Young Development program and the trainee program, the main difference being that YD participants have a permanent job in the organization, whereas trainees have fixed term contracts and are part of a job rotation program.

"And there is really not that much to say, other than that they are in a permanent job, and to actually produce in that job, because a trainee is clearly delivering products in service, for a particular department, but not in their home department where they really are, where it really matters, they are actually doing it on the side. For a trainee, it is their primary job, so to speak. That's really the most important difference. And afterwards, it's not like that person has to find a job; they are already in place. And the idea behind it is that we are giving them these impulses, development oriented, opening it up, oriented more towards cooperation, looking in

from the outside, to be aware of the organizational environment. And thus to create an acceleration and an improvement for the organization as a whole. What you see in both these groups is that they build up huge networks, both among each other, because it is a huge cross-fertilization of all sorts of different departments and cultures, as well as to have a look inside all those engine rooms. And that works really well.” (EA: 80)

This use of “improvement”, as a signifier for organizational change processes, was not as common as the other two variations (“to improve” and “points for improvement”). Additionally, these two latter variations have a more direct relationship to the signification of performance within the organizational context of Publica. The noun “improvement” was generally used to create a distance between said “improvement” and the agency of the subject. “Improvement” figures in the speech fragments as a means of referring to large-scale processes that can scarcely be affected in any direct way by organizational actors.

The verb “to improve” brings back this agential dimension much more strongly. Its use is sharply different from that of the noun. Subjects draw on this signifier when discussing their *personal development*, which in turn is often linked to appraisal interviews. Through the performance appraisal situation, it is also linked to the signifier “points for improvement”.

In Publica’s performance appraisal interviews, competences are discussed and evaluated. As I have already discussed in chapter 2, Publica operates a ministry-wide system of competences with some additional competences for each local site (including both the central policy organization as well as the operational organizations). In the interview accounts, I did not come across any instances where these competence schemes were not used for appraisal purposes, although the degree to which they were central to the appraisal interview did display some differences. However, the centrality of the system of competences within the trainee and YD programs is such, that they can be seen as an important subset of signifiers within the total set of signifiers that govern the notion of “performance”. As signifiers, these competences are assembled in particular ways in the context of performance evaluations. The role of the supervisor (the appraiser) takes on a Symbolic authority, which gives rise to certain punctuations and the privileging of certain signifiers over others. This is an important process, which also has links to the Lacanian concepts of identification and desire. I will discuss these in further detail in chapter 6. What I am concerned with here, is how the appraisal situation gives rise to subjects’ desire to “improving” their performance, and the construction of “points for improvement”.

The discussion of competences during the appraisal interview becomes the basis for the subject’s experience of how well he or she performs at work. This evaluation of performance is generally made in terms of output- and competence based measures, and as such “points for improvement” are produced in the course of the appraisal meeting. “Points for improvement” provide an impetus for re-authoring one’s identity construct of what it means to be a good employee, to be what the Other (the supervisor, the organization, society, etc.) wants from us. This relates both to the Symbolic register, as well as the Imaginary register – it occurs precisely at the interstice between the two, namely by means of the subject’s identification with the specific part of the ego ideal put forward in the organization. This ego ideal is touched upon in the process of evaluating the subject’s performance. This is a topic that will be more



thoroughly explored in chapter 6 when I discuss the Imaginary aspects of the interview accounts.

The appraisal process has crucial formative effects on the Imaginary register, which are in turn an introjection of what is being assembled and punctuated on the level of the signifier, the Symbolic. In the course of this process, the subject's perception of its own agency is anchored in the verb "to improve", by means of which the subject announces its desire to put into practice the "points for improvement" handed down by the manager in the appraisal interview. Here is an example where both signifiers appear:

"Well, during a periodical meeting [bi-weekly performance evaluation] you will hear about, how he thinks you are functioning, but uh, in a performance appraisal interview you discuss everything all at once. Yes I think that is great. Especially when you have points for improvement, at least you will know what you can still improve upon. That's really the most important thing that you can, or at least what you want to get out of such a meeting. What can I, you know, what can I do better. So that's really, uhm, useful." (Rt Fqz: 97)

In this fragment, the signifier "points for improvement" links to the activity denoted by "improving". These "points for improvement" are negotiated in the setting of the performance appraisal interview, after which they become a basis for the activity of self-monitoring one's activity for what can be ameliorated in terms of what the organizational demands upon a satisfactory level of performance are. The "points for improvement" lay down the demands that are made upon a subject for a re-authoring of its ego, and it does so by framing it in terms of what is still possible or attainable in the development of competences.

Another example is the following:

"Yes, and we drafted it together [a PDP], and I thought you know, I can draft it myself, but he will probably have better ideas than I do on how I can improve, because he has worked here so much longer. I could just make up things myself, but maybe that won't turn out the way he wants to see it, and that would really inefficient. So that's how I did it more or less. And uhm, that's, that happened just before he went on vacation, and when he comes back it will be signed, and then it will be official and you really have to keep yourself to it." (LO: 161)

In this excerpt, the role of the manager in handing down the "points for improvement" (although they remain implicit) is very clearly visible. The agency in "improv[ing]" them remains with the respondent, as can be seen in her use of the first person.

The signifier "points for improvement", in close linkage with "to improve", takes up a space within the signifying chain of performance in Publica that links notions that are normally associated in the management literature with development, such as learning, with the notion of effective performance. As such, it takes up an important position for the subject of performance in Publica. I will return to this below in section 5.4, when I discuss the linkages between the signifiers of performance in more detail.

### 5.3.13 On “to deliver”

Respondents drew on this signifier in order to describe work production and how it related to other parties within the organization, such as colleagues, supervisors, other departments, or operational organisations. It invokes the image of a supply chain, in which one party delivers products and services to another party. As such, it incorporates discursive elements from a well-established business management discourse into the public sector. It frames whichever relationship it describes as a business deal that is formal, unambiguous and financially driven.

In some cases, subjects employed this signifier to refer to their own work performance. Here is an example:

“Uhm, uh, especially when it comes to products, so they look at the products I make, the pieces I write, the [social work] that succeeds or fails, the questions I pose, or rather the level of them, the way in which, uhm, you walk down the hall, interact with people, the way other people talk to you. The unit manager, that’s their manager, I have contact with this person now and then, and they will look at what he has to say about this. Other than that, the size of your workload, and how you deal with that, those are the sources of information on which they base that. And mostly, I think, the contact with me and the products I deliver.” (AO: 70)

The statement is prompted by a question regarding what aspects the interviewee’s manager uses to evaluate his performance. The signifier “deliver” can be seen at the very end of the statement, but it is preceded by the signifier “products” which strongly ties in with the imagery evoked by the use of “to deliver” to describe work.

Sometimes, “to deliver” was also used as a way of referring to someone else’s performance:

“For instance, I will ask someone from a particular social work organization to deliver input to me. I assume that that person has the expertise he says he has.” (IZ: 85)

In other cases, it was used as a description of the performance of a department or an organization:

“Yes, well at least on their year reports and their planning, we want to see those ahead of time. We also make sure that, uhm, every year, eh, there is a negotiation about what budget they will get this year, what kind of money they will be getting, to uh make sure, and you will try and agree on, you will be delivering this many products.” (LO: 21)

The signifier “to deliver” was most often collocated with the signifier “product” in the interview accounts, as can be seen above. A close second alternative to collocate the signifier with was “contribution” On the whole, it can be said that in the interview accounts, “to deliver” referred almost exclusively to work output.

“To deliver”, in the linguistic context of Publica, can be construed as a signifier that is used to refer to performance in a relational sense, highlighting the extent to which one party is

dependent on another's performance. Furthermore, by its implicit invocation of a demand and supply relationship, it casts organizational relations as business transactions.

*Table 5 Summarized significations of key signifiers.*

<b>Key Signifier</b>	<b>Significations</b>
To deliver	Relation of one's performance to others (colleagues, departments, organizations)
To develop	1. Self actualization 2. Formalized learning process 3. Adaptation of the ego to organizational demands
To encourage	Organizational validation of subject's behavior personified in manager's support
Feedback	Supervisor's perception of the subject's performance
To function	Normalization and tight coupling of performance levels
To improve	Self-monitoring in response to organizational demands on performance
➤ Improvement	Justification of organizational changes, downplays agency
➤ Points for improvement	Demands on reshaping of the ego within framework of competences
Initiative	Required behaviors, framed as agential
To organize	Procuring something for oneself, initiating change
Responsibility	1. Organizational demand on the individual, 2. Moral obligation, 3. Empowerment
To start/go to work on	1. Glorification of high performance, 2. Reshaping of the ego in response to hierarchical judgment
To take care of	Proactively procuring something for oneself (identification with enterprise discourse)
To work together	Unitarist notion of teamwork, with strong undertones of performativity
To yield	1. Causal outcome, 2. Pay off 3. One's own work output

The key signifiers discussed above all have an important role in the discourse of performance management in Publica. These terms occurred most often across the interviews, and they were the most central in terms of their placement within the narratives on performance. In discussion above, I have tried to shed some light on the various significations that were dominant in the interplay of these signifiers. This helps to understand the effects that these signifiers have on the subject's experience and self-understanding. In Lacanian terms, the precise structure of the Symbolic determination of the subject has signifying effects on the level of the Imaginary. These signifying effects are derivative of the interplay between the signifiers, as we have seen. In the following section, I will explore this dynamic further, by grouping the key signifiers and tracing their interrelations in a number of exemplary fragments.

#### **5.4 Analyzing the text: relating key signifiers**

In the previous section we saw how the metonymical movements and positions of signifiers produce meaning. In this section, I will focus more closely on the interplay of the key performance signifiers. The fragments that I use in the following illustrations will further demonstrate how the Symbolic network of performance may be seen in the interview accounts, and how the signifying effects that come out of this process are on the one hand stable enough to be apparent and functional within the context of communication, but on the other hand polyvalent and overdetermined, with various different meanings ringing out at once.

The relational analysis I carry out here reveals patterns of signifier interplay that can further help us to understand how the Symbolic network of performance is internally structured, and how it is experienced on the level of the signification by subjects. For example, certain signifiers take precedence over others in particular cases, and some signifiers appear repeatedly in combination with others.

Based on the various prominent signifiers and their interplay within the interview accounts, I have constructed three themes that are used principally for analytical purposes and broadly describe the tensions between different signifiers in the text. These are used to trace the interplay of the key performance signifiers in the interview texts. The themes are Performance, Enterprising Selves and Developing the Self respectively. I now briefly discuss each theme.

##### *5.4.1 Performance*

In this theme I have grouped the signifiers whose significations are most closely associated with the organizational demands placed upon individual performance ("responsibility", "to function", "feedback"), as well as the signifiers that refer to the outcomes of work ("to yield" and "to deliver"). These signifiers refer to the activity of work in the most direct way. However, they are all relational in nature. They mostly reference work or work output in relation to other elements, such as organizational actors, processes or institutions.

The signifiers “responsibility” and “to function” rely on taken-for-granted norms when invoked. “Responsibility”, for instance, is used to evoke the signification of a moral obligation. This moral obligation concerns a duty that the subject feels it must fulfill, above and beyond the formal demands specified in a job description. “To function” draws on a machine metaphor, and in so doing it relates individual performance to systemic, organizational processes. “Feedback” is often used in the context of performance appraisal interviews and usually refers to the supervisor’s appraisal of the subordinate’s performance and hence this signifier also specifies performance only in relation to something else. The following signifiers are grouped into the theme of performance:

- To yield
- To function
- To deliver
- Responsibility
- Feedback

Other signifiers that refer to performance at work in the strict, utilitarian sense (rather than the signifiers that I will describe below) may also be grouped here. Among these are signifiers such as “supposed to”, “of course” and other signifiers that create, when used in the context of performance management, a signification of a naturalized, taken-for-granted state of affairs.

These signifiers collectively create an overarching image of performance as something broader, not confined to the individual and his or her work output, but something that touches upon a wide range of other actors. Performance is posited as relational to something that concerns us all. It stands in relation to other operational organizations, departments, civil services and so on. These signifiers may also be understood as closest to the Symbolic function of language: they are part of the more obviously disciplinary moments within organizational life, since they are at the heart of the appraisal process. In this sense, they are closest to the Symbolic as a grid that instates social order and that works as an authority to which the subject submits.

#### *5.4.2 Enterprising Selves*

A parallel may be drawn between the literature on enterprise discourse (DuGay, 1996) and the significations of the key performance signifiers in Publica. In particular the emphasis on the relation between the self and organizational processes, in which certain forms of behavior are made desirable, is noteworthy. In both the enterprise discourse literature and in the data I present here there is an emphasis on individual action, a glorification of high performance and high workloads, a heralding of the heroism of circumventing rules and procedures and so on. The imagery of these significations is well documented in the literature on enterprise discourse. It is perhaps unsurprising that one should also encounter it in a European public sector organization involved in large-scale change processes.

What is striking about the significations associated with these signifiers is the prominence of the *agency* of the subject. The individual is expected to take charge and behave enterprisingly within the context of the organization. In this image, the proactive employee is opposed to the stereotype of the reactive, rigid and inefficient civil servant. This dichotomy of the proactive/reactive frames work activity, and in the process de-emphasizes the relationship of

the employee to formal requirements, drawing attention to the importance of organizational goals instead. In this move, a unitarist view of organizing is put forward.

The following key signifiers were grouped in the Enterprising Selves theme:

- To go to work on
- To take care of
- To work together
- To organize
- Initiative

These signifiers give rise to a new ideal for what Publica needs from its employees. It creates an ideal of the perfect worker that employees can aspire to. The signifiers put forward the notion that individual change is needed, and moreover, that it is expected of the “new” wave of workers within the public sector. It posits the ego ideal upon which employees should model their identities, in order to be part of the future of the organization: they must become enterprising selves.

#### *5.4.3 Developing the Self*

The significations in this group, shown for example in talk above of development of competences, show an active authoring process with regard to the conscious identity construction of the subject and as such are related to the ego. This conscious authoring can be understood as an Imaginary process in which the subject is concerned with the mirror image of its own ego. The appraisal process provides employees with an account of how their performance at work can be understood with respect to aspects of their selfhood. A specular image of their ego is created, reflected in interactions with the supervisor and reflected in the formal evaluation. In this process, the evaluation as well as the less formalized aspects of the appraisal (e.g. employee counseling, coaching and so on) provide an impetus for the subject *to work on* its ego, to engage with its mirror image. The following signifiers are all central to the active authoring of self and ego evident in the appraisal procedure:

- To encourage
- To improve
- To develop/development

The significations associated these signifiers show that they all tie into this relationship to the ego. The signifier “to develop” sometimes gives rise to conceptions of self-actualization, as a kind of fulfillment of one’s potential, whereas at other times it refers more directly to the adaptation of the ego to the demands that issue out of competence evaluations (tied to performance appraisal). “To improve” references a relation to the self of self-monitoring, a reflexivity of one’s actions and thoughts, based on the “points for improvement” that are constructed in the process of performance evaluations and developmentally oriented appraisals. “To encourage”, finally, denotes more directly the manager’s role as an Other who validates the always tentative and fragile ego construct, produced in the Imaginary dialectic. In order to analyze this signifying field of Developing the Self more comprehensively, the following signifiers were also included:

- Personality
- To learn

These latter two signifiers are important in facilitating a language of self-development. They were both very prevalent in the interview accounts, and as such made it very difficult to analyze their occurrence and significations comprehensively. Respondents used these signifiers on many different occasions and in relation to a variety of topics. To include them in the analysis of the signification of performance would have led away from the concern with what “performance” signifies alongside other aspects of work. Nevertheless, I have decided to introduce the two signifiers at this part of the analysis, because in the instances in which they appeared *in combination with the key self-development signifiers*, they formed an important part of the infrastructure of the signification of the developmental aspects of performance.

The signifiers included in this theme work together to create an image of the possibility of a new self. This self is a project that is continuously being crafted and shaped in accordance with the guidance of supervisors and trainers. This works as a validation of the subject; it provides a fantasmatic support for the subject’s ego on the premise that it represents what the organizational Other demands of it. Here, one can also see how this group of signifiers is closest to the Imaginary register, in the sense that they hold up the subject’s self-image and the work it does upon it.

#### *5.4.4 Illustration of the relational analysis*

In the Symbolic analysis above, I have demonstrated why it is useful to scrutinize the specific signifiers that make up the signifying field of performance in Publica. This has provided some insight into the various significations that signifiers produce through their interplay. In the following relational analysis, I take this one step further by inspecting the mechanisms of signification at work in particular statements.

Here, I focus on how the signifiers link together and create a metonymic chain in relation to each other. This means that I single out the important signifiers of performance (grouped into the themes discussed above) and examine with which other signifiers they collocate to produce particular signifying effects. The statement is furthermore punctuated in a specific way, which means that it provides the metonymical play with a temporal end point and thus a final order of relations, much like a game of linguistic musical chairs. The themes of Performance, Enterprising Selves and Developing the Self are used to show this movement of the key performance signifiers through the text. I have undertaken this relational analysis for all of the interviews. Below, I will provide 4 illustrations of how I have carried this analysis out.

Here is an excerpt from one of the interviews in which the three themes can be seen:

“But you have to take care of it yourself and you have to plan it yourself with your manager, and that manager really doesn’t want to see you leave. So, yeah, that will be some real negotiating, and yes although the manager is there for your personal development, uh, it’s all mostly of course supposed to happen within her organization, so that you will be of some use to them. So at certain moments it resulted in some struggles on as long it works it works, how long should it take, and uh, what am I going to do exactly, well, I have, I took care of that internal internship myself.” (CQ: 29)



In this excerpt, a former graduate trainee is talking about how he managed an internal internship that he had to complete as part of the trainee program. The passage starts out with the signifier “have to”, which is linked with the signifier “to take care of”. This latter signifier was already discussed above as a central marker of the theme *Enterprising Selves*. The coupling of these two signifiers into the phrase “you have to take care of it yourself” gives rise to the signification of an imperative to procure the internship in question, and to shape one’s own career. This emphasizes the autonomous and proactive tenets that I described above in this theme, and elevates them to the level of a normative expectation upon the behavior of other employees.

This imperative of “you have to take care of it yourself” then intersects with another string of signifiers: “although the manager is there for your personal development, uh, it’s all mostly of course supposed to happen within her organization, so that you will be of some use to them”. We can see here how the signifier “personal development” is opposed with the signifier “use”, which is in turn related to the “it” which here refers to the internship that the respondent has arranged for himself.

In a manner reminiscent of the soft/hard HRM debates (Storey, 1989; Blyton and Turnbull, 1992; Legge, 1995) a potential clash is posited here between “development” and “use”. “Development” is central within the theme of *Developing the Self* and implies a context within which the organization supports and enables this developmental intention while “use” can be seen as drawing on the utilitarian aspects of the *Performance* theme. The imperative to “develop” the self comes into conflict with the imperative to be “useful” and the realization that one is also “used” by managers or organizations to achieve certain goals. In the remainder of the fragment, the respondent describes how this potential conflict led to “struggles”, which were resolved by means of his “[taking] care of” the situation. We can see here how the respondent’s speech displays signifiers from within the theme I identify as *Enterprising Selves* (“to take care of”), thereby overcoming the potential contradiction between *Performance* imperatives framed by the organization’s discourse (“use”, “supposed to”, “of course”) and those imperatives captured by the signifiers in the theme I label *Developing the Self* (“personal development”). In its signifying effects, this poses the agential, enterprising behavior of the subject as a solution for the tension between organizational demands on performance and honing one’s competences in the process of working.

In the following passage, two of the themes can also be seen in relation to each other:

“Well the first one was worthless. That person believed in the principle, the less you see me, the better it’s going. Uh, I said, you know, I want some feedback, I am a trainee, I want to know whether it is going well or not. After that, consequently I did it myself the second time, went by all project managers, gave them that form, and said to them ‘fill this in and discuss it with me’. And uh, consequently I changed supervisors and then it was handled a lot better. But more or less, I took care of it myself here. I’m here now, I want to be evaluated, appraised by you. And uh, I thought it was a very positive experience. It’s still a bit scary I think. Personally. Although you know you’ve done well, it’s always a bit scary. But I thought it was very useful mostly. Feedback, and I specifically asked for feedback, and I really worked with that. In one job I was told certain things, and I thought wow, I’m going

to work on this. I want to incorporate them in that PDP, that is very useful.” (NN: 193)

The passage is part of a narrative on performance appraisal interviews. The “first one” refers to her first performance appraisal meeting. The signifier “worthless” can be thought of as belonging to Performance discourse: it has strongly utilitarian connotations, as does the signifier “useful” that occurs later on in the text. The text continues and the respondent states that “I want some feedback” and that for her next performance appraisal, she “did it [her]self”. “Feedback”, as the supervisor’s judgment of the employee’s performance, is still entrenched in the theme of Performance. This narrative of Performance then is aligned with the theme of Enterprising Selves. This is signaled early on by the occurrence of the signifiers “I did it myself” and later more forcefully by “I took care of it myself”. The phrase “I want to be evaluated, appraised by you” further construes the signification that is engendered for the signifier “feedback”, by placing emphasis on the subject’s demand for the recognition and validation of its performance.

The themes of Performance (“worthless”, “feedback”) and Enterprising Selves (“I took care of it”, “I did it myself”) are placed alongside each other, as if they are enlisted in achieving the same goals. Further on in the passage, this is supported by means of designating the performance appraisal as “useful”. Within the produced signification, this instrumental value is gotten from the possibility of “going to work on this” feedback. This latter signifier connects the narrative to transformative identity work, by incorporating the supervisor’s hierarchical judgment of the subject’s performance (“feedback”) into the self-transforming work of writing one’s PDP (also see Townley, 1994). This final connection to the PDP also brings the theme of Developing the Self into the statement, which is consistent with the theme’s focus on reshaping the ego in the dialectic of identification with images of the ideal employee. The introduction of the development theme is then immediately punctuated by the signifier “useful”, which retroactively frames the statement in terms of instrumental rationality. The signifier “going to work on this” is very important here, because it signals a direct connection between hierarchical judgment, signified here by “feedback”, and the subject’s Imaginary construction. This places the themes of Enterprising Selves and Developing the Self in the service of Performance.

In the interview accounts of this study, these three themes are constantly shifting and re-assembling. Here is another illustration of this:

“Well I think it’s nice to be able to notice that in the two performance appraisal interviews I have had, we both more or less agreed on things [*zaten we op een lijn*], we explain to each other, well I gave you this score because... You know. Well, and then I will say, I gave you this because I think.... Uhm, I think this is a nicer way to do it, you don’t run into surprises in the interview this way. It is also a good way to test whether or not you can estimate your own performance, because I don’t think it’s a good thing... It is not very good if you overestimate yourself, if you think you’re doing a great job and your boss thinks it’s so-so. But it’s also not very good if you underestimate yourself. If I think that I’m not doing a good job and he says, you are doing fine....It is nice to see that I can correctly estimate how I am functioning, I think that is useful, and it gives you a realistic picture of the directions you can take, how you can develop yourself. So uhm, I like that a lot.” (IG: 168)

In this fragment, the respondent is speaking on the topic of appraisal interviews and in doing so, she links up the themes of Performance and Self-development. The performance appraisal interview, which can be seen as a disciplining moment and a ranking and hierarchizing of one's behavior at work, is signified here as an objective assessment of one's value for the organization and an impetus for re-shaping one's identity so that it accords with what comes out of the appraisal interview.

The theme of Performance is prominent throughout this fragment. The signifiers "test" and "estimate your own performance" put forward a signifying chain by which the performance of the individual becomes something that can be unambiguously determined, provided by the appraiser and to be anticipated (or "estimated") by the appraised employee. The adjective "correctly" takes on the role of providing the appraisal of one's "functioning" with a status of singularity and objectivity, further strengthened later on by the phrase "realistic picture".

The signifier "functioning", a central signifier in the Performance theme, ties together the previous sentences. It frames the preceding discussion in terms of consenting to a certain performance evaluation. There is constant movement within the fragment whereby the respondent attempts to align herself with the impending assessment of her performance alongside attempts to portray these as mutually agreed upon, or even as something she chooses and can somehow manage or control.

The signification that rings out as dominant designates the performance appraisal as an unambiguous and objective measurement of what one has contributed towards organizational goals. Although these organizational goals are not mentioned, they are implicit within the signifier "to function", which draws on a machine metaphor in order to designate one's performance as a part within the operation of larger whole. This *machine* is then dependent upon the "functioning" of all parts. This "realistic picture" of individual performance is then presented as input for a re-authoring of the self, by means of "develop[ing] yourself". In this move, the theme of Self-development is then connected to Performance, in a subsidiary relationship.

In this final illustration, the themes of Developing the Self and Performance can be seen:

"Mmmm, what is my strongest point.... Well, you know, I am someone who is really intent on working together, and involving people and talking about it together. And I prefer to discuss things and ideas I have with someone else first, to present them. And I am also the kind of person when things need to be, it happens sometimes that in a group certain things need to be taken on, I am very willing to take them on. And uhm, for myself I always want to, I'm the kind of person who wants to yield something good in the set timeframe, so I'm quite performance-oriented. Uhm, and I'm very flexible in the sense of, if there are things that need to happen all of a sudden, I have to say I can handle that, I will be ready to take things on. I actually like that, hectic in a good way. Not too structured, but many things alongside each other and .... Yes. So that's more or less it." (FA180)

The respondent discusses here what she perceives as her most important qualities as an employee at Publica. In this fragment, a signification is evoked that displays some of the

aspects of the ego ideal for employees in Publica. The signifier “working together” appears here, a prime signifier of Enterprising Selves. In the context of the interviews, “to work together” often conveys the idea that organizational goals should be achieved together, that it is a shared responsibility. In the interplay with other performance signifiers, “to work together” routinely takes on strong overtones of unitarism and instrumental values. The Enterprising Selves theme bundles together signifiers that all put forward images of what the ideal employee in Publica should be. In this fragment, various aspects of this ideal can be seen.

The speaker designates herself “the kind of person” who voluntarily “takes on” work. This distinction posits a dichotomy between “the kind of person” who embraces responsibility, who takes on work, and the kind of person who does not. The signifier “to yield” also crops up here, an important symbol of the Performance theme, and it has an unusual role. It is a metaphorical substitution, in which the words “to yield” take up the place in the chain of signifiers that would normally be occupied by the signifier “to produce”. This results in a somewhat unusual and clunky phrase (in the original Dutch as well as in English). By virtue of its place in the signifying chain, formerly occupied by “to produce”, “to yield” functions here to convey the signification of one’s work output. However, the substitution allows other meanings to ring out as well, meanings normally associated with the verb “to yield”. This includes the notions of surrendering, ceding, giving way, as well as the more pertinent signification of generating, paying off, etc. This demonstrates once more the way in which meaning is radically overdetermined: it always reveals more than the speaker intends to convey.

In this fragment, the subject aligns itself with the image of the ideal employee. It presents itself by means of favorable traits and behaviors such as being proactive and enterprising, readily taking on “responsibility”, being “flexible” and “performance-oriented”, and so on. On the level of the themes, one can see that Enterprising Selves is dominant here and that Performance is enlisted as a subset of the former. The two themes work together to personify the “I” of the statement as the ideal employee, as the ego ideal that subjects strive to embody on the level of the Imaginary.

In the illustration above, I have used the themes of Performance, Enterprising Selves and Developing the Self to trace the interplay of key performance signifiers in relation to each other. The themes take various positions with respect to each other, without a clear pattern that emerges out of their interplay. There appears to be a lot of movement between the themes. Sometimes one theme will take precedence over the other. At other times, they are presented as competing rationalities. And yet at other times, they play off one another in a collaborative effort. The question that emerges is what it is that allows for relatively stable significations to emerge, notwithstanding the shifting of the various groups of signifiers with regard to each other. What gives these signifiers coherence in their signifying effects? In the next section, I will address this question by means of a discussion of the Lacanian concept *point de capiton*.

## 5.5 Connecting the Symbolic to the Imaginary and the Real

The prominent signifiers of performance management in Publica, as they have been discussed above, are instrumental in holding up the current dominant signifying network of

performance. These signifiers are very rich in their interconnections to other important performance signifiers, such as many of the formal competences for example. The frequency with which they come back in the interview accounts, and the different contexts in which they re-appear, are testament to this. From a Lacanian perspective, the interesting question is what stops these signifiers from sliding under their signifieds, and gives them a somewhat stable signification.

The themes identified in the interview texts can be seen to interact with each other but without a specific pattern emerging. The Lacanian notion of the quilting point is a useful concept in explaining ways in which the signifiers become consistently meaningful within the context of the respondents' speech. What keeps conversations in place here? What allows them to take place? It is important here to keep in mind the specific organizational context of Publica. The discursive shift from the "old" to the "new" is what pins down the references made by subjects to their development. The active approach of employees to development of their competences, and their professed proactive attitude towards performance monitoring and appraisal is made desirable by the imagery of a "Different Government". A constant in all interview accounts is the notion that the government needs to change in order to keep up with changes in society – it goes without saying.

The signifier "Different Government" can therefore be understood as a quilting point. The themes of Performance, Enterprising Selves and Developing the Self all hinge on the notion of being "different". Within the context of the Performance theme, for instance, being "different" stands for being efficient, productive and responsive to the demands of organization in contrast to the imagined "old-fashioned" employee who was inefficient, unproductive and unresponsive. Within the context of Enterprising Selves, "different" signifies the "new", proactive, customer-oriented behavior that is needed in today's society. And within the context of Developing the Self, being "different" stands for the changes that the subject must make to itself to be what the organization wants from it to face the new pressures and challenges that are common in the modern public sector. In all these themes, this signifier of "difference" strikes at the core of what the signifiers convey. It ties them together by providing them with a shared purpose and signification.

What remains devoid of meaning in the interview accounts, is precisely this doctrine of Different Government. While this term is applied to most of the radical discursive changes that are happening within the organization, it stays elusive. However, on the level of signification, it ties together the themes of Performance, Developing the Self and Enterprising Selves. The Lacanian concept of the quilting point is instructive in understanding the structuration of the signifying network in a particular Symbolic context. In Publica, the discourses of performance, development and enterprise work together to cover over the lack of meaning present in the signifier "Different Government". Although the signifier itself is drawn from the grand-scale change project within the government organizations, at the same time it can be seen as a retroactive gloss over the various performance management discourses at work in Publica. By means of "Different Government", an opposition between the "new" and the "old" worker is erected, between business and bureaucracy. Signifiers such as "taking care of", "going to work on/with..." and "functioning" take on a particular signification, which emerges within the signifying process.

The halting effects of the quilting point push the alternate meanings to the background that signifiers evoke within the signifying process. The quilting point does not totalise the signifying field, but it does cause certain significations to emerge over others. As such, this signifier of “Different Government” reduces the indeterminacy that is inherent in the signifying operation, because it works to foreground particular dominant significations. These dominant significations become prominent in the subjectivity of employees who aspire to be part of the “new” regime. However, their subjectivities are not fully determined by this “gloss” of the quilting point. Although the quilting point stabilises the signification of performance, this signification remains incomplete. The signifier of “Different Government” is itself devoid of positive content. This emptiness of the quilting point, along with the indefinite significations that make up the Symbolic dimension of subjectivity, impel the subject to construct identifications to give itself the impression of a secure identity. As I will argue later on in this thesis, the multiplicity of the signifying process (and thus alternative significations of performance) may be regained by relinquishing the Imaginary constructions that aim to plug up this gap.

One of the interview passages I have cited while discussing the signifier “to function” provides an account of how this operation of tying together takes place.

“Yes, I think you shape your traineeship to some extent, and that it really differs what you get out of it. Some people are more active, others are more passive. Yes, I think it really differs. Absolutely. And some people, you notice they have reflected a lot more on themselves, especially when it comes to intervision [group counselling sessions], that is a bit like a mirror, you know. What kind of person am I, what makes me tick, how do I function, why do I do things the way I do them. You really notice a difference, some people are ahead of other people, or you notice that some people are more open to it than other people. I think there is a real difference between what people got from it. I mean everyone has grown, but you can see the difference, you know, some people have their career plans laid out and know where they are going, and some people are, well, this is what I’m doing now, and that is very different.” (LL: 105)

The centrality of the signifier of “difference” and its variations (i.e. “to differ”) is striking in this passage. It is instrumental in setting up the distinction between “people who have their career plans laid out” and people who do not, people who engage seriously with training exercises and question their value for the organization against those who do not, those who have “grown”, and so on. This “difference” is central in all of the three themes, providing the organizing principle that allows for the elaboration and comparison of what stands for “performance”.

Here, the Lacanian conceptualization of *retroactive signification* can help to think about the way in which discursive change has affected the subjectivities of employees. The movement by which the notion of “difference” pins down the performance management signifiers that are floating, retroactively constitutes them as coherent and part of the “new”, in opposition to the “old”. History is effectively rewritten in terms of a new discursive regime.

The signifier of “Different Government” pins down signification not only in the sense of a quilting point; it also has a structural role as an empty signifier. The notion of a “need for

change” has an important role in governing the subjectivities of respondents in this study. For the subject, the possibility and *desirability* of a “Different Publica” is important in linking the Symbolic signifying network to the other dimensions of subjectivity. The idea of a “Different Government” and importantly, being a “Different” government worker, casts a strong and positive image of the ideal employee. This image can be seen in the Imaginary identities that the respondents in this study draw on. It becomes an ideal that they variously live up to, reject or feel ambivalent about. It takes the place of an other that they create for themselves, and in relation to which they posture their selves. In the next chapter, I shall pursue these dynamics and explore how Lacan’s conceptualization of the Imaginary register may provide important insights on this.

The diversity of significations that issue from the signifying network of performance in Publica is obscured within this Imaginary construction. The Imaginary self-image becomes a way for the subject to evade the ambiguous and incomplete nature of the Symbolic order. It provides an easy answer to the subject about who it is and what it means to be performing. It forecloses the diversity within the signification of performance, in which alternative meanings are nevertheless offered up. Any critique of what “performance” means in Publica must therefore address the Imaginary register. It is to this question that I will now turn.

## Chapter 6 Imaginary identification with performance

“[I] designates the enunciating subject, but does not signify him.” (Lacan, 2006k: 677)

### 6.1 Introduction

The significations that were described in the previous chapter are important elements of the Imaginary, in that they describe part of what subjects experience on the conscious level. However, the limitations of this experience can be seen in the haunting suspicion that some subjects have, that what they think and feel is the result of nothing more than “empty words” (quoting one respondent [JI: 277]). This anxiety about the alienated, empty way in which their being derives from language is channeled by subjects into a construction of an Imaginary identity. They create elaborate identities for themselves to cover over a traumatic lack in their being.

Lacan conceptualizes the Imaginary as a deceptive entity, a dimension of subjectivity that is rife with narcissism and rivalry. More than anything else, it gives the subject the idea that it is in complete control of its fate, that its decisions are rational, that it is not dependent on anything or anyone, and so on. The Imaginary provides the subject with an illusion of Cartesian selfhood: I think, therefore I am. However, this internal unity is never total and therefore cannot help but fail the subject. Its interruptions by the register of speech are representative of the primacy of the unconscious within subjectivity, and of the structuring role of language in the social field.

In the course of his work, Lacan does not cease to warn readers about the dangers of taking the Imaginary at face value. In the analytic situation, the analyst must be aware of the subject's tendency to identify with the analyst, to model his own ego after the analyst's. The subject casts the analyst in the role of the subject supposed to know, the expert who has the key to the subject's cure. This draws its attention away, Lacan argues, from addressing the underlying problems, which are on the level of the signifier. The subject must face the signifier, stripped of its Imaginary corollary. The symptom is located on the level of the letter, on which subjectivity is also structured; it provides the form in which experience must take shape, and in the process, it limits and perverts that experience of being. This leaves the subject always yearning for wholeness, for something beyond the confines of the signifier. However, this reality of the structuring role of the signifier is too much for the subject to handle. It spins itself narratives that rationalize its actions, which serve as an explanation for the desires it finds itself gripped by. The Imaginary covers over the traumatic emptiness of the signifier, the lack of content that marks subjectivity itself.

I have demonstrated in the previous chapter that subjects' understanding of their performance in Publica is determined by the interplay of key signifiers. The chain of signification of performance is in some sense always shifting, but this shifting is clearly limited by the “quilting” role of Different Government. This provides a kind of grouping to the signifiers, granting them an internal coherence that allows particular subjectivities to take shape. In this chapter, I want to interrogate the text from the interviews for the Imaginary constructions that subjects use in Publica with respect to their performance at work. I will focus on the



identifications that subjects use in their talk about performance. The question that I will seek to answer is therefore this one: what images are present within their speech?

This chapter will be structured as follows. First, I will present illustrations of the main Lacanian concepts of the Imaginary from the interview text: the mirror stage and the ego ideal (section 6.2). Before doing so, I will make a few remarks on how identification figures within the interview situation. After this I present illustrations of the mirror stage, exploring instances in which these concepts may be recognized in detail, and showing typical examples of how subjects adjust their ego constructions within the re-staging of the mirror stage. To demonstrate the working of the ego ideal, I trace identifications in the text. This ego ideal can be seen as an image of the ideal employee within Publica. This is a fruitful device for exploring how subjects construct their identities in specific ways. And I will also present some instances in which the retroactive nature of signification has led subjects to interpret past experiences in the employment relationship in particular ways.

Second, I will explore two major themes in the Imaginary constructions put forward by the interviewees (section 6.3). This serves to get a sense of how performance discourses appeal to people, and how they work on their desire. Two partial ego ideals will be discussed in terms of the subject positions they put forward. These can be understood as identifications with specific aspects of the signification of “performance”, and therefore as a way of filling in the gaps within its signifying process. I will also devote attention to the question of their relation to certain organizational practices.

## **6.2 Illustrations of the mechanisms of the Imaginary**

In this section, I hope to demonstrate how the concepts discussed above can be of use in understanding processes of identification in Publica. In order to analyze the workings of identification in Publica, it is important to think through the concepts to make them applicable to organizational phenomena. I will explain how I have used the concepts of the Imaginary in my analysis. I will also discuss how the interplay between the ego, the ideal ego and the ego ideal can be understood in the context of performance management. By means of these concepts, we can understand the identifications that subjects put forward in the interview accounts as means of “covering over” the gaps of the signifying network of performance in Publica.

### *6.2.1 Identification in the interview process*

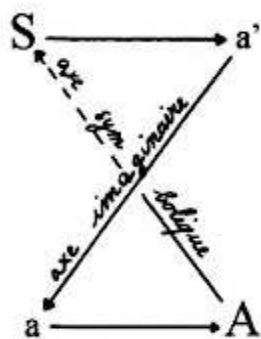
In the interpretation of the interview accounts using the concepts of the Imaginary, I have also sought to incorporate my own role in the co-production of interview accounts as much as possible. Here, I view the interview situation, as I previously discussed in chapter 2, as a mutual achievement by the interviewee and the interviewer. However, I will extend this perspective on interview research with some of Lacan’s work on the role of the analyst.

In the Symbolic analysis presented in chapter 5, the main focus was on discerning how people were *being spoken by* the chain of signifiers of performance in Publica. After identifying some of the most important signifiers in this chain, I proceeded to explore the significations of performance that emerged within the speech of subjects. These significations are experienced fleetingly on the level of the Imaginary, as I have argued here. In this chapter, I will focus on

the more deep-seated, constant aspects of the Imaginary, associated with identifications that subjects construct with regard to performance management in Publica. I will give an account of the identifications that are present or implicit in the narratives of respondent, and the roles they ascribe themselves in the interactions with co-workers and supervisors. I try to get at the identities they draw on and the ideals they strive for. Due to the question of the signification of performance, central to this research project, I have focused on these relatively stable identifications with various *ideals* of performance. Before I will discuss these processes of identification, I will first explore some of the dynamics of the interview situation, as understood through Lacan's conceptualization of the analytic setting. This will raise a number of concerns that should be addressed before analyzing the interview material.

The nature of the Imaginary plane is such that there is much rivalry between the subject and others (small, imaginary others – other egos). As a researcher, it is important to avoid the trap of identifying with the interviewee, having the interviewee use you as a point of identification, or ending up in the role of the “subject supposed to know”. However, one should acknowledge that some of these tendencies will nevertheless be present in any interview situation. Consequently, as an analyst of the data, it is important to take into account the identification dynamics in the interview accounts. Lacan's following schema can illustrate this.

Figure 4 The analytic relationship, taken from Lacan, (1993: 14)



In this schema, we see the subject *S* in a relation of speech with another subject (the analyst). Lacan's theorization of the proper psychoanalytic situation is that of the *S-A* axis. The analysand should ideally relate to the analyst as Other, as something ungraspable, something disconcerting and fascinating. This arouses the analysand's desire and allows analysis to take place on the level of the Symbolic. The analysand learns to relate to the analyst as subject to the Other. It re-starts the trajectories of desire and allows the subject to glimpse how it exists within the Symbolic order, how it is constituted by what it is Other to it. The dangers of the analytic situation lie in the temptations of the Imaginary, the *a-a'* axis. In this relation, the analysand approaches the analyst as an Imaginary other. This can manifest itself in various ways, but the most common roles that the analyst becomes cast in are either the “subject supposed to know”, or the rival. In the first case, the analyst becomes the analysand's teacher or expert: the person who has all the answers and whose guidance will lead to the “cure”. In the second case (often following the first case), the analyst becomes the target of jealousy, distrust, conflict and other forms of confrontational behavior. Another way in which this may

manifest itself is in the form of competition with the analyst (for instance, trying to prove one's knowledge on a certain topic, trying to outguess the analyst, etc.). These examples of interaction on the Imaginary axis bog down analysis into an unproductive game, leading the analysand further away from the symptom, which must be sought on the Symbolic level of its discourse (Fink, 1997).

This schema has relevance for the interview situation insofar as the respondent may engage in forms of identification with the interviewer. In approaching the interviews, my aims as an interviewer have been to elicit accounts from respondents that displayed the construction of performance on the Symbolic and the Imaginary level. It is important to acknowledge the collaborative efforts of myself as interviewer and the respondents in these situations, and the problems with assuming an authentic self behind self-representation.

My goal has been to gain understanding of the most salient language of performance in the social context of Publica. To pursue this goal, I have tried to relate to the respondents on the level of the Symbolic; I have tried to activate certain circuits of signification in their discourse, by the questions I asked. The danger of respondents relating to too strongly to me on an Imaginary level was that they might view me as a representative of a business school, thus trying to position themselves in a certain way. Following Lacan's conceptualization, such behavior can be expected when the subject relates to an other as rival or subject supposed to know.

I have therefore tried to discourage interviewees from identifying with me in this way. The problem of socially desirable answers to the researcher's questions, which is well known within the literature on qualitative research, can thus be approached differently by means of Lacan's work. The interviewee's answer can be seen as a demand addressed at the researcher as subject. The interviewee attempts to gain the Other's approval through the researcher. As such, the researcher must jolt this relation by attempting to subvert it. I have done this in the interview situation by verbal and non-verbal responses that were aimed at undermining the interviewee's tendencies to try and find out what the researcher as *other* wants from them. Identification works as a preliminary answer to this question of "what does the Other want from me?" By occasionally leaving silences, or responding in ways that puzzled or surprised interviewees, I have sought to prevent them from pigeon-holing me in this way. However, such identification is by no means easy to avoid, and in some ways this is endemic to the interview situation, by virtue of its question-answer format.

In attempting to induce such dis-identification, I hope to have encouraged the respondents to draw on wider signifying chains than they might have done otherwise, since they would have responded to a specific identification with me (for instance, as representative of managerialism, as an employee advocate, as one who is concerned with their well-being, and so on). My attempts to perturb these identifications have hopefully given a wider insight into the chain of signifiers that structures their experience.

Playing the devil's advocate for the moment, the question may be raised whether this "scansion" on my part has not functioned to arouse the desire of the subject, thereby giving rise to fantasy scenarios in which the object of my approval has come to take center stage. Even if this would be the case, I would still maintain that the strategy of upsetting the trajectory of identification is the most viable way of gaining a glimpse of the Symbolic register

in the respondent's discourse. There are two reasons for this. First, by preventing the respondent from feeling completely at ease, and on the right track in its discourse, he or she is thereby encouraged to keep on speaking. If no answer satisfies, the subject must continue speaking. And following Lacan, I argue that speech goes beyond the conscious intentions of the subject to include slips, slurs, contradictions and other anomalies that put us on the trail of the Symbolic order. In other words, we cannot assume that the subject's intention to present an image of itself is fully successful. Second, my concern has been with the *shared* elements of speech of subjects. Therefore, my analysis hopefully avoids some of the pitfalls of the ways in which respondents have reacted to a fantasmatic identification in singular ways. After these remarks on identification in interviews, I will now expand upon the Lacanian concepts of the Imaginary and how they may be of use in studying identifications with performance.

### *6.2.2 The ego and the ideal ego*

The relation between the ego and the ideal ego can be thought of in terms of getting a sense of self. I have discussed above how Lacan conceives of the relationship between ego and ideal ego as a mutually reinforcing process. In fact, the two can hardly be separated in the analytic process (both clinical and social-scientific) because they require each other to give form to the Imaginary.

When respondents speak about their selves, often in terms of personality or "the way they are", they are revealing parts of the identity that they have constructed for themselves within the context of the organization. These identities are constantly shaped and re-shaped on the basis of interactions with other subjects. However, these other subjects are not Symbolic others – they are what Lacan would call "small others". They are other subjects to the subject itself, and they relate to the subject on the level of the Imaginary. In the interactions with others, the subject adjusts its ego to their reactions. This can be anything from a glance or a remark made in passing to a formal performance evaluation.

It is important to distinguish between the ego ideal and the dynamics between ego and ideal ego at this point. The ego ideal differs from the mirror stage in that it connects to the Symbolic order. The ego ideal is appealing to the subject because it represents an image of the big Other, the locus of truth for the subject. As such, the Symbolic embodies authority for the subject. As I discussed above, the ego ideal is suffused with what is desirable to the subject, and as such it has a strong appeal. At the same time, it connects this personal economy of desire of the subject to the shared dimension of subjectivity, the Symbolic.

This means that whenever the interaction between the subject and an other are (for whatever reason) imbued with a particular authority for the subject, they can be most productively analyzed using the concept of the ego ideal, since the ego ideal represents a condensed image of the overpowering, authoritative Symbolic Other. This is for instance the case when an encounter between an employee and a supervisor has a strong disciplining effect on the behaviors and attitudes of the employee. In this case, the ego ideal is affected by the supervisor's intervention because of the supervisor's hierarchical judgment. Such an interaction has quite a strong effect on the worldview of the employee, affecting the ideals she aspires to. It touches on the deeper assumptions about what constitutes a "good employee". On the other hand, when the interactions with a supervisor or with colleagues leave intact this ideal, the mirror stage provides a better framework for interpretation than the ego ideal. This is also in line with the idea of relating to an other like oneself – this would be entirely on the

level of the Imaginary, because it concerns another ego. When an interaction is considerably influenced by the social status of the other, the Symbolic order comes into play.

In analyzing the interview accounts with regard to the dynamics between ego and ideal ego, I paid specific attention to the assumptions that interviewees display about their personality. In many cases, subjects used the system of competences as a form of representation with regards to their selves. Whenever these are discussed in interviews, the concepts of the mirror stage are most productive to the understanding of the Imaginary consequences. Another example of the dynamics of the ego and the ideal ego includes any instance in which the interviewee professed to have gained an understanding of their self in a conversation with someone else, for instance in the case of mentoring.

I will present some illustrations from the interview accounts that highlight various aspects of the mirror stage. I have selected these passages because they exemplify the dynamics described above, and do so in a reasonably clear manner. The interrelation between the ego and the ideal ego is central and indeed formative to the Imaginary in general, and thus it is present to a varying extent in all speech.

In the following fragment, the respondent talks about what aspects of her behavior her manager appraises her on. I have included the original question.

“Q: When he is looking at you and your work activities, the things you have done, is his focus on, for instance, your behavior, how you manifest yourself in meetings, or in a project group, or does he look at the quality of the things you have written for instance, or the quality of the process....

A: Well, in what you.... I think he looks at everything, in what you are discussing, he wants to discuss the things he has an opinion about. And if our working together doesn't give rise to thinking, well, this is not going the right way, then he doesn't really talk about it. And he won't really talk about, oh you did this and this really well, but he will talk about what he notices. And that could be, you know, you don't do your job well. But that is mostly about behavior and how you present yourself, how people can perceive what you project, I guess....” (UO: 140)

In this passage, the interviewee lets on how much she depends on the signals of her manager for her sense of self at work. She indicates this by means of the phrases “he will talk about what he notices”, “how you present yourself” and “how people can perceive what you project”. This demonstrates that she is aware of others' appraisal of her behavior. This provides a glimpse of the formative possibilities of the perceived responses for her ego.

Many respondents are quite frank about being sensitive to signals from their supervisors. A typical expression of this is the following:

“I just want confirmation all the time, because I hear about people doing things all the time that the manager would like to have seen differently in the end. And you're tinkering away at your policy report. I don't want to be in that situation at all.” (AqOh: 57)

The contact that the respondent implies here is very much of an informal nature, a sort of regular checking in with her supervisor. Apart from the communicative value of this, which serves to coordinate her work activities with those of the rest of the project team, there are

some implications for her identity work. The iterative process of having the way one “do[es] things” evaluated, is of great importance for the ego of the subject. The ego needs to be continually supported by its specular opposite, its mirror image, in order to retain a semblance of stability. This means that the subject actively looks for confirmation from her supervisor in order to uphold a sense of identity.

Another passage in which this can be seen is this one:

“Yes, I do that with my supervisor once every two weeks, a personal meeting, that’s right. Usually that lasts half an hour, but if I need more time I can ask for it. And I did that last month, because I have to deal with new tasks, and exactly because everybody has their own thing, it can be difficult to check with colleagues, you know, I want to do it in this and this way, what do you think about that? Just sparring with them, you know? So I agreed that for three weeks, our meetings will be a bit longer and more frequent, so that I can just pick it up. Just do that sparring thing with him, that’s.... you know.” (IG: 156)

In this passage, she describes how she has recently increased the frequency of these meetings because she feels that she does not get the encouragement or confirmation she desires from her colleagues. The meetings with her supervisor allow her to substitute this. She uses the signifier “sparring” to refer to this process of validation.

These illustrations provide expressions of the basic work of the mirror stage. In Lacan’s conceptualization, the mirror stage is at the basis of the ego – it constitutes the dialectic by which the “I” articulates itself. The interplay between the ego and the ideal ego provides a sensation of stability of the self. The very recognition of a contained self in the reactions of others, gives the subject the impression that it subsists wholly in consciousness. It obscures the unconscious processes that are so central to subjectivity, as we have seen in the previous chapter. And as Lacan reminds us, the recognition of the “I” in its mirror image is in fact a form of misrecognition.

### *6.2.3 The ego ideal*

The ego ideal represents an image of the Symbolic order to the subject, an “introjection” of the Symbolic. This is the subject’s response to the overwhelming presence of the Other. The Other becomes condensed in this ego ideal. As such, it functions as the point of direction for the subject, at least on the level of conscious thought (because we have already gotten a sense of the determining effects of the Symbolic Other on the subject’s acts and thoughts in chapter 5).

The ego ideal is the point of identification for the subject. It is with respect to the ego ideal, the introjected image of the Symbolic Other, that the subject starts reconstructing its Imaginary. Identification, in psychoanalytic terms, is a fundamental formative process. In Freud’s work, it designates the developmental work by which subjectivity takes shape. The child identifies with one or both of its parents. Evans describes this as “a process whereby one subject adopts as its own one or more attributes of another subject” (1996: 80). Lacan uses the term in relation the ego ideal to describe the way the subject models its ego on aspects of the Other. The subject is always in a relation of dependence to the Other, where it looks for validation and reassurance for its being. The subject seeks the approval of the Other, to be

desired by the Other. “Man’s desire is the Other’s desire”, as Lacan so often declared. It is in this dialectic that the subject tries to model itself (or rather, its self) in the image of the Other.

If we are to apply this relation of the ego to the ego ideal to the context of Publica, it is important to recall the discussion of the signifying network in chapter 5. Here, I highlighted the most important signifiers of performance in Publica. These signifiers are central in the structure of the subjectivity of employees. These signifiers become central to their being, the material by means of which they speak, construct thoughts and relate to others. I have discussed dominant significations that may be observed in the interview accounts, on the basis of the metonymical interplay of the signifiers of statements, where the constant referral between the signifiers and their relation to the complete chain of signifiers brought them forth.

The Imaginary is a dimension of subjectivity that is very much connected with conscious, sensory impressions. We have already seen this in the process of the mirror stage, which also takes place in the Imaginary, and in which the perception of others is highly important. Meaning, pieced together from the signifier’s play, is part and parcel of the Imaginary register. It is built up within the Imaginary register from speech and, with respect to the mirror stage, also in non-verbal interactions. The ego ideal, on the other hand, is a condensed image constructed out of the Symbolic Other, and therefore more abstract. The conscious self takes this image on as a source of direction.

The ego ideal becomes relevant to the analysis of the Imaginary when an interview touches upon goals or ideals that respondents have constructed for themselves. The way in which the subject takes on this image of the Symbolic is far from voluntary, as we have already seen from the discussion of the Imaginary in chapter 4. It is importantly linked to how chains of signifiers work together to represent particular areas of social life, and how desire is organized within these significations. I will touch on some of these questions in section 6.4 when I will discuss common themes in the Imaginary construction I have encountered in the interviews. In the next chapter, I will also explore these questions in relation to the questions of politics and ethics.

In the next fragment, the respondent talks about coming back from an international placement, and noticing a particular set of norms in the group of trainees that she had been a part of before she left.

“Well, after that last placement I went back to my original job, that was really necessary. I would have liked to have stayed longer, but that was really not possible, I really had to go back and that was completely justified. Uhm, and yeah, I got back to my original job, and I really had to say to myself, what now? Because I really came back like, oh we’ll see, take it easy, I wasn’t too worried about things. There hadn’t been any other trainees in Africa. And all of a sudden I noticed what kind of a group it actually was. How there was a huge social pressure on you and how you... [All those] people did the same training you did, so a lot of comparing goes on [*spiegeln*]. But [they were] very occupied with what other people were doing, and whether I shouldn’t do that too. And uh, that made me a bit nervous, so I started looking really hard what kind of job or work I wanted to do. Then, I still thought I wanted to work

for the UN, but you know. In the end I got a job really quickly, so it's all relative.” (JS: 161)

She speaks about a “huge social pressure” that she had not previously noticed among the group. The temporary change of location, and the consequent return, had given her the opportunity to reflect on the dynamics within the group and the unspoken expectation upon its members. In the narrative, she describes these social norms with some ambivalence; the phrase “I noticed what kind of group it actually was” does not leave an impression that is entirely positive. However, she does feel the pressure to conform to this ideal of competition in the group, describing how it makes her “nervous”. It leads her to intensify her internal job search to live up to the norm.

In this next fragment, this idea of the ego ideal of a norm can also be seen.

“How do I get insight into the quality of my work.... Well, what is quite clear, is when something is not good enough or when something's incorrect, you get it back without it being signed off on. You get comments on it. So that's easy. But uhm, sometimes exemplary reports are discussed in our departmental meetings, and my department head will refer to those, like, the other day this and this person published this report about this and this topic. And he'll request to have it sent to the whole department. Those are the good examples, so to speak. That gives you... It says something about the quality of your work of course. Uhm, yeah, and I also think that, yeah, if your quality is not up to par you won't get any new assignments. Then, that prevents you from going further, whereas normally you start doing more difficult things, more challenging things. Or get more responsibility... You enter as the youngest clerk in a government organization, so yeah. If all goes well you grow out of that level, that says something about your qualities. But for instance, how analytical you are, or how well you can express yourself verbally or in writing, well, negotiating with difficult parties or something, I think that's difficult to measure, is that going well or not.... You would have to test that between colleagues, you know, you were there with me, how did you think I did, or... But you would really have to make sure that happens. Those things don't happen automatically.” (SgK: 101-103)

The performance norm that functions as part of the respondent's ego ideal may be glimpsed in this fragment when she describes how “normally”, one would receive progressively more challenging and difficult assignments. Furthermore, she also outlines how hierarchical progression is to be expected from anyone who has the “qualities” for government work. It is the implicit nature of these notions that gives them a place within the ego ideal. As a point of connection to the Symbolic, the ego ideal functions on a less-than-conscious level. The image that she has produced of what the Other wants from her, shines through in the logical connections she makes in her narrative. These connections are completely self-evident to her, but when scrutinized, they show a very particular representation of what constitutes good performance.

The ego ideal can also function as a kind of point of reflection, from where the subject judges its own behavior, recalling the phrase by which Fink describes the ego ideal: “a point outside of the ego from which one observes and evaluates one's own ego as a whole or totality” (2004: 117). This evaluation then becomes the basis on which the ego is re-constructed,



remodeled in the image of the ego ideal. In the following excerpt, the respondent talks about personal development. She has stressed that she plays an active role in her own development. After a clarifying question as to how she does this, she gives this answer:

“I think it has a lot to do with being aware of how you deal with that, of recognizing those situations. And I think that only afterwards do you recognize that you would have liked to have handled it differently in a certain situation. And bringing that point of recognition closer and closer. And that you, because of your growing awareness, you know, of how you act and how you position yourself, that you kind of come to realize that well, I should have handled this and this differently. The closer you come to that moment, you get to the point where you start handling it differently. And you can start anticipating on it.” (IG: 204)

In other cases, this form of self-evaluation on the basis of the ego ideal is coupled more closely with the role of the supervisor. I have briefly touched upon this in the previous section. This can be the case when the interactions between the supervisor or manager and the employee who is evaluated are sufficiently disciplinary, to warrant a change in the employee's ideas of what constitutes a “good worker”. In such a case, the supervisor's judgment, imbued with a Symbolic authority, is incorporated into the image of the ideal employee, constituting that part of the ego ideal that is relevant to performance. The subject comes to accept the authority of the manager as legitimate, and it identifies the evaluation with the Symbolic Other. The manager ceases to be an other like oneself, but takes up the place or “stands in for” the Other. An example of this can be seen in the following fragment.

“Yes, I make a lot of progress reports and I find it very difficult to, well...difficult, what I do too much is to be too friendly, to be too friendly to people who don't like progress reports. And they... I let myself get brushed off too easily, you know. I'll ask them, how is everything going, and they'll say, oh so and so, and uhm, my department head thinks I should put a bit more effort into it, and think carefully, whether [what they're doing] is logical, whether additional things need to be done, does it have consequences for future projects, so just, well he calls it ‘keep asking questions’. So that kind of thing, you'll hear that in the course of the year, and during your performance appraisal interview it comes up again, as in, pay attention to that. So...” (RtFqz: 81)

The narrative reveals to what extent the respondent has taken the manager's evaluation to heart, and consequently, how the performance appraisal has shifted her view of what is wanted from her. It has affected the way in which she perceives how the “organization” evaluates her performance. The manager is cast in the role of a representative of this “organization”, temporarily taking the place of the Symbolic Other. Her image of the organization's appraisal of her has changed; this partial image of the Other touches on the ego ideal that she, as subject, aspires to. This is markedly different from the way in which an appraisal interview such as this is generally viewed in mainstream HRM research, namely as an instrument of control as well as a way of engendering discretionary effort or commitment from a self-contained individual, engaged in an employment relationship with mutual expectations. A Lacanian perspective allows us to perceive this process as an attempt at shaping the identifications of the subject, by means of the reproduction of an ideal of what constitutes the good worker.

In many of the interview accounts, the interviewees display an identification with a “different” type of government work. They are eager to position themselves as part of a more efficient, more outcome-focused group of government workers. This has been covered already in detail in the previous chapter, where I have demonstrated how the significations associated with key performance signifiers are all pinned down by this notion of Different Government. Before concluding this section, I would also like to devote some attention to how subjects identify with Different Government. For some subjects more so than others, the notion of Different Government becomes part of their identity. They shape their identities on the basis of what they perceive as a Different Government, on the basis of what they believe is desired from them - “Man’s desire is the Other’s desire”. In the following fragment, an example is given of such identification.

“Because I will try and see, which issues emerge from that? And what are we going to do about it? I am involved in that process, after all. Evaluation of the department itself, that department has existed for a year now, no a year and a half. And that has to be evaluated, how is that department functioning, up to now, is it doing well, is it doing better, is it doing worse, should we be doing things differently, etcetera, and we are making a start with that at the moment. That is part of policy work too but it is quite different from [the question of] ‘what do we want to do with [particular activity]?’” (IG: 112)

The respondent talks about her department and the issues that emerge from a survey held of its employees. The respondent is involved in the organization of the survey in question. The consistent use of “we” for the department gives insight into how important the departmental membership is to her. She also differentiates this evaluative part of her job from more regular policy work. The work pertaining to the issues coming out of the survey is more managerial in nature, whereas policy work is more content-driven and specialist in nature. The respondent positions herself on the side of the managerial in this utterance, adding that it is “quite different” from more traditional government work. Another instance where this “difference” is instated in speech can be seen in the following fragment.

“There is a kind of turn-around going on at the moment, where the idea is that people think ahead. And that things from the citizen’s agenda, as we have called it, are taken into account, that society thinks are important. Those are addressed by politicians and political programs. What do they think is important, and what are important themes for politics that match with what citizens think is important, and do you do that in the same way, do you give the same name to that? That is the kind of stuff you incorporate into your work. And the international agenda, what is important for the EU? For the future. And what is also very important, [name project], [name]’s project, how does the policy that is created here perform in practice? What are the problems, what could be organized better, what does work? Making it a more well-oiled machine.” (JI: 65)

This respondent also describes a situation where there is a change in the current situation, a “turn-around”. This will be instrumental, she argues, in getting people to “think ahead” and turn the organization into a “more well-oiled machine”. She links this change in the organization also to a democratization of policy, but it remains somewhat unclear how this is

to be accomplished: through political parties and their programs or in a more direct manner? This narrative mirrors some of the significations associated with enterprising behavior that we have seen in the previous chapter. The respondent presents these topics with such fervor that it can be interpreted as part of her ego ideal. She also draws on the second person in order to state the importance of the questions she raises, i.e. “[t]hat is the kind of stuff you incorporate into your work.” It represents a core aspect of her identification with what is “important” for the organization. Moreover, one can sense that she wants to present these issues as something that addresses a deficiency in the organization, a gap that can be filled, remedied, fixed. This is emblematic for the role that the ego ideal has in providing the answer for what the Other wants from us. As we have seen, this is derivative of a structural insufficiency of meaning in discourse.

The following excerpt from another interview shows a similar incidence. The respondent is talking about the reputation of government work for being relatively easygoing and not very efficient. She explains how she sometimes encounters reactions from friends that emphasize this stereotype.

“You know, it’s not just Publica, I think it applies to the whole government, for every ministry, the people react in this way. Well, no, at first, uhm, uh you tend to get defensive. And now it’s like, you idiot. You know better now. So yeah, how do you apply it to your own work, you just let it slip away once you walk in this place and... I can’t change it by myself, and I hope it will become less difficult as I go along. [I hope for] a change away from cowardliness.” (M): 387)

The first part of the excerpt relates the respondent’s reaction when being confronted with a stereotype of government workers. There is a distinct turn in the story at “So yeah...”. This second part details her own partial agreement with this stereotype; she describes her frustration with some parts of the organization and her feeling of inability to change things. She draws on the signifier “cowardliness” to describe the culture in Publica. This signifier has a very strong effect on the narrative and its function, besides referring to the status quo in Publica, is also to position the respondent as its opposite – courageous, active, enterprising.

The operation of the ego ideal and the various points of identification in Publica will be the topic of discussion in section 6.4 below. Before that, I will devote some attention to the process by which meaning becomes retroactively attributed to the signifier, and the implications this has for our understanding of the Imaginary.

#### *6.2.4 Retroactive signification*

In chapter 5, I have discussed in detail the significations that are constituted in the process of the field of performance. The key signifiers form a chain of signifiers that assembles in a particular way when the subject utters speech. The contingent nature of these significations mostly stays hidden to the subject, appearing instead as natural and self-evident. However, this idea of self-evident meaning is easily disrupted when one looks at how differently words are used in various contexts. Moreover, when one traces the interplay of the signifiers in a speech fragment, the indeterminacy of signification emerges. The apparent self-evidency of meaning turns into a complex puzzle, which is difficult to reconstruct.

Lacan conceives of the process of signification as *retroactive*; as the signifiers assemble in a particular order, and meaning is created with a backward movement, glossing the constellation of signifiers with a certain signification. The retroactive nature of this process furthermore gives the subject the impression that meaning is not contingent in the slightest, but that the meaning of words and phrases is fixed and without ambiguity. Moreover, this can apply to not just sentences and words in speech, but it can also occur to entire chains of signification. I have discussed the role of the quilting point in chapter 5 regarding the discourse of Different Government. This signifier “different” has quilted the signification of the signifiers of performance in Publica in an important way.

I will devote some attention to this concept of retroactive signification, with regard to the accounts given by respondents. In many of the interviews, instances can be seen where a subject rationalizes experiences in light of a particular occurrence, such as a disciplinary intervention by a supervisor for instance. An example of this can be seen in the following fragment.

“Yes, well, we have taken a lot of courses in the meantime, and you always learn something. “Reporting Policy” for instance, “Enneagram”, those kinds of courses, you always get something out of them. You end up learning the most from the work experience of your fellow YD [Young Development] colleagues, the other Young Development people, how they handle their jobs, uhm, the workload, learning to say no, that sort of thing. And I think that’s the most important in all the contacts I have. You keep that in the back of your head, but nine out of ten times, I end up going my own way. And I know what kind of person I am, and actually I had known that all the time already. It’s just been a confirmation of that, really.” (ZA: 245)

The real thrust of this passage comes in the last two sentences. Before that, the respondent tells about her experiences in the courses that are part of the Young Development program that she takes part in (an intensive training program for a select number of permanent Publica employees). Among the courses she mentions the “Enneagram” course, which deals mainly with personality testing and elaboration of personality traits in terms of strengths and weaknesses. She also describes how the expertise and experiences of fellow employees are of great help to her. (Incidentally, she uses the signifier “to say no” in this context. This signifier takes on a very particular signification, as we shall see in the next section.) Despite the admission that these courses are informative and helpful to her, she nevertheless describes her self-knowledge as something she has known “all the time”. The experience in the Young Development program serves as a “confirmation” of this. Taking a Lacanian perspective on this utterance, the concept of retroactive signification throws a particular light on the situation. The nature of signification is such, that all experiences and significations from the past will be viewed in light of the most recent “quilting” of their meaning. Her ego, the “kind of person I am”, will appear to her exactly as it has always been – her past effectively re-articulated in terms of the new signification of her Imaginary selfhood.

In the following fragment, the respondent talks about an exercise given to her by her mentor, to try and write down her seven “core qualities” for herself, and then ask a few colleagues to do the same about her.

“A: I first wrote everything down for myself, and after that I had to ask four or five acquaintances, colleagues or whatever what they thought, and they had to name seven core qualities of mine, and five annoyances. Well uh, I had to integrate those, and when things kept coming up, that meant that that had to be a core quality, because everyone had mentioned it. Well, last Wednesday I had a look at those with my mentor, and looked at, what do I want from a job? And uhm, after that we compared the core qualities [with that], and uhm, is possible? And well, it matched up, more or less, and what I wanted, to what extent does that come back in my present job? Well, that is the case, you know. Well, this may be going a bit too personal, but uhm... One of my core qualities had ‘Impatience’ as a pitfall, and I said I wanted more content-specific knowledge, and uhm, because my job is already so varied, I don’t encounter very content-specific knowledge very often. But when I stay here for a bit longer, I will be able to develop more content knowledge, uhm, but I became restless because I don’t have that at the moment. And uh, this is very personal I think, but.... [nervous laugh]

Q: No, no, no go on.

A: So that core quality makes sure that I want to achieve everything right away, and that I want to do everything right away, and achieve. You know. But it has to go as quickly as possible. So, so the job I have now is fine but I have to wait for two more years and I would feel perfectly fine in it. So, that was very useful.” (RtFqz: 185-189)

More than anything, what comes across from this excerpt is the far-reaching impact the conversation with her mentor has had on the way she views her current job. The exercise of writing down what her “core qualities” are, touches upon the ego construction she has crafted for herself. The mentor assures her that one of the core qualities she has formulated for herself is accompanied by a “pitfall”, namely “impatience”. This utterance from the side of the mentor retroactively signifies her experience in this particular case. All the dissatisfaction she feels in her job, and with the work she is doing, becomes a function of her own “impatience”. She comes away from this “useful” exercise with the conclusion she will simply get used to her job in about two years! The effects of retroactive signification can be clearly seen in this case. The meaning the subject attributes to her own activities, and reactions and responses by others will be invariably framed by the outcome of this development exercise, and the reading provided of it by her mentor.

It is important to keep in mind that all meaning that the subject attributes to its experience is caught up in this retroactive relation. All accumulation of experience and identity work is framed through the re-signifying movement. This has implications for how we can understand the movements of identification in the Imaginary, and their connection to the Symbolic chain of signifiers. We can see here that it has important shaping effects on their identity, fragile as it is. There are issues of power within the relation of one subject to another. The position of the supervisor in the illustration above is indicative of how one subject may come to take on Symbolic importance by virtue of the judgment it may pass on another subject, in terms of performance, development, and so on. In this case, the position of the supervisor takes on elements of Otherness for the subject, as it looks toward the supervisor for validation and approval. In such a way, that position becomes identified with the Symbolic Law, and any verdict issuing from that position retroactively signifies a chain of signifiers accordingly.

In the next section, I will explore in greater detail the identities of employees in this study. I will focus on the main themes that emerge from the passages in which the machinations of the Imaginary are prominent, particularly with respect to the ego ideal, but also in the form of the mirror stage and retroactive signification. This will provide insight into the shared nature of these imaginary constructions.

### **6.3 Themes in the Imaginary constructions of subjects**

In this section, I will explore two shared Imaginary themes in the subjectivities of the Publica employees in this study. This will provide insight in the points of identification that are put forward, intentionally or otherwise, within this organization. The extent to which organizational practices instrumentally elicit and channel the mechanisms of the Imaginary, sheds light on the role that management practices can have in producing and shaping particular identities. At the same time, it also allows us to explore the extent to which employees construct identities that embrace or subvert these attempts of management.

I have discussed the Imaginary mechanisms that are at work in the concept of subjectivity as it is outlined by Lacan. The Imaginary register, as we have previously seen, encompasses the conscious awareness of the subject. It allows for meaning, knowledge, and reflection. The shared aspects of the Imaginary within Publica can be seen along the lines of its organizational culture. This describes a shared social dimension within the organization, something that goes unsaid. It can be seen as a shared repertoire around which the social relations within Publica align themselves, either in conformity with it or in opposition to it. It is often implicit in organizational interactions, but can nonetheless still be sensed by the subject – it does not fully belong to the unconscious dimension of subjectivity.

In this sense, the concept of organizational culture can provide a useful analogy for a shared Symbolic point of identification. I have discussed issues that pertain to Publica's organizational culture in chapter 3. In this section, I will focus on shared tenets with regard to identity construction as they unfold within this context. In chapter 5, we have seen that the interplay of performance signifiers creates particular significations. Here, the focus is on *identifications* more so than on signification, meaning that the interaction between organizational practices and the identities invested in them is of specific interest. This implies that wherever organizational practices are successful in creating a particular (partial) ego ideal, there should be shared identifications visible in employee accounts. I will also draw in the concept of retroactive signification in this analysis, to demonstrate how organizational practices can at times serve to re-frame the subject's experience of events.

#### *6.3.1 In response to the quilting point*

As noted, the field of meaning in Publica is quilted down by the signifier "Different Government". This signifier provides the various signifiers that are salient to performance management in Publica a kind of coherence, tying them together to create a chain of signification. The identifications that I will discuss below are also part of the Imaginary register, and thus also subject to the "*capitonnage*" of the quilting point.

The Imaginary is to some extent always the site of comparison and difference, where the ego will relate to other egos in terms of rivalry, competition and narcissism. So when respondents draw on the concept of being “different” (or when they use terms such as “we” and “they”), it is important to be sensitive to the notion that marking difference between Imaginary others and one’s own ego is an integral part of the Imaginary realm itself. However, in the case of Publica, “different” also has a central role in holding down a very specific distribution of signifiers. We will see below that this signifier “different” remains a Leitmotiv in the identifications that subjects in Publica have constructed.

In the next two sections, I will trace two partial identifications that can be recognized in the interview accounts. I have called these “assuming responsibility” and “embracing the new”. These identifications both respond to the empty nature of the quilting signifier “Different Government”, and represent attempts to provide it with substantive content. They each aim to represent part of the answer to the question of what being “different” entails for the subject. As ego ideals, they provide a blueprint upon which the subject models its ego. I will discuss on what ways these identifications emerge in the speech of subjects.

### *6.3.2 Embracing the new*

The notion of the “different” has a very significant role in the speech of the subjects in this study. As I argued above, the quilting effect of the signifier “Different Government” can be clearly traced in the signification effects produced by the various key signifiers of performance. One signification that is strongly associated with this quilting point is the notion of a division between “new” and “old”. I have discussed this at length in chapter 5 in terms of its recurring role in the field of signification affected by the quilting point. However, this notion of the “new” also functions as a point of identification. Its central role in the meaning of performance in Publica means that it becomes part of the subject’s image of the Symbolic. It becomes part of the ego ideal that subjects model their ego on.

As part of an opposition, the “new” gains its desirability only in relation to the undesirable or repellant notion of the “old”. This oppositional logic can be seen in some of the narratives presented by respondents. They will describe the status quo of work processes, and juxtapose this with their take on them. In doing so, they tend to set up a straw man of the “old” way of doing things, whereas a fresher, newer approach (their own) can produce better results. As we have seen in chapter 5, often these accounts align the “new” with forms of managerialism or enterprise.

This theme of new-old is stronger in some interviews than in others, and I will use this opportunity to draw out some examples where it is strongest. In the interview accounts from which the illustrations below are taken, most of the utterances were structured along this particular nexus of new-old. I would argue that for these employees, this nexus is more than a phenomenon experienced on the level of the signification, but that it runs consistently through their accounts. It can therefore be more productively conceptualized as an identification. This would imply they model their ego in many ways on what they perceive as the “new”. Here is an example of how a respondent constructs the “old” in an account of informal performance evaluation on the job.

“Those are kind of... a kind of mini-performance appraisal things, that I ask for myself. If I don’t ask for it, it doesn’t happen. Then we just go on with business as

usual until December 31. And I could keep that up by just sending out memos, make minutes once in a while, make a phone call here and there, and uh, that's it [in English]. But I don't want that." (J1: 305)

She presents a stereotype of the "old", by giving the image of an employee who does the bare minimum whenever possible. Consequently, she lights this straw man on fire by announcing "I don't want that."

Here is an example where the respondent addresses both the "old" and the "new" in relation to her career goals.

"I am thinking seriously about [having a career at] the government at the moment, but something else that I'm thinking about now is that I should leave the government in a few years. Uhm, it makes you a bit apathetic. Take for instance the [operational organization], that is a field I am really interested in. [organizational function removed] Uhm, that organization is a big mess, we all know that, but I have the feeling, the naïve feeling perhaps, but yeah, whatever it is, that I can go ahead and change that. So to get into a high-placed job there, and to make sure the place starts running properly again." (JS: 189)

The notion of new-old can be seen in the excerpt above quite clearly. The respondent describes the attitude of the traditional government worker as apathetic [*dichtgetikt*], of which the literal translation would be "boarded up". An alternative translation would be "aloof". The Dutch metaphor implies being closed off to social interactions, imperceptive to dissenting voices, and as having somewhat of a cynical attitude. It has connotations of classic Marxian alienation on the one hand, and a voluntary choice to become "boarded up" on the other. She seems ambivalent here; she describes her fear of becoming apathetic herself by staying at Publica, but at the same time she does think she could "go ahead and change" the problems at the operational organization she would like to work at. The ideal of being different from the "normal" government worker appears to be a point of identification for this subject.

The following illustration of old-new was prompted by a clarifying question at what the respondent meant by the signifier "government-esque".

"Well, rules are very important, and everything has to pass the right channels, and everything has to be checked and approved at least twenty times, where it could really be done in one go, so to speak. But that, I haven't experienced that directly, but that's what I get from the stories of the other Young Development people. That it does, that it has to go through twenty layers, when that is just absolutely unnecessary. Yeah." (LC: 374)

The respondent puts forward an image of the "old" in this fragment, one that she has constructed on the basis of other people's accounts of how work processes are organized in the central policy organization of Publica (she works in one of Publica's operational organizations). For her, this exemplifies what is "government-esque". We can see the same new-old logic at work that we have seen above. It is an image of the large and inefficient organization, overly caught up in its own rules and regulations, and not responsive to societal problems. It is, in short, a stereotype of the classic bureaucracy. This image figures as part of



the new-old identification that she constructed, and on the basis of which she gives meaning to her work experience.

I will draw out one more example of this. It is slightly longer than the examples discussed above, but I feel it warrants the extra attention due to the strength of the identification apparent in the utterances. This is an employee who speaks on the changes she anticipates in Publica, namely in the direction of a more centrally managed and efficiency oriented organization.

“A: The people who have been here for fifty years, they will have to start conforming themselves eventually. So I do think it is possible, yes.

Q: Do you think it will happen?

A: Mmmmmm [chuckles]. Uhm, I don’t know. Wouldn’t be able to guess. No idea. Because I think that if you, uhm, that it is something government-wide, that it is not just happening here. That it might be a lot worse here, than it is at those other ministries. Let me just say, I hope it will work.

Q: Alright.

A: That it becomes a bit less cowardly. You know what I mean, right?

Q: Yes.

A: With cowardly? Because I think, to the outside world – and I’m talking purely about working for the government, not just here at Publica – I have to defend myself all the time. I constantly have the feeling uhm, that I have to account for what I am doing with my friends’ tax money. Or, they’ll say, [respondent’s name], you start at 9.30, well that is the case, I do come in at 9.15, have a cup of coffee, and go into that meeting at 9.30, and at 10.15 my day really only starts, and most people will leave at 5. Those [colleagues] will be in Parliament until three in the morning if necessary, so... But really, it is a 9-5 job. I take trainings all the time, because of Young Development. That gives me some time, to do this or that... And everybody seems to think that I don’t do a damn thing. And that I just take trainings all the time. And you also have a TV in your room here, and your newspapers, you get everything you need, your phone is paid for, and your computer and your fax, and I’ve got the feeling that I have to somehow account for that. I’m like, it is a good thing, I don’t really do nothing. I have the feeling that, I am a government worker, but just by saying that, people will be just be like ‘Oh. You’re one of those. 46 vacation days.’”  
(MJ: 371-383)

This fragment shows quite a lot of movement in the text. Upon closer examination, the dichotomy new-old seems to be implicit mostly in the first part. The latter part of the fragment mainly gives the reader a hint of where the anxiety comes that drives her identification.

In the first part, she talks about the current state of the organization, using the signifier “cowardliness” to describe the culture. (The reader may remember this signifier, also used elsewhere in the same interview, quoted in the discussion of the ego ideal above, section 6.3) She sees this “cowardliness” as a government-wide issue, and hopes that there will be a change away from this. In doing so, she positions herself on the side of the “new”, or in this case, as the opposite of cowardly, the brave.

In the second part, she starts out by addressing the concept of “cowardliness”, but instead goes off into a story about her own feelings of guilt, in “account[ing] for [her] friends’ tax money”. This can perhaps be seen as an expression of the incompleteness of her identification. The story may be seen as a way of communicating the fear that she is in fact not different from the “people who have been here for fifty years”. As an Imaginary construct, an identification is never sufficient or whole; it always falters. The stronger the identification, the more the subject’s ego depends on the ideal. Identification is something of a double-edged sword in this. In this case, the subject’s strong identification with the ideal of the brave “new” government worker fails to take away her doubts.

### *6.3.3 Assuming responsibility*

In this theme, I have grouped all instances where respondents identify with the ideal of responsibility for organizational outcomes. What can often be seen in these interview excerpts is how employees respond to situations where their workload becomes stressful. In the instances discussed, employees actively seek the blame for this with themselves rather than looking for causes of this in managerial decision making or standard allocation procedures. The sentiment that prevails here, is that it is the responsibility of the employee to either perform the allocated tasks, or to find a way to unload them onto other employees. The identification at work in these cases is one of “assuming responsibility” for the outcomes of a certain work process. Whereas these responsibilities are formally ascribed to the managers and senior managers, the employee in question is held accountable for the output of the work process, which often depends on the contribution of other employees as well.

For instance, take this excerpt that I cited above when providing illustrations of the ego ideal:

“Yes, I make a lot of progress reports and I find it very difficult to, well...difficult, what I do too much is to be too friendly, to be too friendly to people who don’t like progress reports. And they... I let myself get brushed off too easily, you know. I’ll ask them, how is everything going, and they’ll say, oh so and so, and uhm, my department head thinks I should put a bit more effort into it, and think carefully, whether [what they’re doing] is logical, whether additional things need to be done, does it have consequences for future projects, so just, well he calls it ‘keep asking questions’. So that kind of thing, you’ll hear that in the course of the year, and during your performance appraisal interview it comes up again, as in, pay attention to that. So...” (RtFqz: 81)

In this excerpt, the respondent describes how she is instructed by her manager to be persistent in making sure that other department and project teams live up to their commitments to the respondent’s own department. In this excerpt, she mentions that she “gets brushed off too easily”, and that she is “too friendly”. What is in effect happening here (gleaned from other parts of the interview and off-the-record conversations) is that the respondent deals with

people who are either hierarchically higher placed than she is, or people whom she has no means of pressuring in order to get them to live up to the agreement. This fragment gives the reader an impression of the extent to which she has internalized a norm of what this task entails, a norm that she is currently not living up to. The consequence here is that she internalizes the responsibility of the other parties not respecting the set deadlines or targets, a responsibility that belongs with her direct manager, in this particular instance.

Another example of this can be seen in the following fragment. This is a more direct expression of an identification with devolved responsibility.

“...and my problem is, I have agreed to have those texts here at a certain point in time. So what does that mean? I will be writing those texts in the evenings or at the weekend, because it’s my responsibility, to have those texts done. Because this has been my first big project. But you could also say, it wasn’t even my responsibility to get them to produce those texts, that’s true. But yeah, those texts weren’t there, and I am held accountable for whether or not those texts are there, and saying ‘they’re not there because this and this person didn’t do his job’, people don’t care about that. I think we are really in the kind of role where you.... I think I have the right training for this job as a business major, we’re not really doing things ourselves so much, as managing things. We are responsible for the end product and we have to make sure that people who are supplying part of the product do their job, and that they all do that with the same issues in mind. That they all work from the same concepts, and that all those parts come in on time.” (IZ: 77)

Here, the respondent describes how she is held responsible for the completion of a particular document, for which she has to compile a number of texts from high-placed officials in Publica. She experienced some trouble getting them, and has ended writing many of these texts herself. In this excerpt, she lets on to what extent she has internalized the responsibility for the final document. She talks about the project in terms of having to “make sure that people who are supplying part of the product do their job”. That she goes beyond her own job description to assign to herself the responsibility of other parties delivering their promises, is telling of how strongly identifies with the collective responsibilities. Moreover, she consistently use the adverb “we” to describe her project team. That this team is not a mutually supportive unit should be clear from the way she has to take over other people’s work.

Another line of examples of the kind of assumption of responsibility at stake here, is to be found in the use of the signifier “to learn to say no”. This expression is generally used by respondents to convey that the sentiment that they have taken on too much work. Here is an example of this:

“Yes, it will come back. I am just thinking how strong that would be but...it is, there are moments where you are just going through your work activities, and uh, and he will say really clearly you know, that’s going really well, or that didn’t go that well, or... Uh, you know, why did this and this take so long? Uhm, and that will mean that there are some weak points there, because for instance you have said yes to too many things and you’re bad at saying no, or uh, I’m just saying you know. In that way, you’re checking, check, checking things off your list. You run into your points for development in that way.” (SgK: 73)

This excerpt describes the way in which the respondent's manager addresses her performance in appraisal interviews, and how so called "points for development" are then distilled from this. In talking about this kind of performance evaluation, the respondent gives the example of the personality trait of being "bad at saying no" as a reason for why a person's workload might be unmanageable. This way of framing this particular situation displays a naturalized acceptance of the location of responsibility for the tasks given: this with the employee in question, and not with whoever allocates these tasks to that employee. Besides completely bypassing the question of power asymmetry, this demonstrates an identification with the responsibilities of the individual rather than the collective.

The use of this particular expression can also be seen in the following fragment:

"Maybe I am... because that was one of the things that came up, we were working with a PDP and that came up in some of the things we had to develop. Yes, it was always, the conclusion was always that I was a bit too easy, and too flexible. That I could be a little bit more firm, say no more often, that sort of thing." (FA: 184)

Again, this is a case of an employee being evaluated on her past performance, with the main conclusions being used as input for a PDP. Here, the meaning of the signifier can be seen as a re-location of the responsibility of task allocation with the employee who is receiving them. For the employee in question, this is "point for improvement". Her performance suffers because she does not adequately manage her workload. Again, the same identification can be seen here. The responsibility for organizational outcomes, formally elsewhere, is assumed by the subject in question.

#### **6.4 The interruption of the One: tracing the Real**

These ego ideals, assumption of responsibility and an embrace of the new, have definite consequences for the way in which subjects view, undertake and experience work. As such, it bears on questions of stress in relation to performance management. With the risk of running ahead of the discussion in chapter 7, one could say that the ego ideals that are prominent within the interview accounts encourage very particular identity work. Within practices such as performance appraisal, mentoring, career counseling and self-development training, employees are stimulated to identify with these singular ideals of what the perfect employee embodies. I argue that this image is particularly one-sided and, more importantly, that it holds out a promise of overcoming the divided antecedents of subjectivity itself. This fantasmatic image, by no means bound to this organizational context alone but resonating with wider societal discourses of self-actualization, is exploited within management practices in order to achieve certain goals in terms of work organization. However, as I shall demonstrate in the next chapter, these identifications are routinely interrupted by the Symbolic register in the course of the act of speaking, thereby engendering the possibility of their own subversion.

## Chapter 7 The performing subject of the Real

“We are not even semblance. We are, on occasion, that which can occupy that place, and allow what to reign there? Object *a*.” (Lacan, 1998: 95)

### 7.1 Introduction

The Lacanian account of subjectivity that I have pursued in this thesis has hopefully provided further insight into the structuring properties of management discourses, and the extent to which the signifiers that make up these discourses come to figure within the experience of subjects. We have seen how the moment of coming-into-being as a performing subject within Publica is founded upon a particular set of signifiers. This set of signifiers functions as a condition of possibility for the subject: it derives its being from the order of language. But at the same time, the subject finds itself placed in opposition to this Other of language.

Publica's performing subject is an entity that remains split between the Symbolic and the Imaginary, and that must exist in the void of the Real between the two. On the one hand, it is caught in a love relationship with its mirror image. In this captivity by the image, it becomes encapsulated in the Imaginary, where the ego comes to totalize the subject's relation to itself. The ego is involved in this dialectic of reassurance with its specular opposite, while it shapes itself in accordance with the internalized picture of the Other, the ego ideal. In this relation, the ego restructures itself on the basis of what the Other wants from it, in response to that introjected ego ideal. This is the only possibility that the conscious subject has for dealing with the overwhelming presence of the Symbolic Other, which constantly threatens the continuity and integrity of Imagined selfhood. In this manner, the ego becomes trapped into a love relation with its object, an attempt to fix and fulfill Other's desire. We have seen this in the identifications that subjects have constructed in Publica; by means of the assumption of “responsibility”, and siding with “the new” they responded to the idealized image they had constructed of the Symbolic Other. These identifications have come to stand in for the Other's desire, for what the Other wants from them.

But these identifications are at the same time subject to interruption by the order of the signifier. In the act of speech, the Symbolic order stops short the attempts of the Imaginary to suture the gaps within discourse, and to present oneself as full and whole. This stitching up of the fragmentary nature of the Symbolic order by means of Imaginary discourse is subverted by the play of the signifiers. They operate in ways that overturn the intentions of the conscious ego. Speech flows from elsewhere for Lacan. Namely, from the Symbolic order, where the signifying operations take place and meaning is engendered. Speech subverts the aims of the speaker, and allows the unconscious to flow into discourse, thereby destabilizing the Imaginary constructions that were created to prop up one's ego. As Lacan states in seminar XI: “[A]t the very moment when the signification of belief seems most profoundly to vanish, the being of the subject is revealed from what was strictly speaking the reality of that belief” (1977: 264). Meaning drops out from under the statement, and the subject is faced with the signifiers in their pure form: the Symbolic order as such. It cuts up the Imaginary relationship and confronts the subject with the structuring properties of the signifying chain.

The subject derives its status from the Symbolic conditions of possibility, from the set of signifiers that provide it with a form of being. In this sense, the subject of performance in

Publica can be understood as grounded by a particular chain of signifiers, which give rise to significations by means of their relative position in the network. This network, as we have seen, is characterized by metonymical and metaphorical movements of the signifiers. These processes of deferral and substitution are temporally halted, “punctuated” in a retroactive swoop, and thereby give rise to statements with intelligible significations. Furthermore, the signifying chain is held in place by the signifier “Different Government” within this context. This central signifier holds down a distinct area of meaning with regard to performance, allowing it to shift only within certain boundaries.

With the interruption of the Imaginary by the Symbolic, the Real follows suit. The intrusion of the Symbolic order is accompanied by its traumatic counterpart, the Real. The Real embodies the subject’s alienation from the Other, that which always keeps it one step removed from the Other’s desire. As the discourse of the subject is interrupted by means of contradictions and unraveling narratives, the Real introduces itself. Above and beyond the Symbolic interruptions in the Imaginary, where the play of the signifiers on the Symbolic level shows the contingency of meaning upon the signifying operations, these interruptions hint at something much more unsettling and traumatic. The identifications that subjects in Publica have formed become undercut, broken down by the interruption of pure signifiers. This introduction of something more represents the Real signifier, the empty and unaccounted-for signifier. As we shall see shortly, respondents sometimes hit on something unnerving, which completely derails their conscious sense of being. The object around which their discourse is circling suddenly disappears. Whatever they desire, it cannot be *that*. That’s not it, as Lacan would say. This moment represents a dropping away of the Imaginary veil of meaning, and a disturbing confrontation with the Real emptiness behind it. One is reminded here of Zizek’s example of the Magritte painting that depicts a half-opened window; through the glass, we see a sunny sky with a few clouds, but through the open crack of the window we see a harrowing, dark nothingness.

I will argue in this chapter that the subject’s encounter with the Real opens up the possibility of ethics. On the basis of such an ethics of the Real, we can approach the question of politics, which I will turn to at the end of this chapter. In this way, the subject of performance can change its relationship to the signification of performance, which I have presented up to this point. In order to arrive at this point, it is vital that we explore the subject’s relation to desire, enjoyment and the signifier. This chapter will therefore proceed as follows.

First, I will discuss a number of instances from the interview accounts where we can see an interruption of the consistency of the Imaginary. I will argue that this can be understood as an encounter with the Real (section 7.2).

Second, I will draw out a number of instances from the interviews in which we are confronted with Imaginary constructions that are fused with desire. Here, I will demonstrate how the Imaginary relates to the Real in terms of subjects’ relation to performance management in Publica. We see here that particular discursive elements can come to figure as an “object of desire” (section 7.3).

Third, I will further elaborate on the role of the subject in relation to desire and the Real by introducing the subjective stages of *alienation*, *separation* and the *traversal of the fundamental fantasy*. As we shall see, this will feature the subject as primarily inhabited by each of the three

registers. It therefore allows for an exploration of the different forms of being-subject to the Other, thus opening the way for considering the notion of ethics in relation to subjectivity at work (section 7.4).

Fourth, I will discuss each of the stages separately (sections 7.5 to 7.7). I will interpret the previously discussed material in light of these developmental stages in subjectivity, and touch upon the consequences that such a reading has for understanding the subject's existence within a regime of performance. As the relation of the subject to the Other's desire changes, the subject's relation to truth revolves as well. And finally, I will examine the political possibilities inherent in the subject's relation to the Real (7.8). I will also consider the potential for collective forms of identification and reinscription of signifying networks.

## **7.2 Tension, contradiction and failure in the Imaginary**

The Imaginary is characterized by its essentially doomed nature; it continually thwarts its original purpose. It is the source of the misrecognition that marks the subject's relation to itself. The effect of the various operations in the Imaginary is that of a conscious and self-commanding self, a Cartesian cogito that tricks itself into believing in its own agency. However, since Freud's initial conceptualization of the human unconscious, psychoanalysis has proclaimed that the story is much more complex. Mostly, the unconscious remains under the surface of human existence. It plays the role of a driving force in human decision-making and occasionally interrupts into people's speech, dreams, thoughts and actions.

In his re-interpretation of Freud, Lacan stressed the role of language in underpinning the notion of being within the realm of social relations. The acquisition of language enters the subjects into the social, and all rules, norms, and expectations become instilled in the subject through the language it acquires in its upbringing. The structure of the unconscious is quite simply the structure of language, holds Lacan. This equation of the unconscious with language in its constitutive role is perhaps the most important contribution Lacan has made to psychoanalysis, as well as to the broader debate on subjectivity.

As the unconscious, the Symbolic remains below the waterline of everyday life. The subject rarely catches a glimpse of the structuring properties of the signifier, and instead is engrossed in the narcissism and competition of the Imaginary register. But with every utterance, the Symbolic order engenders the meaning that the subject attributes to its statements. The Symbolic chain of signifiers provides the infrastructure by which language becomes functional in its use, so to speak. By means of the operations of metonymy and metaphor, the signifiers that a subject draws on are signified within the realm of the Imaginary (where the subject experiences meaning). As long as the Symbolic chain of signifiers operates smoothly, the subject is content within its Imaginary illusions that it has full control over itself and over the use of language. But every now and then, the speech of the subject runs into trouble. It comes up against an impediment that prevents the Symbolic operations of signification from taking place. The subject is suddenly confronted with the indeterminacy of the signifying operation, in which the signifiers can present themselves with an excess of meaning or an absence of meaning.

As we shall see, this failure of the Symbolic interrupts the consistency of Imaginary. I argue here that this can be understood as an encounter with the Real, the point of impossibility at the heart of the Symbolic Other. This irreducible lack is also what causes the subject to construct Imaginary identifications in order to cover it over.

The respondents in this study were asked to discuss their performance and how it was being managed. I also discussed their career prospects and ambitions with them, and most everything that came up in between the questions. The Imaginary themes that we have seen in chapter 6 give a good idea of the identity constructions that subjects employ in their interactions with others. In responding to my questions and reactions, the respondents indulged in these Imaginary constructions and spun narratives that revealed much about their ego and its relation to the ego ideal. However, the fragmented nature of the Imaginary could also be seen at times. One example of how the Imaginary becomes interrupted is when the discourse of the subject results in *contradictions*. Here is an example of such a contradiction found in the speech of the respondent:

“Q: Do you have time [to learn on the job], or is it something you try to do as you go along by taking on things you haven’t done before, and to try your hand at that?

A: Well, both actually, because yeah, you want to develop yourself more and more. At least, I know about myself what I am less good at, and what I want to improve, and, I am the kind of person who will do that on purpose, because you’ll get better at it. I hate giving presentations, but I make sure I do give presentations. So you also do it yourself, and uhm, yeah it is also just imposed on you, during your performance appraisal meeting, when you hear, you are bad at that, we’re going to handle it in this and this way, we’ll agree on that, well then you can’t do anything else but take your time for that, and hold yourself to it.” (RtFqz: 201)

In this excerpt, the respondent is talking about her skills at giving presentations in front of other people. At first, she asserts that she does not really like to do this, but that it is something she actively tries to improve by taking on tasks or responsibilities where she is forced to present. Shortly thereafter, however, she reveals that this has in effect not been her decision but that of her supervisor. Her supervisor has rated her presentation skills as insufficient during a performance appraisal, and has taken measures to insure that she will have to present more often, in order to learn to do it better.

In view of the characteristics of the Imaginary, this passage can be read as an example of how the subject can extend identifications in order to re-frame events. The respondent presents herself as enterprising and proactive in response to a question on how she approaches learning. She positions herself in relation to this particular ideal of the enterprising employee by stating that she tries to make an inventory of her skills and a plan of what she “want[s] to improve”, being the “kind of person who does that, because you’ll get better at it”. This narrative crumbles shortly thereafter, when she admits to having had these presentations allocated to her by her supervisor. It contradicts itself, leaving the story unresolved. This is one example of how the Imaginary becomes tangled up, shortly before it unravels.

I will discuss another example of such a contradiction below:



“Often, I’m like, what am I, 25 years old, what do I know? I don’t know anything, silly but that happens sometimes, you know, oh man. And what you really notice here, is that we are the ones who get all the information, and I also think that we don’t know that much, but the people above us know even less.” (IZ: 89)

The narrative contradicts itself here to such an extent, that it eventually collapses into nonsense. The respondent starts off by addressing her own insecurity as a relatively younger and inexperienced employee among her co-workers, and then declares that this lack of knowledge does not exist, as “we are the ones who get all the information”. The respondent is referring to a general knowledge of what is going on in the organization, but fails to make a coherent point on how the knowledge that she has compares to that of her supervisors (whereas she does choose to bring it up). It hits on something that she cannot grasp on the level of meaning, leaving it unresolved.

When a contradiction emerges in the narrative, it may catch the subject by surprise. The ego is caught in a relationship of identification with the ego ideal, and it attempts to re-construct itself on the basis of this. However, some of these identifications may be in conflict with each other, producing a crisis for the ego. These tensions cannot be resolved, as they are central to the current state of the ego. In the next fragment, the respondent becomes caught between two identifications, that of a caring and intrinsically motivated employee and that of a productive employee.

“A: Oh okay. But that will ensure, when you’ve got that, that you really do care about it. If something goes wrong, or uh, I,... look there are people who will think, at a quarter to five, I won’t try and make that placement, because that girl in that whorehouse in Amsterdam, you know, I wouldn’t be able to reach anybody anyway. Uh, Uh, I’ll do it tomorrow. But I don’t do that. I WILL try, because I really care. But I do also notice that I am becoming more immune. That I take the easy road sometimes, because if I wanted to do it, I would have to push everything aside. It’s really because of work pressure that you som... sometimes, you know, take the easy road.

Q: But why?

A: Yeah, that’s difficult to explain, I can see why that’s difficult for you to understand. You have to picture it like this, uhm, there are so many parties involved with such a child, you know, the children’s judge, the district attorney, sometimes the parents as well, social workers, and all those people are very difficult to reach. The district attorney’s office is always in court, the children’s judge is always in court, it is difficult to reach people at those institutions, everybody always has the day off or is ill, or God knows what. So when you still have some question you’d like to ask, uhm, uh, you can make life really difficult for yourself by calling all those people, or write them or whatever. If you just take the decision, it is not your problem anymore, the file is gone, and uh, uhm, yeah, that stack will just be a little bit smaller. You shouldn’t think that,... when it is about something really important, I will give it, you know, my attention, but uhm... I do notice, sometimes, that if I had had more time, that I would have made that extra phone call. Or I would have written that letter.” (BR: 294-298)

The respondent is talking about the tensions that arise in her work as a placement officer for a particular operational organization of Publica, that of Youth Care. She is responsible for the placement of young clients in institutional care or foster homes. She receives their files and arranges their placement. However, the agency she works at is extremely understaffed and the workload is considerable. In this fragment, she describes some of the stress that this entails.

The conflicting Imaginary constructs here can be seen in the roles she ascribes herself. First she affirms her identification with the ideal of intrinsic motivation, a genuine caring about her clients. In doing so, she also sets herself apart from the colleagues who “won’t try and make that placement at a quarter to five”. Declaring that she’s not “like that”, she posits an identity of a committed, motivated worker who will go to extra efforts to ensure that the client gets placed within a foster home or an institution, depending on the nature of the case. It is important to remember that this tendency to mark oneself off from others is part and parcel of the Imaginary register; it is a continuous production of relations of similarity and opposition (Parker, 2005).

Shortly after, however, she does admit to “becoming more immune”. It is at this point that she cannot maintain the identity she has set up for herself. The self-image she has cultivated of a committed employee, who goes beyond the necessary efforts to ensure that her client is placed as soon as possible, becomes untenable in light of the high workload she encounters, and the stress of the work itself. This becomes apparent in the lines “That I take the easy road sometimes, because if I wanted to do it, I would have to push everything aside. It’s really because of work pressure that you som... sometimes, you know, take the easy road”. The narrative turns around here and the respondent explains that time constraints lead her to spend less time on individual cases than she would like. The Imaginary identification of the committed employee becomes compromised in her eyes. Her ego ideal of what a committed employee should do is not congruent anymore with her own behavior, and this ego construction falls away in her account. This also means that her earlier move of setting herself apart from “other people” who would go home at five o’clock and forget about work, no longer stands up. We can read this in terms of an encounter with an impossibility in the signification of this narrative of the committed employee. The identification fails to materialize in a consistent way, and thereby is faced with a contradictory account.

Another instance in which this unresolved, incomplete nature of the Imaginary can be seen quite clearly is what I would call a *breakdown* of the Imaginary. In the illustration of this below, a partial ego construction of the subject falls apart and leaves the subject confused, and disoriented. In this case, the respondent’s speech becomes tangled up and comes to a halt. Signification fails, the subject is left exposed to the empty signifiers, stripped of their Imaginary meaning. She has no means of continuing the narrative and just stops.

“Uhm, I really have to dig it up again. Maybe that means I don’t use it enough. Uhm, I wanted to say, what was that again, that I had singled out, ‘cause I really wanted... negotiating seemed interesting to me... Learning more than just the few arguments I use now. I would have liked to improve my writing skills, we didn’t focus on that in the end, but that’s just a question of doing it, you know, I mean, I don’t have to get beyond memo’s at this stage. That’s kind of, I usually do that in a set format, rather than doing it verbally or whatever, so I try to take that into account. And uhm,

working together is really a point of attention all of the time. And I just don't remember right now... I don't remember now. [pause] At the end of the conversation with my mentor I had a number of them that I had... dropped. [laughs] Because they didn't make the cut [pause] Uhm.... [pause] No. They're not there." (RuSnd: 177)

After a question of mine regarding the progress she is making on compiling her PDP, the interviewee is talking here about a conversation she has had with her mentor. In this conversation, she will discuss which competences she will focus on developing for the next few years in her current job. When she tries to name the competences she values, she slowly but surely loses control over the narrative. It ends up with stuttering and finally absolute silence. The breakdown is total (clearly audible on the recording), and she is not sure anymore what to say. At this rather unexpected turn in the interview, I asked an unrelated question to put the interviewee at ease and to steer the interview back on course. However, from the abrupt nature of the breakdown, it is clear that in her speech she has hit on something unnerving to elicit such a response. Paraphrasing Lacan, this passage may be read as an example of how the signified "slides under" the signifier; the "bar" that excludes the one from the other becomes especially tangible to the subject. As a result of the opening up of this gap between signifiers and their meaning, she temporarily loses the capacity to function on the Imaginary plane and the conversation breaks down.

In the final fragment that I will discuss here, the same disorientation can be seen.

"Well, and now again, I am in a new place, and the competences I will be evaluated on have already been decided on. In half a year I will have to, I will get my first evaluation, uhm, very clear agreements are made on that. Uhm, it's a useful tool [bandva], it's not... Hmmm, how shall I say... It's also very different, because I have, first I had the competences of Publica, with the PDP form of Publica, but in the end I worked with those of [another ministry] because I found them much better and clearer. Because I have a friend in the middle of a job application who has just graduated, I will give her my PDP form, and I will give her, oh you know here are some competences, see what you can do with them. You know, because they sometimes ask at job interviews what are your strong points and what aren't. In order to develop yourself, I find it a helpful tool [in English] to look at, you know, what do I want to improve upon. What I think is the difficult part with competences, or with your PDP, how do you make it measurable, or how do you make it concrete? You know, how do I know whether I have grown, for me that is just a feeling. I think." (NN: 93)

The respondent speaks on the topic of competences and how they will be employed in her performance evaluations. Towards the end of the narrative, there is a break. Her account of how she finds competences useful comes to a halt, and she turns to the limitations. Immediately, the logic of her story falls away as she declares that competences fail to account for her "feeling". This passage can be read as a failure of the subject's Imaginary construction to capture her experience. At the very moment of this failure, the structuring effects of the Symbolic order, the system of language as a whole that structures subjectivity, become visible to her. The subject glimpses the ways in which the signifiers that she draws on are alien to her, and provide her with the stuff of her being. This is a moment in which the Imaginary fails,

and in which a void opens up before the subject, allowing her to see how the Symbolic signifies her experience. The identification of the subject with the discursive construction of performance management fails here, and the signifiers are apparent in their emptiness. The final questioning of her own “feeling [of] growth” in this passage serves here to bracket the subject, to call the conscious subject into question. It marks a moment of doubt at the end of this speech act, by which the statements on development that come before it are questioned by the subject, and almost contradicted.

### 7.3 Desire and the Imaginary

In the previous section, I have discussed some of the moments where the failing character of the Imaginary may be seen in the text of the interviews. The Imaginary, as we have seen, is a dimension of subjectivity that aims at the covering over of the traumatic lack left by the subject’s separation from the Other. The subject is driven to constantly fill this void with images. It uses these images to construct identifications and consequently to reconstruct its ego on the basis of them.

This lack in the center of language is perhaps what characterizes the Lacanian conceptualization of subjectivity more than anything else. Everything else in subjectivity is in constant movement. The Symbolic chain of signifiers is ever in flux, in an interplay of referral and substitution. The Imaginary, as we have seen above, is always being reformulated, built up and broken down again. The lack arises out of the instating of the signifier. The Imaginary gains its meaning only relative to the Symbolic order, and provides the subject with the signifieds that speech evokes. However, the Symbolic order itself is never controlled by the enunciating subject. It always signifies more than it intends to convey. In this way the unconscious speaks through the subject.

Whenever the subject gets a sense of this unconscious dimension, as we have seen in section 7.2, the very emptiness of it is disconcerting and confusing. The subject gets a sense of the beyond of the conscious, sensory world that it occupies itself with most of the time. The structuring effects of language feel far removed, somehow alien to one’s experience of self. These constitutive aspects of the Symbolic order bring an uneasiness to the subject, invalidating, as they do, the identifications that make up its ego. This feeling of being-removed can be thought of as the Real lack in Lacanian subjectivity.

In Lacan’s theorization, the lack gives rise to desire; the anxiety that the Real evokes, causes the subject to focus its desire on the ever displacing signifier of it that takes the place of this lack. Lacan often equates this signifier of lack with the signifier of the Other’s desire: what the subject really wants, is to fill or “plug up” the lack in the Other. It wants to overcome the failure in the Other once and for all. The subject always focuses its attention on the signifier of this lack, the object *a*.

The Imaginary works to cover over the lack of subjectivity. As such, the Imaginary is dependent on the whole operation of desire. The cracks in the Symbolic, the shards of the Real that the subject gets a glance of, are the impetus for the construction of Imaginary identifications. The failure of language to exhaust the being of the subject, is in a sense the motor for the constant movement of the subject itself, in a struggle to re-find itself within the

Other. This inadequacy of the Symbolic Order to fully signify experience simultaneously frightens the subject and draws it in. The fascination of desire is a defining mark of the subject, in the sense that it is what sets it apart from the Symbolic order as such, but the acknowledgment of this void is never made. It is continually filled by identifications, which give the subject the impression that it exists within its cogito.

Lacan has stated that “the ego is the metonymy of desire” (2006i: 534). In his commentary on this little known Lacanian formulation, Fink argues that “[t]he lack at the level of the unconscious is static: it is forever the same. At the conscious or ego level, however, that lack is in constant motion, always moving on to something else” (2004: 101). In the gaze of desire, the subject’s fixation on the object *a* remains steady, but at the same time the object takes on a new incarnation constantly. It is always fleeting, and the subject can never totally grasp what fascinates it. The object will have displaced itself already. What the subject held for the signifier of the Other’s desire, turns out to be not quite what it was looking for. There is always something missing, always something more to be desired. It is in this sense that Lacan says that the ego can be equated with the constant referral of desire. This sentiment can be seen in some of the interviews. It gives a good impression of how one can understand the alienation of the subject by language; it distorts and always gives the subject the sense that there is something lacking.

For instance, it can be seen in the next fragment. Here, the respondent expresses the feeling that her job is not giving her the satisfaction that she would want, but at the same time, she cannot pinpoint where the problem is.

“Well, I don’t know. I’m a bit confused at the moment, because uhm, well.... Because I kind of, I like this job a lot, but I’m just going through a moment where I think, is this it? So uhm, I find it difficult to tell, you know this program helps me to reflect on, do I still want this? And am I still learning enough? And is it challenging enough? Because when you start writing a personal development plan, you think about those things. And you’ll have your own mentor, and a personal trainer, and I haven’t really thought these things through. You know, looking to the future, and that’s what your question was based on, and yeah what do you want from that? And I really don’t know at the moment.” (BR: 190)

From a Lacanian point of view, the phrase “is this it?” can be seen as an example of how desire works. It gives the subject the feeling that there is something more to be had, and it in this some-thing that the object takes shape. The subject invests a particular phenomenon with desire. It becomes fascinated by that object, and pursues it. However, the object soon displaces itself and the subject’s economy of desire fixates itself elsewhere.

It is in the working of desire that the nexus of Real-Symbolic-Imaginary really lies. The three dimensions come together at this, and although they are distinctly different from each other, they have a stake in the working of desire, so to speak. The Imaginary is ultimately a distillation of the ego ideal, an image of the Symbolic order. At the same time, it props up the ego in response to the traumatic dimension the Real. It comes to stand for the demand of the Other to the subject, that which it wants from the subject. But the Real remains the insecurity at the heart of the subject’s preliminary answer to the Other’s demand. There is somehow a structural limit to the identification of the subject with the Other’s question, the demand that

the subject attributes to it. Anything beyond this demand (expressed in the ego ideal) is of the order of desire, and it aims to address the question of “che vuoi?” (Lacan, 2006k): I know this is what you are asking of me, but what do you really want?

In the next fragment, a respondent explains how she became caught up in the social pressure of finding a suitable job after she came back from a placement abroad. (This is part of the same interview quoted in section 6.3 above).

“And when I came back to the Netherlands I noticed how much we were concerned with what the others were doing. What are you doing nowadays, and you know, I’ve got a job already, and well, did you hear this and this person is going to a new salary scale, you know. I’m quite ambitious when it comes to this stuff, and if someone else was going to skip a salary scale, I could do it too. That would be my goal. And uhm, you put, I put a lot of pressure on myself by doing that. Hey, suddenly I realized that the period between, I think I came back in February, I had until September to find a job, so that really works out, you know the ministry isn’t going to invest all those thousands of euros in you just to let you go, so I didn’t feel the pressure of applying for jobs. But because other people were already working so hard at it, and had jobs already, and so on, I started to really feel the pressure. And especially [the feeling of] how good am I really, because you’ve got a really big group of people you have to compare yourself with. So I did that too. And now I can make that comparison quite well, but in the beginning it was difficult, and halfway through it, it was as well. In a traineeship like that, because it can make you really insecure. Especially the time that I was writing that master thesis. I really was dead tired. Because you were doing a course together with those people, those people were just as far into it as you were, but might be better at something than you were, or... I really had the urge, and I think a lot of us did, to always be the best. And that can make you really insecure. Yeah. And other people saw that. Yes, that was difficult sometimes.” (JS: 165)

This fragment represents a strong example of the interlocking mechanisms in the Imaginary with respect to the Symbolic and desire. The respondent provides an account of how her identity went through a process of heavy change when she returned from this foreign placement. Cast back into the competitive group of Publica trainees, she found herself experiencing a certain social pressure to compare herself with others and to find a high-status job within the organization. From a relatively isolated position, the subject re-finds her place within the Symbolic relations of the workplace. Subsequently, her desire is aroused by what she perceives as the demands of this Symbolic network. Before entering back into this group of trainees, she admits to not having any direct ambitions with regard to a new job. But upon her return, she becomes engaged in the job hunt as much as the other trainees. In Lacanian terms, we can say that she becomes invested in the Other’s desire: she wants to respond to what the Other wants from her. In the comparisons she makes between herself and other trainees, she constructs an ideal of what the Symbolic Other wants. This can be considered the ego ideal here, the condensed image of the Other’s demands as it appears for this subject. The subject internalizes these demands, and pursues a job where she can “skip a salary scale”. It is interesting to note that she stresses the rivalry that is part here of the interactions between the trainees. She relates to them as Imaginary others.

In addition to becoming entangled in the competitive relations introduced on the Imaginary level, the subject re-authors her ego construction on the basis of this ego ideal. She “puts pressure on herself”, and immerses herself in the activity of comparing her own abilities with those of Imaginary others, and with what she believes the Other wants from her. This identity work of holding one’s self up against perceived standards, is what constitutes the main process of identification. Inevitably, the subject ends up re-constructing her identity on the basis of the Other’s discourse.

At the same time, the subject describes how the demand for a good job also makes her anxious and insecure. She questions her own abilities on the basis of the rivalry with the other applicants and her trainee colleagues. This can be read partly as a confrontation with one’s desire. It plays on the notion that there is something behind what the Other asks, that the ideal that the subject aspires is not the final answer. This is always somewhat disconcerting to the subject since it touches upon the limitations of its own Symbolic universe. Language cannot capture this anxiety fully, as it is inherently part of desire itself. It is the flipside of desire, so to speak.

The Imaginary, in its endeavor to make the traumatic Real palatable to the subject, provides the subject with a false essence that it stands to lose at any given moment. Desire takes shape at the point where that emptiness of the Real surfaces. The cracks of the Symbolic provide desire with a space in which it pursues its object. This object appears to the subject as an image, but as an image which entrusts the subject with a promise to become whole again. What the subject eventually stumbles upon, is *jouissance*.

“[...] the imaginary and the real act on the same level. [...] Think of the mirror as a pane of glass. You’ll see yourself in the glass and you’ll see the objects beyond it. That’s exactly how it is- it’s a coincidence between certain images and the real. [...] The real objects, which pass via the mirror, and through it, are in the same place as the imaginary object. The essence of the image is to be invested by the libido. What we call libidinal investment is what makes an object become desirable, that is to say how it becomes confused with this more or less structured image which, in diverse ways, we carry with us.” (Lacan, 1988a: 141)

### 7.3.1 *An ethics of the Real?*

I have argued that the Real interrupts the signifying effects of the Symbolic and the Imaginary identifications of the subject of performance. It hereby disturbs any kind of total discursive determination of subjectivity. In this encounter with the Real, the subject becomes confronted with its Imaginary misrecognition of the nature of its being, and the indeterminacy that is inherent in the Symbolic order. In this moment of breakdown, of encountering the void, we can imagine the subject as faced with a choice of acknowledging this Real lack, however difficult or impossible it may be. This choice posits the question of ethics, and it is to this question that I now turn.

Specifically, it concerns the concept of the ethical act in Lacan’s work. In simple terms, one can say that a subject engages in an ethical act at the moment it takes responsibility for the Symbolic. The subject has to acknowledge that the Symbolic is the defining register of subjectivity – its being is completely dependent on, and derivative of the signifier. Language feeds into anything the subject experiences, and makes possible its sensation of being. Now,

the Imaginary register, as the realm of consciousness, exists as somewhat independently of the Symbolic order (although it is clearly being shaped by it). But the operations of the Symbolic are nevertheless present in much of the subject's actions, experiences, utterances and so forth. "Bungled actions" can stand as an example of this working through of the Symbolic into the Imaginary. A bungled action is an action in which Symbolic impulses thwart the original (Imaginary) intention of the subject. The ethical dimension in subjectivity comes into play at this particular point. To Lacan, an "act" can come to be defined as ethical when the subject accepts and *recognizes* the Symbolic impulses that constrain or pervert its intentions, and that constitute it as failure. When the subject takes these upon itself as its own, this can be thought of as an ethical act. The ethical for Lacan is always a matter of congruence with one's desire. It is the acknowledgement of the desire that underlies one's actions that classifies it as ethical (Evans, 1996: 57).

This conceptualization of ethics is closely bound up with Lacan's own clinical work and his aims as a teacher of future analysts. As a clinician, Lacan is most interested in helping the subject to overcome its symptom. With the risk of some simplification, one could say that Lacan's major concern is with the restoration of the trajectories of desire, by getting the subject to embrace its being in the Symbolic and by doing so, its lack-of-being.

In the rest of this chapter I will attempt to address this question of ethical engagement in the context of the research account that I have presented so far. However, it is not a matter of directly applying a Lacanian ethics of the clinic to an organizational setting. The concerns that I outlined in chapter 3 have served to position the subsequent reading of the signification of performance in Publica, and I will begin to explore the question of how a critique may be formulated on the basis of it.

We have seen that subjects are cast as "performing" in particular ways by a network of performance signifiers. Furthermore, we have seen that organizational practices foster and channel specific forms of identification in order to further fill in what it means to be a performing subject. At the same time, I have shown how these identifications are not total, but in fact failing continually. While it may be tempting to view these twin movements of Symbolic determination and Imaginary identification as a dialectic, I will argue that it is precisely the concept of the Lacanian Real that allows us to reflect on the political and ethical significance, as well as to think possible alternatives to the current modes of subjectification.

#### 7.4 Three glosses on the subject

In the following, I will focus on the Lacanian stages of development as a way of approaching the questions raised above. I have already briefly discussed two of these stages in chapter 4, namely *alienation* and *separation*. In his later work, Lacan hints at the possibility of going beyond the fantasy and I will argue, following Žižek and Fink among others, that this presents another subjective stage. I will refer to this stage as the *traversal of the fundamental fantasy*. These three stages can be thought of as representing the different ways in which the subject relates to its own being-subject. In other words, it represents the nexus of language, desire and enjoyment in its different possible constellations.



A closer look at these stages will provide insight into the various aspects of subjectivity in relation to performance at Publica. I have discussed the Symbolic and Imaginary dimensions of performative subjectivities in Publica, highlighting the signification of performance as well as the identification with discursive images. I have also highlighted how these registers become subverted by the order of the Real. However, I feel that it is important to draw the Real in more strongly, in order to provide a stronger coherence to the Lacanian perspective that I have employed in this study.

The Real is structurally necessary for a Lacanian understanding of the subject, in that it accounts for the interrelations that exist between Symbolic and Imaginary aspects of subjectivity. We have seen how the Imaginary constructions of subjects in Publica serve to protect them from the traumatic encounter with the structuring capacities of performance signifiers. This Imaginary effectively shelters them, at least temporarily, from the realization that the very structure of their experience belongs to the realm of the Other, and is only made possible because of it. The Imaginary plays the part of providing them with a sense of identity to shield them from this emptiness. When we saw these constructions eventually break down, subjects scrambled to erect them again on the basis of a different incarnation of the Other (within the ego ideal).

The Real provides the main driving force behind these movements. The subject's will to conform to the Other is based on that which the Other possesses for the subject: the Other's desire. The subject yearns to be the object of the Other's desire, and thus tries to put itself in the place of that desire. At the same time, the subject's desire presents it with the limitations of the signifier; the Symbolic order is somehow incomplete, in the sense that no words can describe what the Other lacks, and thus what the subject really wants. This can be seen in the instances in section 7.2 and 7.3 where subjects struggle to describe their desire, to symbolize it, but inevitably come up short. Language fails them, at this point.

The stages of alienation, separation and traversal of the fundamental fantasy describe this relation of the subject to the Other. As the subject goes beyond the early stages of being alienated or "barred" from the Other by language, it comes to relate to the Other as desire. This means that the traumatic instatement of language and the subject's experience of being removed from a former wholeness now have a signifier. That signifier represents the Other's desire and is of course object *a*. In the final instance, the subject's relation to the object *a* is taken further from the grip of the Other, resulting in an overcoming of the initial fantasy (S in relation to *a*).

For Lacan, these are the stages through which the (neurotic) analysand goes within the course of analytic treatment. They represent the development of the subject, the coming-into-being and to come to terms with the overwhelming force of the Other and its desire. However, I argue that these stages may be productively read within the context of this study as representations of *political* possibilities. Having presented a reading of the language of performance within Publica as a Symbolic Other, in response to which a specific subject of performance comes into being, it becomes important to approach these various ways of relating to that Other as possible modes of existence within a particular Symbolic context. They represent avenues in which the desire of the subject may take shape, and give insight into what the potential is for resistance on the individual level.

## 7.5 Alienation: the subject as Imaginary

The stage of alienation commences when the subject enters the order of language, the Symbolic order. The subject becomes a placeholder within the Symbolic order, and is inhabited by language. Hence, the subject only comes into being in the stage of alienation, since, for Lacan, subjectivity starts with the unconscious. Lacan's symbol for the alienated subject is the barred S, the subject that is crossed out or cancelled by language. This invokes the idea of the subject as irrevocably removed from its initial unity with the Other, a state which it cannot go back to. The subject's initial *jouissance* of being within the Other is sacrificed when the subject comes into being in language.

At this point in its development, the subject is as yet unable to formulate its own desire, or take notice of the desire of the Other. It is only able to relate to the Other by means of *demand*. Demand is the basic formulation of the subject's wants and needs into the framework of signification. It means that the subject looks upon the Other to fulfill its request, and in order to do so it must address the Other through the Symbolic. The subject must speak in order for it to be heard by the Other, in order for the Other to satisfy its request. In doing so, it formulates its demand as the Other's demand (Fink, 1997: 235) and vice versa. In other words, the subject's demand transforms itself in such a way that it comes to believe that the Other demands it from her. As in speech, the subject receives its own message back in inverted form, in Lacan's words. Speech is, after all, always a form of demand. In addition to this reversal of attribution, demand is also characterized by its status of fixation (Fink, 1997: 26). It is focused on the Other, and does not displace itself as desire does. It relies upon that Other for its satisfaction, rather than being able to graft itself onto different surfaces. Desire, as we have already seen, has a metonymical character and is constantly shifting.

Lacan formalises the stage of alienation in the following way: barred S in relation to D (demand). This is also written by Fink (1995, 1997) in the following way:

Other  
barred S

The Symbolic Other obscures or dominates the barred subject here. The subject is overcome by the Symbolic order, and forced to formulate its demands in terms of signifiers. Its demands always already belong to the Symbolic Other. This is the subject as deprived of its selfhood, as an empty marker that owes its existence to the Symbolic.

The alienated subject can also be seen, following Lacan's (2006k) conceptualization of the Graph of Desire, as the "treasure trove of signifiers". It represents the subject in relation to the whole of the signifying network, where speech functions as the demand it addresses to this network. From its place within the network, and the way in which its demand is assembled into speech, it gains meaning. This meaning arises from the place of this network, as we have seen: it is produced by the retroactive punctuation of statements. The enunciating subject is here nothing other than another signifier within that signifying chain. The signifier is that which represents a subject for another signifier (Lacan, 1977: 198), by which Lacan highlights the necessary mediation of the relation between signifiers in anything that concerns the subject. The subject is always mediated by language, and cannot have any direct access to

being but by means of the signifier. And in this relation, meaning crops up from the locus of the Other, “the field of that living being in which the subject has to appear” (Lacan, 1977: 203).

The subject is at this stage only able to relate to the Other as the primary guarantor of its existence. It depends for its being on the Other, as the subject who is barred from itself by the order of the signifier, the discourse of the Other. Unable to relate to the Other directly, it must voice its demand in the form of language. Everything it wants is addressed directly at the Other. This language makes it already dependent upon the Other, since the Other embodies the order of language.

The violent instatement of language in the subject confronts it with its own lack of being, and the subject’s response is to cover this over with the Imaginary. In this way, we can understand alienation as a form of identification, according to Lacan (1977: 256). Accordingly, he links it to the mirror stage (1977: 257). As we have seen in Chapter 4, the subject comes into being in a kind of state of proto-subjectivity when it encounters its mirror image for the first time. In the encounter with the alienating force of the signifier, the subject seeks to perpetuate this Imaginary identity. Because of this response to the instatement of language, the subject of alienation is in important ways stuck on the level of the Imaginary. At the same time, the Imaginary is dependent on the subject’s advent in language. The ego ideal is made possible by means of the introduction of the subject into the Symbolic order. The Other therefore provides the conditions of possibility for the process of identification, so central to the Imaginary.

Lacan argues that the mirror stage provides the “mainspring” for forms of narcissistic identification, mainly found in the ego’s relationship to the ego ideal after the initial coming into being of the subject. As the subject comes to function within the Symbolic order, the Imaginary takes on the role of shielding the subject from its own lack of being, and providing it with a “semblance” of being instead. In this way, the Imaginary becomes the vehicle through which the subject can come to terms with the Other, by means of the ego ideal. The relation of identification is the main way for the subject to relate to the Other as *demand*. From the vantage point of the ego ideal, the subject comes to view its ego as the expression of its subjectivity, insofar as that ego gains stability within the dialectic of the mirror stage. The ego ideal comes to embody the demands of the Other for the ego, and it seeks to remodel itself in the image of this ideal. It seeks to conform to the Other’s demands. In this context, Lacan also speaks of another type of identification, namely one with the signifier of the Other’s desire, rather than the Other’s demand (this pre-empted my later discussion of the stage of separation). The subject can come to a point where it can start to relate to the Other in terms of something more than pure demand. I will return to this in the next section.

The question that is prompted by this discussion is the following: how can we conceive of demand within the context of Publica, with regard to the performing subject? And what significance does the subjective stage of alienation then have? I devoted Chapter 6 to the discussion of the basic mechanisms of identification and how they might be seen in the interview text. I then explored two main points of identification for subjects within Publica with respect to their performance at work. These were what I called “assuming responsibility” and “embracing the new”. These points of identification may be seen as elements of an ego ideal that subjects aspire to, and as a point of direction for their identity work. They can be

understood as a “unary trait” (Lacan, 2006k), insofar as they embody only a very partial and particular image of the Other. I demonstrated how these partial ego ideals may be observed within the interview accounts, and how, on the level of meaning, they serve a role for channeling the desire and identity constructions of the subjects in question. These identifications that employees have constructed within Publica may be seen as exemplary for relating to the Symbolic Other as demand. The subject’s identification with an introjected image of the Symbolic (the ego ideal) is most closely related to demand for three reasons.

First, subjects re-articulate their ego in response to what they attribute to the Symbolic Other. They reformulate the Other’s demands of them in terms of their own demand. The ego ideal they have constructed for themselves in terms of performance comes to stand for what they want to be *for the Other*. This relation to the ego ideal is subject to the typical reversal we can see in the relationship between demand and the ego. Our demand is the Other’s demand. Subjects talk about their performance in terms of what they want, but by doing so they are articulating their relationship to the ego ideal, the internalized image of the Other’s demand on them.

Second, the identification does not displace itself; it extends itself to the point where it falters and breaks down, as we saw in earlier in this chapter. In other words, these identifications are fixed rather than metonymical in nature. Therefore they correspond to demand rather than desire. Subjects have a relatively well-defined idea of what the Other demands of them, what they must do or be to conform to the Other’s demands.

Third, the identification takes place on the level of meaning rather than the level of the signifier. This is on the level of the conscious subject, rather than the unconscious. It does not concern the structuring capacities of the signifier, but is rather aimed at assemblages of meaning. These assembled meanings are the result of the particular significations produced, in defined temporalities. They are always provisional and subject to re-signification by means of new forms of meaning production, as we have seen in chapter 5.

This is why the identifications with “responsibility” and the “new” may be seen, par excellence, as an expression of demand that is directed at the Other of performance. These identifications that we have previously seen, the fascination with the “new” and the assumption of responsibility, are taken up by the subjects in this study, to a greater or lesser extent, as a point of re-articulation of their conscious self. They come to regard themselves through the lens of this specular representation of the Other. In the partial ideal of the assumption of responsibility, we saw how employees talked about their willingness to take work on board. In doing so, they were eager to set themselves apart from what they regarded as undesirable types of behavior, where actors did not accommodate unexpected tasks as the respondents themselves professed they did. In the partial ideal of the “new”, we saw how subjects presented themselves as part of a movement of change within Publica. In order to present themselves in this way, they drew on an idealized, stereotypical version of what the “old” ways of working and organizing work implied, and they juxtaposed this with their own stories, in which they embodied the role of the more entrepreneurial, productive and autonomous employee.

These two points of identification fulfill their role in shielding off the subject from the intrusions of the Symbolic, at least to the extent that the Symbolic register is not experienced

as such by the subject. That is, until it interrupts in speech. The identifications aim to totalize the subject's relation of demand to the Other. This can be seen in the way in which employees discuss their performance in relation to their identity and their personal abilities. The Imaginary constructions they have set up for themselves aims to encompass their whole being. It links their performance in the workplace to a whole apparatus of personal characteristics and competences. This implicates the performance-driven subject into a whole trajectory of re-authoring of its ego, and re-inscription of the relationship between time and activity. This has been well documented within Foucauldian studies of the labor process under competence management and developmental versions of HRM (Townley, 1993, 1994; Deetz, 2003).

For our concerns, what is important here is that the subject's desire is foreclosed, and channeled in a ready-made Imaginary template of performance. In this way, the subject is made to relate to the Other as pure demand. It can only go through the means of the relation to the ego ideal, identification, in order to address the Other and gain access to the Other's guarantee for its being-subject. The subject's relation to what the Other lacks, what is wrong in the Other, where the Other fails, is obscured by the way the Imaginary casts the subject as demand. This prevents the subject from being able to identify with the signifier of the Other's lack. By doing so, it frustrates the subject's desire by providing it with a pre-made, easy answer. This conceals the failure of the Other, the incompleteness of the signification of performance and the possibilities that this lack represents.

A question that comes up when analyzing these processes of identification, is how they have come to take up such a position within the subjectivity of employees. The rhetoric that is produced within Publica concerning the changes that are happening on the organizational level (the Different Government program), as well the emphasis on how the individual employee's behavior tie in to this, and have certainly had an effect on the creation of these ego ideals. How do these subject positions, as they are being put forward within the discourse of Different Government, present themselves as images for identification? What makes them desirable? I suggest that the promise that they represent is the most important factor in their becoming-desirable. They put forward a promise of wholeness, a suturing of the constitutive lack of subjectivity. I return to this notion later.

#### *7.5.1 The failure of identification in alienation*

Within the dynamics of alienation, the subject is completely overcome by the Symbolic order. It relies on the Imaginary to come to terms with this insertion into the structure of language. It takes up an empty place within the Symbolic chain of signification, and is confronted with the loss of its original jouissance, the state of being-with the Other. The Imaginary takes on the function of representing the Other to the subject, but this is an essentially hopeless endeavor. The identifications that subjects use to cover over the traumatic lack of being, eventually encounter interruptions in the form of the Symbolic order (such as in slips or contradictions) or in the form of its necessary companion, the Real (such as in breakdowns). In the narratives that I explored in this chapter, the identifications became entangled in interruptions from the Symbolic/Real nexus.

The subject's relation to the ego ideal forms the demand that the subject addresses to the Other, but this Other will interfere in this dynamic. Within thought, the subject protects itself from the Other by means of a hermetic relationship to the ego ideal, the introjected Symbolic. But as soon as it starts to engage in speech, the Other makes itself felt: meaning in speech is

always already overdetermined. This disrupts the narcissistic relationship of identification that takes place on the level of demand.

At the same time, within this demand of the subject, there is a trace of desire. There is something that cannot be given meaning or accounted for by the Other. This is where the stage of separation comes into play. Identification attempts to encapsulate the failure of the Symbolic order, as it covers over that object that symbolizes the lack in the Other. When the subject comes to realize this, it has entered into the stage of separation. The subject has gone through the stage of separation when it has come to understand that

“[i]t is to this object that cannot be grasped in the mirror that the specular image lends its clothes. A substance caught in the net of shadow, and which, robbed of its shadow-swelling volume, holds out once again the tired lure of the shadow as if it were substance.” (Lacan, 2006k: 693)

The Imaginary compensates for and protects the subject from the object of desire, which is at the same the traumatic reminder of the subject's removal from the Other. To acknowledge this, implies that the subject can begin to relate to the Other as desire. It can start to understand that the Other is missing something, that the Symbolic order as such is fallible. In this movement, the subject of enunciation can move from being an empty signifier in the Symbolic chain, to being something more, something else: a relation to desire. The subject can come into being as fantasy. This initiates the stage of separation.

## 7.6 Separation: the subject as Symbolic

When one refers to the process of alienation of the “barred” subject, attention is drawn to the violent structuring nature of language. It refers to language in the sense of its mortification of experience, as a forced choice or *vel* of moving into the Symbolic order, thereby splitting oneself off from the Other. It places upon the subject the categories of its signification, and by this something original or pre-linguistic is irrevocably lost. This loss is forever inscribed into subjectivity. Insofar as one can speak of a universal characteristic of the Lacanian subject, this lack is its defining mark.

But the relation of the subject to this lack, this pre-conscious loss, can change. In this section, we are concerned the subject's stance with regard to the lack in the Other, resulting from its separation from that Other. Whereas the stage of alienation foregrounds the relation of demand with respect to the Other, the stage of separation casts the subject's relation to the Other as desire. The stance to the Other is thus at stake here. It is important to keep in mind here that I use the stage of separation in the sense of a political category, more so than in the sense of a stage of development. The subject's relation to the signifying network and its gaps is what is at stake here. The notion that we are dealing here with the signification of performance in the context of work organization further draws attention to the political implications of this.

Separation finds its expression in the realization of the subject that the Other is not complete. This entails the discovery that the Other lacks something, that it is not complete and all

embracing. There are gaps and fissures, signifiers that cannot be accounted for, that miss their coherence. Lacan expresses this as follows:

“By separation, the subject finds, one might say, the weak point of the primal dyad of the signifying articulation, in so far as it is alienating in essence. It is in the interval between these two signifiers that resides the desire offered to the mapping of the subject in the experience of the discourse of the Other, of the first Other he has had to deal with, let us say, by way of illustration, the mother. It is in so far as his desire is beyond or falls short of what she says, of what she hints at, of what she brings out as meaning, it is in so far as his desire is unknown, it is in this point of lack, that the desire of the subject is constituted.” (1977: 218-219)

The Other begins to fail in the subject’s perception. There are nonsensical elements within the domain of the Other, meaning that the Other cannot provide.

“A lack is encountered by the subject of the Other, in the very intimation that the Other makes to him in discourse, there emerges in the experience of the child something that is radically mappable, namely, *He is saying this to me, but what does he want?*” (Lacan, 1977: 214, emphasis in original)

The subject comes to view the Other as imperfect and lacking in something, and this gives rise to the subject’s desire to plug up that gap. It wants to be *that*, that which the Other misses: “[t]he desire of the Other is apprehended by the subject in that which does not work, in the lacks of the discourse of the Other” (Lacan, 1977: 214). In the same movement by which the Other’s desire is acknowledged by the subject, it becomes signified by object *a*. This signifier comes to stand in for the place that the subject seeks to occupy, that which it desires to be.

“But there is another function [besides identification with the ego ideal], which institutes an identification of a strangely different kind, and which is introduced by the process of separation. It is a question of this privileged object, discovered by analysis, of that object whose very reality is purely topological, of that object around which the drive moves, of that object that rises in a bump, like the wooden darning egg in the material, which, in analysis, you are darning – the *objet a*.” (Lacan, 1977: 257)

The object *a*, the signifier of the Other’s desire, has been previously discussed with regards to its function. Once it becomes instated, it forms the linchpin of the subject’s desire. It becomes the object in which the subject invests its own lack of substance. As the subject becomes more aware of the lack in the Other, and the limits of the Other’s ability to respond to its demand. The object then becomes the site of the subject’s attention, the place in which it tries to fulfill the desire in the Other, and in which it can come to live out the desire the Other has for it.

The object *a* comes to stand in for the Other. In Lacanian shorthand, this takes the following shape:

Object *a*  
Barred S

The subject, barred by language, now obtains its being from the relation to the object. Rather than just taking up an empty space within the Symbolic order, the subject is now desiring, and thereby caught in a relation of fantasy. The subject thus comes to relate to the Other as incomplete and lacking in something. Its stance toward the Other becomes less weighted down by the asymmetry, as is the case in the alienation. The overwhelming nature of the Other's demand drops away to some extent, as the subject comes to view itself not as totally dependent on the Other, but rather as the supplement to the Other, in trying to situate itself in the Other's desire.

There is another gloss that can be cast upon the stage of separation. The subject can come to glimpse the Symbolic as the constitutive dimension of its subjectivity. As it becomes aware of the gaps in the Other, it ceases to relate to the Other solely as demand. In fact, this failure of the Other to tend to the subject's demand, opens up the space for the Symbolic.

The signifying chain breaks the hegemony of demand, and thereby introduces something strange and unexpected into the subject's discourse. As we have seen in chapter 5, within the Symbolic, there remains an overdetermination of meaning. The interplay of the signifiers results in a cacophony of signification. As we have seen, mostly one signification will win out over the others (by means of its relative position within the network of signification), but this nonetheless implicates the dominated meanings in a certain statement. They continue to resonate, and reveal more than the speaker intended. This frees up the space for unconscious thought to break through the flow of speech.

We can therefore say that the stage of separation represents the subject as Symbolic; it comes to terms with the "invasion" by the Symbolic by means of the very failure of it embodies, namely the Real. Here the subject has to take responsibility for the Symbolic – to account for how the Other determines it. Its action, its slips, its being are the result of the Other. It should take responsibility for the unconscious determination of its acts, beyond its intentions that exist only within the Imaginary register. Hence, separation can be conceived of as a coming to terms with the workings of the Symbolic order. The subject gains a slight awareness of how language feeds into its mode of understanding itself, and how it determines the very possibility of being within social relations.

In this chapter we saw how Imaginary constructions can break down in the course of the construction of a narrative, where the subject ventures into speech but cannot defend its identifications against the interruptions of the Symbolic registers. Language is radically overdetermined and subverts the intentions of subject by letting alternative meanings ring out, by slipping contradictions into the story, by inserting irresolvable knots of signification, causing the narrative to unravel itself. Or alternatively, subjects may stumble upon non-signifying elements that find their way into the words they use. These interruptions in the Imaginary register point toward the principal role of the Symbolic in subjectivity, and it is by means of these infractions that the Symbolic reinstates itself. The network of language takes precedence over the various identifications that emerge within this field, as an attempt to reduce the radical Otherness that is embodied in it. As the subject itself slides across the signifying chain in speech, the Symbolic signification of performance spills over in the accounts that subjects try to present of themselves as performing individuals. They cannot help but presenting more than they know about themselves. Somehow, their Imaginary identity constructions fail to fully account for what they represent to the Other, what the



Other expects of them. They struggle to embody (and recount) what it is the Other wants of them.

This can be seen quite clearly in expressions of the nature of “that’s not it”, as I explained above. Subjects may argue that the system of competences fails to account for their experience, and in making this claim, they are asserting that the Other fails to provide for them. They invoke the lack in the Other to situate themselves. It should be clear that this brings us into the thematic of separation.

By means of these expressions of incompleteness, the concept of desire becomes relevant to understanding what drives the subject in this context. At the point where the field that signifies performance in Publica begins to falter, where it fails to provide the necessary signifiers for the subject to voice itself, it becomes invested with desire. Certain objects take on the guise of the Other’s desire. They extend the promise of doing that which the Other cannot yet account for, that which it desires. It extends the promise of becoming one with the Other.

This can take the shape of an upward career move, the possibility of working on a certain project, an excellent performance appraisal; this comes to stand for what the Other (one’s manager, parents, society, friends, peer groups, lifestyle magazines) wants from me. The subject may come to believe that it can fulfill this role for the Other, that it can be that which plugs up its lack. However, when the invested object is obtained the promise is left unfulfilled. Yes, one has what one wanted, but it was not exactly what one thought it to be: this is the displacement of the object *a*. What is begotten in the process is a satisfaction that falls short of the promise that the object *a* extended. This is the *jouissance* that the subject gets off on. However, the subject still asks itself the question: “I know this is what you are asking, but what do you want from me?” With this sentiment, the object of desire displaces itself to its next incarnation.

#### *7.6.1 Separation, ethics and desire*

In coming to terms with the mechanisms of the Symbolic order, the subject can come into being as an ethical subject. For Lacan, ethics is embodied in the subject’s acknowledgment of the unconscious and its constitutive role in subjectivity. Ethics is bound to truth, and Lacan is adamant that truth is of the order of the unconscious. To act ethically means to take responsibility for the unconscious, in the form of the Symbolic and the Real, and the fumbled acts that are caught up in it. In short, it means to claim one’s place in the incomplete signifying chain.

In his seminar on ethics (1992), Lacan presents his reading of Sophocles’ tragedy *Antigone*. In this play, Antigone becomes caught between the decree of the gods and the law issued by her father, the king. When her brother Polynices dies in battle, the king orders that he shall receive no burial as retribution for his failed deeds on the battlefield. Antigone, however, feels bound by the law of the gods that every body must receive a proper burial, and takes it upon herself to bury him. In doing so, she invokes the wrath of her father for disobeying him, and is subsequently killed.

It is by virtue of Antigone’s connection to her brother as sibling, that she is bound to the Symbolic law of the gods to bury him, and her obedience to this causes her to die. Lacan

argues this is a matter of taking the determination by the Symbolic as duty, and pursuing it to its limit. This is what makes it an ethical act. Antigone is determined by the Symbolic order, situated in the field of the Other (Lacan, 1992: 277). Her relation with her brother is a prime example of this determination, as it is one of the axes around which social order is organized. However, her father's refusal to bury him has driven Antigone to the very limit of that Symbolic order, to the point where his orders and the law of the gods contradict each other, She is faced with an impossibility: choosing between obeying her father and honoring the Symbolic relation to her sibling. Antigone's decision is ethical precisely because she takes responsibility for the Symbolic.

Antigone's insistence on a proper funeral for her brother is unconditional. This goes beyond any Imaginary conception of the decision, as imbued with autonomy and deliberation. She cannot help but take this position, and remains immovable in the Symbolic relations that determine her, making it a decision within the Symbolic. Antigone's decision is a fidelity to the limit of the Symbolic determination of her own being. Her insistence runs the risk of upsetting the Symbolic fabric, because of her refusal to obey her father, and it is because of this that she can be thought of as occupying the place of the Thing, the Lacanian Real. Her decision to honor her commitment to the gods will cause her to die, and explode the law of her father. Her position is thus at the point of failure of the Symbolic, when it is interrupted by the Real: "involved here is an invocation of something that is, in effect, of the order of the law, but which is not developed in any signifying chain or in anything else." (1992: 288). On this account, Lacan argues that she takes up the place of the radical limit of what binds her to her brother in the order of language (1992: 279).

In Lacan's reading of Antigone, we can recognize the ethical act as a moment where the subject takes responsibility for the structuring role of the Symbolic and Real. For our purposes, we can conceive of the embrace of the ethical act as the moment where the subject acknowledges the determining effects of the signifying chain, in all its multiplicity and overdetermination, and the point at which they break down. This means being open all the different significations that may ring out when a signifier is invoked in relation to the rest of the chain, and to possible failures of signification.

The metonymic relation of the signifier gives rise to its signification, as we have seen, but these signifying effects are at the same time manifold and contradictory, and fundamentally unstable. The possibility of ethics implies that the subject can begin to recognize both the potential and the impossibility embodied within the signifying chain. However, to come to this point, it must begin to concede to its own lack of substance as subject. For this, there is a further separation that must be undertaken.

When we regard the stage of separation, we focus on the subject in relation to the Other's desire. Rather than treating the Other as the ultimate guarantor of the subject's being, we get to focus on the role that the lack in the Other plays. The subject creates for itself the role of plugging up that lack, of being what the Other wants it to be. However, this other stage of development that can be discerned in Lacan's work, is the traversal of the fundamental fantasy. All desire is still subservient on the Symbolic order, it all derives from the Law of the signifier. What is at stake in this final movement is the subject's movement away from the Other, by means of the subjectivation of the drive.

## 7.7 Traversing the fundamental fantasy: the subject as Real

The traversal of the fundamental fantasy represents the subjectifying of the cause. It is the moment (logical rather than temporal, see Fink, 1995, 1997) at which the subject takes up the place in which the Other's desire previously was. This stage can be thought of as the last step in the gradual displacement in the relation of the subject with respect to the Other. It represents the final ethical moment in the subject's taking responsibility for the presence of the Other and the Other's desire, and their place in subjectivity. As such, it provides an important starting point for my concern to use Lacan's notion of subjectivity to understand work, organization and the subject of performance. As we shall see, it is at this limit of the Lacanian notion of the subject that we can begin to situate the possibility for new trajectories of desire and jouissance.

In the discussion of separation above, we have seen that the Other's desire is represented by means of the signifier object *a*. Object *a* embodies for the subject that which the Other lacks, that which bars the Other from being whole, being One. The signifier of the Other's desire extends the promise to the subject of taking the place of this gap, of completing the Other. As Lacan so often repeats, "man's desire is the Other's desire". In the stage of separation, the acknowledgement of the Symbolic ushers in the Other's desire; the subject can come to face its signifier instead of constantly trying to shield itself off from it. The traversal represents a further separation, in that it shakes up the inscribed, rigid way of relating to this signifier (*a*).

This can be conceptualized by means of a thinking through the Lacanian formulation I just cited. In a sense, the subject's desire is for the same thing as that of the Other. This is one way of reading the formula. This refers to the subject's wish to embody the signifier of the Other's desire, to plug up the gap in the barred Other. It wants to be what the Other is missing. This is why it continually tries to obtain the elusive object *a*, which inevitably displaces itself and incarnates itself in the next object. But it also refers to the notion that the subject's desire is structured in the same way as that of the Other. This plays on the idea that there is something in the desire of the Other that has nothing to do with the subject. Some part of the Other's desire exceeds the subject. There is something that the Other desires that is *not* the subject's desire. This is what taunts the subject about it: as soon as the separation has occurred, the subject comes to understand that the Other wants something else, something that the subject cannot give it. This is what prompts the initial separation. The third term, the metaphor of the Name-of-the-Father, intervenes in the unity between the subject and the Other (or, rather, the subject as wholly consumed by the Other) and symbolizes the Other's desire by means of object *a*.

What is at stake in the traversal of the fundamental fantasy is the breaking up of the tie between the subject's desire and the Other, and reconfiguring it into a less fixed relationship. It represents a bringing into play of a desire that exceeds the Other, something that is not connected to the desire that the subject had previously experienced, but something that can situate itself at the level of pure jouissance. This pure jouissance springs from what Lacan refers to as the *drive*. The drive is of the order of the Real, whereas desire always retains a trace of the Symbolic. As Lacan states, "desire is merely a vain detour with the aim of catching the jouissance of the other", whereas there is also a "jouissance beyond the pleasure principle" (1977: 183-184), beyond the transgression of the Law.

Desire must be understood as bound to the Symbolic order. It is not something free, but slips through the cracks of the signifying chain. Desire is thus always conditioned by the Law. Lacan argues that “[d]esire is situated in dependence on demand”, as a “metonymic remainder that runs underneath it” (1977: 154): it always situates itself as a transgression of the Symbolic, even if it is in a space in which the Symbolic is absent. It remains bound by it. However, the traversal of the fundamental fantasy indicates a possibility to escape this stifling dimension of desire. Beyond the confines the Other’s desire, the subject exists in the context of its drive. This drive is the pure pleasure-seeking aspect of subjectivity, a “headless subject” (1977: 181) and its advent in Lacan’s work marks a shift from his earlier, more linguistically oriented work. The drive represents the subject’s will to *jouissance*, which orients it toward the object *a*. The drive circumvents, encircles or moves around the object (Lacan, 1977: 168). It can be thought of as an insistence on enjoyment that functions separately from the Symbolic social reality of the subject, and that takes shape in the Real. This is an important shift in Lacan’s thinking, because it means that the subject is no longer an empty space, but that there is a force in the drive, a pleasure-seeking agency as such.

The drive orients toward the irreducible aspect of the Real, that which is not related to the Other or the Other’s desire, but to the trauma that structurally resists symbolization. This is where the subject encounters *jouissance*, when it pursues the object. Desire is always bound to the Symbolic, whereas the drive’s pleasure-seeking is the subject’s encounter with the Real that cannot be subjectified: “desire comes from the Other, and *jouissance* is located on the side of the Thing.” (Lacan, 2006: 724). In the traversal of the fundamental fantasy, the subject comes to identify itself with the drive. It goes beyond the fantasy, which holds up a particular rapport with the object. This fantasy relationship is what maintains the subject’s desire, and not the object itself: “[t]he phantasy is the support of desire; it is not the object that is the support of desire. The subject sustains himself as desiring in a more complex signifying ensemble” (Lacan, 1977: 185). This concerns the necessary failure of the fantasy to deliver on the promise of a reunion with the Other, of plugging up the lack in the Other. This means that the subject must come to accept that desire always results in an experience that falls somewhat short of its mark. In other words, that the object of desire always evokes a “that’s not it”. Once the subject traverses this idea of situating itself in the Other’s desire, it gains a freedom to pursue its enjoyment in less fixated ways.

This means that the subject must go beyond the relationship of fantasy. Lacan refers to this as “getting-himself-out” of the relationship with the Other, in which “he will simply find his desire ever more divided, pulverized, in the circumscribable metonymy of speech” (1977: 188). To go beyond this relation of fantasy also means that the subject puts itself in that place, that it takes the place of object *a*. This is different from trying to embody object *a*: this is fundamentally impossible. It means that the subject takes responsibility for what brought it into being, and what causes it to be desiring. It means that the subject assumes the responsibility of *jouissance*, and that it acknowledges the pain/pleasure it derives from its own relation to the Other. Only this can bring into being a new relationship, a traversal of the ingrained fantasy relationship to the Other’s desire that the subject is caught in. Its relationship to the object *a* can change from then on, in ways that are less strictly regulated by fantasy.

This is another way in which one can read Lacan's take up of "wo es war, soll ich werden". In the place where the object *a* was, the subject (as drive) must come into being. In Lacanian algebra, this corresponds to the following movement:

Barred S

Object *a*

The traversal of the fundamental fantasy implies a further separation from the Other, by taking responsibility for the jouissance begotten from encountering the Real (i.e. the failure of the Symbolic). What is at stake is a subjectification of the drive, by making oneself its object (Lacan, 1977: 195). The traversal therefore posits the possibility of removing oneself from the stifling relationship to the Other. I will now consider the importance of this possibility for our present concerns with subjectivity in organizational settings.

In the previous discussion of the signification of performance in Publica, we have seen that the signifying network puts forward a particular constellation of signifiers that all bear on the notion of "performance". "Performance" comes to embody an Other for subjects, which provides them with the possibility (and necessity) of being *performing* subjects. This is the Symbolic dimension of subjectivity, which functions as a determining influence. However, we have seen that this Symbolic determination is far from totalizing. Signification is not a one dimensional or singular process, but a multiple and indeterminate one. Conflicting or alternative meanings arise in the process of signification, and retroactive glosses may impact on prior significations. Metaphor may allow for creative jumps in the use and dissolution of signifiers, and slips, slurs and contradictions may lead to unexpected outcomes.

At the same time, we have seen that this indeterminacy in the signifying network proves to be anxiety-inducing for the subject. It confronts it with the empty nature of the Other: the Other has no plan, no rationality, no order that makes sense to the subject. Therefore, the subject ascribes a sense to the Other by creating a condensed, simplified version of it. This is the ego ideal. The ego ideal provides the starting point for the identifications that the subject cultivates, as a way of avoiding the frightening lack within the Symbolic. We have seen that these identifications are stimulated and channeled by specific management practices, for the purposes of control and work intensification. This is where we must locate the *fundamental fantasy of performance*.

However, the register of the Real cuts up these identifications. The Real can be seen in the fragmented and partial way in which these identifications manifest themselves. I have also showed, earlier in this chapter, how they may break down completely within the process of speech. The potential for a traversal must thus be sought in these interruptions of the Real. They serve to distort and upset the fantasy relationship that the subject cultivates with "performance". A traversal must consist in an acknowledgement of how subjectivity itself is caught up in the signifying network of performance, and how identification forms a failed attempt to obscure the subject's dependence on this signifying network. At the same time, it means an embrace of the multiplicity of that signifying process, against premature closure by management practices that seek to fill in the blanks. I will explore this question further in the next section, where I take up the problematic of a politics of the Real.

## 7.8 Subjectivity, ethics and the political

In this study, I have documented how the concept of performance is signified within Publica, and how it functions with respect to subjectivity. The performing subject comes into being with respect to this signifying chain of performance, in such a way, that it can be seen as an Other from which the subject is always once-removed. This gap between subjectivity as such and the Symbolic Other of performance gives rise to a play of identification and desire. In this play, a relationship of fantasy is established that provides a temporary effect of closure of this structural gap. It extends the promise of completing the Other, of satisfying one's own dissatisfaction as well as that of the Other (the system, the organization, the department, society).

This fantasy takes place in very specific significations: it revolves around the embodiment of a "new" government worker. It entails that one embraces the responsibility for tasks and projects eagerly, that one monitors one's work behavior for possible improvement, that one works late to get the job done, that one internalizes the organization's goals, and so on. These aspects of the ideal employee play into the promise of enjoyment that is at the heart of it. If you play your part, you will be rewarded – with enjoyment. This *jouissance* is promised in the form of job security, career mobility or challenging future tasks, just to name a few. This makes up the fantasmatic relationship that holds up an enjoyment that ultimately falls short of its promise, as we have seen already.

The identifications that subjects construct with the partial ego ideals in Publica have very specific effects in the organization of work. They lead to a devolvement of responsibility and labor intensification. These effects can be seen most clearly in the identification that I have called "assuming responsibility", where subjects put themselves in a place of responsibility for tasks that they are not formally accountable for. The identification that I have called "embracing the new" works to strengthen this, as well as the wide range of self-disciplinary moments and transformative effects on the ego that I have discussed in chapters 5 and 6.

These effects have been widely studied within critical management studies, and can be found in a wide variety of organizing processes. Within public sector organizations, they have been most closely associated with enterprise discourse. The enterprising employee becomes subject to an increasingly harsh organizational climate, where the demands on performance are going up and employment security is dissipating (see Legge, 1995; Keenoy, 1997; DuGay, 1996). The discourse of enterprise enables the fantasmatic relation of subjects to the signification of this changing employment relationship. We have seen in the course of this study how desire is used instrumentally within management practices to foster certain identifications, which in turn serve managerial purposes. We have seen above that Lacan defines the fantasy relationship as that which ties the subject to the Other's desire. So it is by means of fantasy that subjects become locked in these arrangements, and it is by breaking up the hegemony of this fantasy that more ethical forms of being become possible. The collective nature of this fantasy, and its role in facilitating particular identifications in relation to the present organization of work raises the question of politics. How is this fantasmatic relationship upheld? And what is the scope for resistance?

In order to come to terms with these questions, it is important to introduce a Lacanian conception of politics and the political. A Lacanian view of the political and of politics de-

centers the concept of traditional politics, confined as it is to the sanctioned institutions and forums for democracy. Social reality can be understood through the Symbolic field of signification. All social relations are made possible and occur with (or occasionally at the fringes of) the Symbolic. Similarly, ideology can be understood as part and parcel of the Symbolic order (Žizek, 1989): its very structure is a part of human subjectivity and the fantasy relation toward the traumatic object of the Other's desire is what sustains it. Politics is merely one part of the reality-constituting function of the Symbolic order, and the supporting Imaginary processes that uphold the fantasy relationship. Traditional conceptions of politics, on the other hand, must be understood as fantasmatic, in the sense that they accord an important role to institutions and processes that do little to put into question the discourses that govern our everyday perception.

According to Stavrakakis (1999), the political must be conceived of as the very limit of this screen of social reality. The moment of the political is the encounter with the Real, the point where social construction fails. This is also the possibility of creation and destruction of the Symbolic order. Stavrakakis cites Lefort stating that “[t]he political is thus revealed as the ontological level of the institution of every particular shaping of the social (this expression denoting both giving meaning to social relations and staging them)” (Lefort in Stavrakakis, 1996: 73). Whereas traditional politics attempt to cover over the necessarily incomplete nature of all forms of discourse, the political moment is for Stavrakakis, as for Žizek, the traumatic exposure of this failure.

We have already seen above that Lacanian ethics represent a coming to terms with the nature of the unconscious and its role within subjectivity. For our discussion of politics here, it is important to foreground the role that the Real plays in that which remains unconscious to the subject and to the social field more generally. Besides acknowledging that the Symbolic provides us with the structural basis of our experience, it means that we also recognize the impossibility that is at the heart of this Symbolic. This means that the traditional ethical ideal of the Good, to which the human subject must aspire, becomes displaced. This ideal is itself a fantasy of the One, of a wholeness and harmony that can overcome the fundamental failure at the heart of subjectivity. The ethical is precisely to move beyond the fantasy of the One. The subject must acknowledge the incomplete nature of being. There is always something lacking, because this lack is the very split from the Other that brings us into being.

An important step in moving beyond the fantasy of reuniting with the Other, of perfect satisfaction, is to realize that every attempt to suture the Real will be interrupted. The subject spins Imaginary “inertias” against the traumatic nature of the Real. It fills the void that was left by the split from the Other with identifications, that eventually are thwarted by the interruptions of the Real. The identifications of the subject are engendered by the subject's relation to object *a*, and in this way, the Imaginary constructions are embedded within a relation of desire. This fantasy relationship covers over the Real, and reinforces the importance that the Imaginary accords itself. As noted earlier, the ego is understood as

“... a means of the speech addressed to you from the subject's unconscious, a weapon for resisting its recognition; it is fragmented when it conveys speech and whole when it serves not to hear it. Indeed, the subject finds the signifying material of his symptoms in the disintegration of the imaginary unity that the ego constitutes.

And it is from the sort of interest the ego awakens in him that come the significations that turn his discourse away from it.” (Lacan, 2006f: 355)

When the Imaginary construction of the subject breaks down, the possibility of glimpsing the “signifying material” of one’s symptom emerges. This productive potentiality of the encounter with the Real is also acknowledged by Deleuze and Guattari, who state that

“It is the point where the structure, beyond the images that fill it and the Symbolic that conditions it within representation, reveals its reverse side as a positive principle of non-consistency that dissolves it: where desire is shifted into the order of production, related to its molecular elements, and where it lacks nothing, because it is defined as *the natural and sensuous objective being*, at the same time as the Real is defined as *the objective being of desire*.” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1977: 342, emphasis in original)

This desire that takes shape between the illusion of the Imaginary and the ordering properties of the Symbolic, is the emancipatory force that can give rise to new, different ways of living. It is at this nexus that new forms of organization and being can be initiated, the point at which social reality takes shape. For these authors, schizoanalysis provides a way to force this moment of the encounter with the unknown and unrepresentable and in this way, to break through the sedimented properties of Imaginary representation. It is this encounter with the Real that makes ethics possible. Like Antigone’s insistence on her brother’s burial, to act ethically is to take responsibility for the Symbolic and its radical limit in the form of the Real, by occupying the place of impossibility where it dissolves.

#### 7.8.1 *A politics of the Real?*

The task then, for political analysis, is to give way to acknowledging this structural failure at the heart of subjectivity, politics, and social reality as such. It must carry out the subjectivation of the lack. This is a paradoxical endeavor: it entails the study of that which, by definition, cannot be symbolized or put into words. The Real resists all attempts to capture it. For Stavrakakis (1999), this entails the rejection of what he calls the “ethics of harmony”. This means that any political utopia that forms an implicit or explicit part of a political philosophy must be refused. The Real should be understood as an integral part of social reality, something that is a structural necessity in any manifestation of social relations. Social reality is by its very nature disjointed and incomplete. Any attempt to cover over this failure, to present society as potentially balanced, is to engage with fantasmatic politics:

“It is the constitutivity of this moment [of our encounter with the Real] in Lacanian psychoanalysis that proves our fantasmatic conception of the socio-political institution of society as a harmonious totality to be no more than a *mirage*.” (Stavrakakis, 1999: 73, emphasis in original).

Zizek (2006, 1989) has shown how populist ideologies are structured around the idea of a foreign entity, which threatens the societal order that would otherwise function perfectly well. The foreign element (which can be recognized in various discourses as the Jew, the Muslim, the immigrant, and so on) is an empty signifier in this ideology, onto which all ills of society are projected. In the structure of these ideologies, the empty signifier of the outsider is an attempt to plug up the Real. It accounts for all the dissatisfaction, for the failure to fully enjoy.



The social order is always structured around this hole, this remainder that cannot be symbolized. Populism gives a certain fantasmatic spin on this structural condition of being in relation to the social. It creates a narrative that attributes the loss of *jouissance* to the outsider:

“The anti-Semitic figure of the Jew (to take the example of this sublime object) bears witness to the fact that the ideological desire which sustains anti-Semitism is inconsistent, ‘self-contradictory’ (capitalist competition and pre-modern organic solidarity, etc.). In order to maintain this desire, a specific object must be invented which gives body to, externalizes, the cause of the non-satisfaction of this desire (the Jew who is responsible for social disintegration).” (Žižek, 1997: 76)

The figure of the Jew comes to stand in for the ideological desire of anti-Semitism, and although internally incoherent, this figure props up the populist ideology. It represents all problems, as a scapegoat who can be blamed for everything that is wrong. It is by showing the very inadequacy of this populist image to cover over the deep underlying contradictions that the constant failure of this ideological discourse can be made to surface. Žižek’s study of populist discourse demonstrates precisely how Lacanian political analysis can engage with ideology critique without engaging in a utopian ethics. To understand the political, the shaping moment of social reality, it is important to show how the Real structures the Symbolic-Imaginary axis of ideologies. Although the Real itself has no positive ontological status and cannot be represented as such, it can however be *encircled*. Lacanian analysis can trace the movements of the Real by means of the Imaginary and Symbolic constructions that surround it. The Real, as a traumatic remainder of the division at the heart of the subject, is overcoded with identifications and empty signifiers that aim to explain it away.

This can also be seen in McGowan (2004) who argues that current western (notably American) society is characterized by an injunction to enjoy, which is upheld by means of the fantasy-image of full, total *jouissance*. For McGowan, this is rooted in the decline of authoritative structures in society that regulate social life by means of the mechanism of prohibition. Where this former regulatory ideal maintained its function by means of the escape provided by transgressive action, the new order merely engenders obedient subjects. The economy of commanded enjoyment that has come to supplant traditional authoritative systems blindly reproduces the Symbolic power relations within society. Although it sustains an image of radical *jouissance*, it fits comfortably within a capitalist system. Also here, we see that the fantasy of the whole, of perfect enjoyment, sustains the ideological discourse. For McGowan, as for Žižek, the way out of the ideological deadlock is to break up this Imaginary fantasy and pursue a partial *jouissance* of the drive.

The question that has been asked by critics of this Lacanian approach has been following: what is the point of political analysis, when it is decoupled from the emancipatory goals of utopian ethics? The cursory answer here is that an analysis of the political can hope to contribute toward what has been referred to as moving beyond conformity and utopianism (Stavrakakis, 1999: 98) and an ethics of the drive (Glynos, 2000). This takes the traversal of the fantasy as an ethics, as the ontological possibility for distancing oneself from the ways in which fantasy structures our relationship to the symbolic Other of ideology.

### 7.8.2 *Beyond the fantasy of being Different*

We have seen in the case of Publica, that the failure of the Other is covered over with identifications that aim at ideals of the “new” and “responsibility”, yet the notion that gives them coherence – the signifier of “a different government” – remains empty. This very lack of content reveals the functioning of the Real. At the same time, the signifier of “Different Government” works as a screen upon which identifications and fantasy take place. In its very emptiness, it allows these ideological fantasies to fill it in, at least temporarily. In this way, it ties the discourse of performance together in an Imaginary way. Until, inevitably, this construct fails and falls away.

In the light of the previous discussion, my study of Publica’s signification of performance and its relationship to subjectivity can also be seen as a way to encircle the Real limit of the field of signification: it addresses the failure of the Symbolic Other of performance, and the subjects’ struggles to cover this over. The political aspects of my study may be seen in the ways in which the identifications of subjects in Publica are channeled in certain directions, and are thus meant to provide a certain (Imaginary) construction of reality. I have discussed how these identifications are constructed and how they do not manage to fully account for the subjectivities of employees within Publica. Instead, these identifications fail and in their breakdown, they give rise to the possibility of traversing the fantasy of being “different”, that is held up within this discursive context. In the moment of the Imaginary decomposition, subjects struggle to rebuild their ego identities. This re-assembling of Imaginary constructions carries within it the possibility of a re-articulation of those identities, beyond the confines of the dominant fantasy, and glimpsing a different way of relating to the lacuna in the Symbolic Other. It is my hope that this study can further stimulate the momentum of such a traversal.

## **Chapter 8 Conclusion**

### **8.1 Introduction**

In this concluding chapter, I will reiterate what has been achieved up to this point, and what implications may be drawn from this study for the understanding of subjectivity at work. Having introduced a Lacanian perspective on how workers are constituted as performing subjects in a specific organizational context, it is important that we now consider the value of these insights for academic and political purposes. With regard to the development of academic knowledge on the topic, this consists of an examination of the outcomes of this study in the light of existent debate on subjectivity in organization. In addition to this, I will consider the possible contribution that this study can make to the political struggle for more sustainable, inclusive and fair management practices. Here, I will implicitly draw on the conceptualization of a politics of the Real that I have discussed in the previous chapter. This will go some way towards situating the main conclusion from the present study within a political project for radical democracy.

Therefore, this chapter will proceed as follows. I will discuss the significance of this thesis (Section 8.2) by outlining the contribution made by each chapter to the overall argument, and by providing more general remarks on the contribution of this study to the field of organization studies.

After this, I will briefly return to the thematic of politics in relation to the present study (section 8.3). I will argue that it is in the naming and the critique of the particular fantasy at work in an ideology that we can locate a vital political project, one that represents the possibility of traversing this empty promise encapsulated in the managerial fantasy of performance.

### **8.2 The contribution examined**

This study has sought to create an account of how the performing subject comes into being within a specific organizational context. It has documented some of the ways in which managerial practices impact upon the selfhood of employees by means of the language in which they are couched. We have seen this in the Symbolic determination of subjectivity, in which the language of performance carves out a space for the subject in the organizational context, thereby eliciting a host of significations of what it means to perform, which are nonetheless incomplete. At the same time, I have argued how this Symbolic chain of signifiers continues to function as something Other and alien to the subject, thereby putting into motion the processes of the Imaginary. In this respect, we have seen that managerial practices put forward particular images of performance, which form the object of identification for the performing subject. These identifications are an important influence on the behavior of the subject at work. Therefore, I have sought to highlight instances in which identifications are partially or fully interrupted within the speech acts of respondents. I have argued that these instances indicate the possibility of “traversing the fundamental fantasy”, which implies going beyond narrowly defined identifications with respect to the Symbolic network. The more stringent trajectories of identification that we saw being put forward in Publica may serve as an illustration of this. Their interruption allows the subject to glimpse the indeterminate

nature of the signifying network. For this reason, the traversal indicates the possibility for the subject to change its position with regard to the Other, in which it engages in more partial and fragmented forms of identification rather than being caught in a narcissist fantasy of autonomy and rationality. In Lacanian terms, it indicates the possibility of a subjectivation of the lack in the Other, away from the promise of a rejoinder with the Other. Because of this, we must locate resistance at the level of the encounter with the Real.

In order to spell out this rather condensed summary a bit more clearly, I will now revisit the contribution made to the overall argument by each individual chapter, and suggest ways in which the field of organization studies and managerial practice may benefit from them.

In chapter 1, I have re-asserted the importance of studying subjectivity in the workplace. It provides a way of examining the interrelations between selves and social processes, thereby accounting for the diverse ways in which power is reproduced through them. I have proposed the study of performance in relation to subjectivity, in particular, since this allows for a conceptualization of how workers are disciplined in organizational settings, and how it is that they come to act in conformance with what is expected of them in terms of performance. I have argued here that the employment relationship hinges on the wage-effort bargain, and that it is translated into organizational policy by means of the concept of performance. The purpose of this study has been to trace the way in which this notion of performance is signified in organizational contexts, and how it impacts subjectivities. Here, I have also designated government organization as a case for studying the intersection of subjectivity and performance, because it allows for an exploration of the spread of business management discourses in a context in which they previously had relatively little impact.

In order to further the debates on subjectivity in organization studies, I have proposed to take the work of Lacan as a starting point for this study. In doing so, I felt it necessary to single out some of the paradoxes that are associated with this. In short, it is important that we acknowledge that Lacanian thought cannot bring the final answer to subjectivity to organization studies, since at its heart, it pertains to a different discipline and a different field of practice (“psychoanalysis is not a science”). In addition, its insights are partial, not comprehensive (“there is no such thing as a metalanguage”). Any use of Lacanian thought therefore always requires a careful interpretation from one context to another, an activity that must be undertaken each time anew when we engage Lacan in organization studies, for fear that it becomes a programmatic exercise or a machine that is simply applied to empirical phenomena.

In chapter 2, I have introduced the case study of Publica, by drawing out some of the most important developments in the organizational context. I have devoted special attention to the “Different Government” program, which has proved to be an important factor in the signification of performance in Publica. The discourses that comprise the “Different Government” program are in many ways similar to those described under the heading of New Public Management. However, this study has specifically sought to look for the localised ways in which the signifying network of performance is imbued with meaning in the organizational context of Publica, rather than following the accepted insights on the introduction of New Public Management in the public sector. In order to access this problematic of the local significations produced by particular discourses and their place in the subjectivities of employees, I have followed Lacan in arguing that we must take speech as the primary unit of

analysis. In speech, the various operations can be observed by which language becomes simultaneously constitutive of and meaningful to the subject. Therefore, they provide insight into the structuring properties of discourse. I have also stressed here the importance that translation has played in drawing out this insight.

The main point that can be taken away from this chapter is that it is important to focus on language in a contextualized and embodied sense, rather than on a wholly systemic and abstract level. This concerns the level of “la parole” rather than “la langue”, in Saussure’s terms (1974). Discourse does not fully determine the social practices that are enmeshed in it. As we have seen in chapter 5, there is considerable indeterminacy within the process of signification, and this has far-reaching implications for the way in which we think about subjectivity in terms of structure and agency.

In chapter 3, I have sought to discuss some of the current debates in organization studies on subjectivity, power and resistance. I have argued here that critical organization studies are currently faced with the need to escape overly deterministic or romanticized images of worker subjectivity. The influence of Foucauldian thought has been strong in previous conceptualizations of subjectivity, and here we see an initial stream of accounts in which subjectivity is mostly seen as an ontological effect of disciplinary power. Broadly speaking, this has prompted a response that favors practices of resistance in relation to managerial attempts to produce particular subject positions. Following recent interventions in the debate, I have maintained here that the current theoretical account of subjectivity is in need of fresh insights. I have argued that the study of subjectivity, power and resistance may be advanced by introducing a Lacanian perspective. This allows us to conceptualize subjectivity as able to accommodate conflicting discourses, following from Lacan’s notion of the divided subject. In addition to this, I have argued that Lacanian theory provides an account of how language fails to exhaust the subject, to account for it fully. This introduces the notion of desire into subjectivity. With these two theoretical advances in mind, I then sought to position the approach to the Lacanian oeuvre that might be taken from the central questions of this study.

From Deleuze and Guattari’s critique of Lacan in *Anti-Oedipus*, I have taken three main guiding principles for my reading. First, it is vital that subjectivity is not equated with either consciousness, individuality of life history. For this reason, a psychoanalytic study of organization should not set out to create individual (or organizational) case histories, but rather take the problematic of subjectivity as a starting point for an exploration of the social. Second, desire should not be conceived of as merely based in loss or lack, but should instead be viewed as an affirmative life force. Here we encounter a sharp difference between Lacan on the one hand, and Deleuze and Guattari on the other, in how the term desire is used. I have argued (both in chapter 3 and later in chapter 7) that Lacan’s conception of the drive must be seen as largely sympathetic to what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as desire. Third, and most importantly for organization studies, the Symbolic Other must be seen in terms of the capitalist relations of production, rather than in a familial sense. This ties a psychoanalytic approach in with the critique of political economy, and its deployment in organizational settings.

Furthermore, following Butler’s discussion on the “suppressed psychoanalysis” in Foucault, one can argue that a Lacanian conceptualization of the subject is not necessarily in opposition to a Foucauldian view. The Foucauldian subject comes into being as tied to specific

conditions, and the same is true for the Lacanian subject. I have given an account of precisely this point in chapter 5, to which I will return shortly. On the basis of these critiques of Lacan by Deleuze and Guattari and Butler, I have strived to put forward a reading of Lacan which is attentive to the specific nature of capitalist work organization, and which engages in an affirmative manner with the notable Foucauldian tradition within critical management studies.

In chapter 4, I have presented a discussion of the areas of Lacanian thought that are relevant for the subsequent analysis. I have structured this discussion mainly around the three registers of Symbolic, Imaginary and Real, since these provide the main vehicle for exploring the texts that make up the empirical part of this study. My goal has been to highlight the areas of Lacan's work that open themselves up to use in textual analysis. Concerning the Symbolic order, I have chosen to highlight the concepts of signification, including metaphor, metonymy, punctuation and retroactive signification. With respect to the Imaginary, I have given attention to Lacan's reinterpretation of the mechanism of identification as constituted between the ego ideal and the ego, as well as the mirror stage. Regarding the Real, I have stressed the role of desire and the object *a*, and the place that jouissance takes up in Lacan's work. I have stressed the connection that all these concepts have with the function of language for the subject, since it is through language (in a situated, embodied sense) that we may access empirical phenomena. I suggest that the three registers provide a powerful way of thinking about this function of language. Moreover, it gives an account of the limits of language, and the consequences that this has in terms of subjectivity and discourse.

In chapter 5, I have presented my analysis of the Symbolic network of performance in Publica. I have argued that the discursive field of performance in the organizational context may be seen as a *signifying chain*. Following Lacan, these signifying chains must be conceived of as characterized by a very specific structure. They are *organized around a quilting point* (or conceivably multiple quilting points), which prevents the produced signification from sliding excessively. In this way, we can understand the signifying chain of performance as situated in proximity of signifying chains that bear on other modes of organizational life. Extending this conceptualization, the organization may be seen as a signifier, which ties a field of signification to it. It functions as a central point for these signifying chains. Signification is also *incomplete*. The signification of organizational life comes up against a fundamental limit, in that the meaning that arises from the metonymical interplay of signifiers fails to account fully for the experience of the subjects in question. It is in this discrepancy that desire functions in organization, and it is used in various ways in managerial practices, as we have seen.

In my analysis of the key signifiers of performance in Publica, I have stressed the radical separation or "bar" between signifiers and signifieds. This separation causes meaning to be dependent on the position of the signifiers with respect to each other, and is therefore not fixed but continually in motion. I have discussed the significations that are produced in this interplay of the signifiers of performance, focusing on the various significations that may be associated with each of the key performance signifiers. However, these significations are merely indicative of a range of different meanings that may be evoked.

I have put forward the notion that the signifier "Different Government" can be understood as a quilting point that stabilizes these significations. The groupings that I have used for the various signifiers of performance, namely the themes of "performance", "enterprising selves" and "developing the self", all hinge on the notion of being "different". Within the context of

the Performance theme, for instance, being “different” stands for being efficient, productive and responsive to the demands of organization in contrast to the “old-fashioned” employee who was inefficient, unproductive and unresponsive. Within the context of Enterprising Selves, “different” signifies the “new”, proactive, customer-oriented behavior that is “needed” in today’s society. And within the context of Developing the Self, being “different” stands for the changes that the subject must make to itself to be what the organization wants from it to face the new challenges common to modern public sector organizations. In all these themes the signifier of “difference” literally ties the other signifiers together by providing them with a shared purpose and meaning. All these significations are united under the quilting signifier of a “Different Government”. This idea of difference is taken very personally by subjects, yet they cannot clearly express how they conceive of themselves or others as “different”. This signifier provides the network with solid footing, effectively halting the sliding of meaning beyond what we saw in the interview accounts. However, it is an empty signifier, functioning as part of the structural make-up of the field of performance within Publica, but itself devoid of positive content. The significations that present themselves to subjects are multiple in their nature, suggesting various different conflicting meanings. The Symbolic network is therefore imbued with a particular indeterminacy, which lets alternative significations emerge side by side. The quilting serves to limit this “sliding”, but it does not fix it completely. To the subject, the Other reveals itself in this way as empty and unsatisfactory, giving rise to the Imaginary covering over of this gap. The subject still experiences a gap between itself and the Other; language does not ring true to experience, thus *giving rise to the play of identification*.

In chapter 6, I have traced the identifications that function within the Imaginary register of performing subjects in Publica. I have used the concepts of the ego, the ego ideal and the ideal ego to conceptualize this process of identification. I have demonstrated how these concepts may be utilized to map out identifications with particular images that subjects derive from the Symbolic network in a particular organizational context. This analysis can be extended and used more widely in organization studies as a way of understanding how subjects collude in their own submission to potentially exploitative management practices. The notion of an ego ideal, as an Imaginary condensation of the signifying network, can be understood as a point of reference for the subject, around which its fantasmatic construction of its identity is structured. I have re-iterated the specifically Lacanian concepts of retroactive signification and the quilting point as a way of understanding how these processes of identification are not singular or solipsist, but are instead shared collectively to a greater or lesser extent. At this precise point, we can begin to discuss power dynamics in relation to subjectivity, since it raises the question of how certain forms of collective identification prevail over others.

I have sought to address these matters in my analysis of identification in Publica, where I classified the shared identifications with performance in two categories: “assuming responsibility” and “embracing the new”. These two identifications represent partial elements of the self-image that subjects cultivate and model their behavior after. These identifications draw on themes that are common in the literature on New Public Management, by setting up a dichotomy between managerialism and bureaucracy, and enterprising versus reactive behavior. These dichotomies come to structure the subject’s ego construction, and therefore form the basis for its work activities and its interactions with (imaginary) others.

I have only begun to indicate the ways in which identification with images of performance may be connected with specific managerial practices. These managerial practices can work to emanate particular images of performance, and engage subjects into practices where they are actively asked to draw on these images. These practices, including performance appraisal, PDPs and competence management, tie performance at work to a specific image of the self in terms of qualities that one possesses and “improvements” to be achieved. As such, it *extends a promise of coherent and unified selfhood* to those who subject themselves to the managerial practice in question. This can give rise to narrow, singular forms of identification that ensnare the subject in a particular fantasy relationship to its narcissistic self-image (which takes up the role of the object *a*). My own research has merely started to open up this question, and more research on these questions is certainly needed. Again, I argue here that a Lacanian perspective can usefully supplement existing research on these questions, which on the whole has tended to ignore the role that desire plays in this.

Within the confines of the Imaginary, the significations that are produced within the metonymical play of the signifiers become permeated with a coherence that is provided by identification. In Publica, we have seen that subjects construct images of the ideal employee: a worker who shuns inefficiency, adherence to rigid structure, and work-avoiding behavior. The ideal employee gladly “assumes responsibility”, and is an exponent of the “new”, managerial current with Publica. This ego ideal (or perhaps “subject position” in another vocabulary) comes to stand in for the emptiness of language. It provides an illusory coherence to the demands that subjects experience, and the demands they themselves address at the Other. It is invested with desire, since it extends the promise of a rejoinder with the Other. It symbolizes the gap in the Other for the subject, up until the moment that it collapses. This unraveling of identification formed the main object of investigation of chapter 7.

In chapter 7, I finalized my analysis of the performing subject in Publica by foregrounding aspects of the Real. Here I have argued that insofar as identification occurs in a singular trajectory, and carries within it the promise of fully overcoming the lack-of-being at the heart of subjectivity, it must be regarded as detrimental and conducive to misrecognition. In other words, insofar as identification is laced with desire, it provides the subject with an illusory sense of mastery in selfhood. I have spoken about the *empty promise* in this respect. However, these identifications are subject to *interruptions* from the side of the Real. These interruptions manifest themselves in the discourse of the performing subject (including its actions) as contradictions, breakdowns, incoherencies, slips and so on. These interruptions provide a glimpse of the illusory nature of the Imaginary in covering over the empty signifiers of the Symbolic order, and thus, of the failure at the heart of the Other.

What they show, is how the symbolic Other of performance within Publica cannot help to fail the employees that are subject to it. As a signifying chain of performance, it falls short of accounting for the diverse areas of experience that it signifies. Performance is signified in terms of instrumental goals, personal life goals, development of appropriate skills, provision of job security, teamwork, and so on. But the interruptions demonstrate that this signification is not total, and falters at crucial moments. I have argued that these interruptions represent the possibility of escaping or subverting the confining effects of identifications, and the inscription in managerial regimes that they imply. To the extent that subjects take these interruptions as indicative of the failure of signification and of the lack at the heart of subjectivity, they engage in an *authentic act*. This means taking responsibility for the totality of



unconscious forces that determine one's being, traversing the fantasy of a mastery of the self. Traversing this fantasy means that one acknowledges the impossibility of freedom and rationality as they are implied within neoliberal ideology.

The *traversal of the fundamental fantasy* represents a possibility for the subject to change place with respect to the Other, to shift its position and its determination by the Other. In this traversal, the subject can come to occupy a position toward the Symbolic in which it is not caught in a singular, fixated identification in which its desire is stifled, but one where its desire can be transposed more freely and fleetingly. It allows the subject to come into being with respect to this failure, in order to subjectivize it. This coming-into-being where the failure of the Other once was, represents the possibility of more ethical forms of being within the context of performance management practices in Publica and other organizations. It represents an overcoming of the flawed fantasies of performance management discourse.

### 8. 3 Traversing the empty promise

In what remains, I will provide a few reflections in order to situate my study within the broader struggles that we face as critical scholars today. I suggest that the mechanism that we have observed at work in Publica in fostering particular identifications with an idealized image of performance can be understood as part of a broader set of discourses that attempt to suture the failure at the heart of the capitalist ideology of work organization. It extends a promise of perfection, of satisfaction, of success. It holds out the possibility of a rejoinder with the Other, of becoming the perfect employee. But this rejoinder is false, and the promise is empty. Herein lies the task for critique, in exposing this empty promise for what it is: a gift of shit. Under scrutiny, we recognize not only that the Other fails, but that the Other is constantly failing.

In approaching Lacan's work as a means of understanding the subject at work, I have taken seriously Deleuze and Guattari's commentary that the Other must be conceived of as comprised of the structuring forces of capitalism. The signification of the capitalist labor process can be thought of as an Other, against which the subject-worker comes into being. This creates a complex interplay of Imaginary, Real and Symbolic glosses on the subject at work, as we have seen. The main vehicle by means of which the signifying network of Publica upholds a semblance of coherent meaning is the promulgation of these points of identification, in which desire becomes contained. These idealized images take place within the fundamental fantasy of performance. The ego ideal to which subjects in Publica aspire, in order to transform themselves into "different" government workers, is an attempt to cover over the failure at the heart of the signification of performance.

The mark of this failure can be seen within the identifications that employees construct, invested with desire, with the objects that Publica provides them. These objects (which find resonance with wider ideologies in society, such as self-help books, magazines, consumer culture, and so on) become the device of legitimation of their own exploitation, their own giving themselves to the Other for its enjoyment. The promise of future *jouissance* becomes the price that they pay for the *jouissance* they sacrifice for the Other. They work in order to live up to the demands of the Symbolic Other. What they get back, however, falls short of the promise that is embodied within the Other's demand.

The traversal of the fundamental fantasy provides the *possibility* of moving beyond this scenario. In this sense, it can be thought of as an ontology of resistance. It is the condition of possibility for more ethical forms of subjectivity and a way out of the smothering rapport with the Symbolic Other. It represents the possibility of taking back the object from the Other and being able to enjoy it as jouissance of the drive, and not wholly as jouissance of the Other. Desire becomes more fluid, less tied to the lack in the Other, because it is no longer inscribed in the singular fantasy relationship that demands that the subject embody “difference”.

The themes that can be seen within the signification of performance in Publica are prevalent in modern life, and can be recognized in various realms of social life. The idea of self-actualization has become a central aspect of the image of the self in Western capitalist society, and it fulfills an important function within neoliberalist discourse. Many of the signifiers that were central in this study are widely shared across different social fields and as such their signification within a particular fantasmatic framework has far-reaching consequences for people’s lives. Work identities are tied to consumer identities by means of the desire to become a fuller, more complete and more “ideal” person. What I have argued in this study is that it is precisely the promise of the One that is embedded in this fantasy that is conducive to exploitative processes within the workplace. Only by exposing this promise as empty, can we hope to get-ourselves-out.

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## Nederlandse samenvatting van het proefschrift “Vastgepind op presteren: een Lacaniaanse benadering van subjectiviteit en arbeid”

In deze studie heb ik ernaar gestreefd de vraag te beantwoorden, hoe mensen komen te functioneren als een presterend subject in een organisatiecontext. Hierbij heb ik het werk van de Franse psychoanalyticus Jacques Lacan als uitgangspunt genomen. De empirische casus die centraal staat is een Nederlands ministerie, dat ik het pseudoniem Publica heb gegeven. Ik heb hier een groep van 29 werknemers onderzocht, die allen verbonden waren aan intensieve werknemersontwikkelingsprogramma's. De analyse van de empirische casus is gestructureerd aan de hand van de drie dimensies die het subject kenmerken volgens Lacan, namelijk het Symbolische, het Imaginaire en het Reële.

Binnen de analyse van het Symbolische heb ik het subject gedefinieerd als grotendeels geconstitueerd binnen het veld van taal. Lacan's concept beschrijft hier taal in haar structurerende vorm, opgebouwd uit betekenaars. Daarbij moet betekenis gezien worden als een product van het interne spel tussen betekenaars. Op basis van de interviews heb ik hier een lijst van de belangrijkste 13 betekenaars van het begrip “prestatie” aangedragen. Deze betekenaars zijn van centraal belang binnen de significantie van dit begrip, en zijn derhalve de belangrijkste bouwstenen van het presterende subject binnen Publica. Verder heb ik hier beargumenteerd dat de keten van betekenaars van “prestatie” interne coherentie wordt gegeven door de betekenaar “Andere Overheid”. Deze betekenaar van het “andere” blijkt een centraal referentiepunt in de narratieven van de respondenten, waarbij het afwisselend de vorm heeft van “anders zijn dan andere medewerkers”, “andere organisatievormen dan bureaucratie”, “andere manieren van werken”, enzovoorts. Het blijkt een belangrijk positionerend mechanisme te hebben in de representatie van het subject, en als zodanig oefent het een stabiliserende werking uit op de betekenis die voortkomt uit het samenspel van de betekenaars. In die zin heb ik gesproken over het *point de capiton*. Maar deze stabilisatie is verre van totaal. Ik heb benadrukt dat er in het significantieproces van het begrip “prestatie” een veelheid aan betekenis geproduceerd wordt, waarbij alternatieve significanties naast elkaar voorkomen.

Deze alternatieve significanties worden sterk ingedamd door bepaalde identificaties die centraal staan binnen Publica. Dit betreft de Imaginaire dimensie van subjectiviteit. Door deze identificaties komt er een dominant beeld naar voren van wat “prestatie” betekent, gekoppeld aan een ideaalbeeld van de presterende medewerker. Ik heb twee aspecten van dit ideaalbeeld of *ego-ideaal* besproken, namelijk “verantwoordelijkheid nemen” en “nieuwheid omarmen”. Deze gedeeltelijke ego-idealen vormen punten van identificatie voor het presterende subject, waarbij het ego voortdurend gespiegeld wordt aan het ideaal. Identificatie met deze ego-idealen wordt actief gestimuleerd binnen HRM praktijken zoals functioneringsgesprekken, mentoring en competentie management. Hiermee dragen ze bij aan arbeidsintensificatie en het naar beneden duwen van verantwoordelijkheden binnen de organisatie, door het reproduceren van een ideaal zelfbeeld waaraan de medewerker zich gedwongen voelt zich te conformeren.

In het derde en laatste gedeelte van de analyse, heb ik mij gericht op het Lacaniaanse register van het Reële. Dit betreft het precieze punt waar taal tekort schiet, en dus waar significantie en identificatie falen. Ik heb hier een aantal gevallen uit de interviews naar voren gebracht waarin zowel de identificaties van respondenten als de significantie van hun discours uiteenvallen. In deze interruptie van de gangbare significantie van het begrip “prestatie” moet het potentieel voor politieke weerstand op het niveau van het subject gezocht worden. Het is op dit punt van interruptie dat de fascinatie van het subject met het ideaalbeeld kortstondig verbroken wordt,

en waar derhalve deze “fundamentele fantasie” aan kracht inboet. De fantasie van volledige zelfverwezenlijking blijkt hier slechts gefragmenteerd en incompleet.

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## Performance, pinned down a Lacanian analysis of subjectivity at work

This study seeks to create an account of how the performing subject comes into being within a specific organizational context. It looks at some of the ways in which managerial practices impact upon the selfhood of employees by means of the language in which they are couched. Drawing heavily on the work of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, this study furthers insight into the ways in which language, power and subjectivity are connected in organizations. The prime vehicle for exploring these linkages is Lacan's conceptualization of the three registers of subjectivity: the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real.

It traces the linguistic determination of subjectivity, in which the language of performance carves out a space for the subject in the organizational context, thereby eliciting a host of significations of what it means to perform. Although stringent in their effects, these significations nevertheless prove incomplete. The author argues that this Symbolic chain of signifiers continues to function as something Other and alien to the subject, thereby putting into motion the processes of the Imaginary. With respect to this register, the author demonstrates that managerial practices put forward particular images of performance, which form objects of identification for the performing subject. These identifications are an important influence on the behavior of the subject at work. In order to uncover resistance to these determining effects, instances are highlighted in which identifications are partially or fully interrupted within the speech acts of respondents. The author argues that these instances indicate the possibility of "traversing the fundamental fantasy", which implies going beyond narrowly defined identifications with performance. Their interruption allows the subject to glimpse the indeterminate nature of the signifying network. For this reason, the traversal indicates the possibility for the subject to change its position with regard to the Other, in which it engages in more partial and fragmented forms of identification rather than being caught in a narcissist fantasy of autonomy and rationality. Hereby, the fantasy of self-actualization, as propagated within HRM practices, is exposed as flawed and exploitative.

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