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## **The Use of Personality Typing in Organizational Change: Discourse, Emotions & the Reflexive Subject**

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## Abstract

This article is based on a study of an organizational change program that sought to alter employees' self-perceptions, emotions and behavior through the use of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, a popular personality-typing tool. The program affords an opportunity to explore the various ways in which discourses advocating personal and organizational change work through employees' subjectivity. We argue that theoretical approaches that view the targets of such programs as passive – as either 'colonized' or constructed by discourses – fail to capture the complex and contradictory nature of organizational control, and subjects' changing positions within it. Drawing on symbolic interactionism, we argue that the power of discourses is mediated through an active, reflexive, and often emotional engagement on the part of individuals. Through their involvement, employees variously reproduce, resist or reconfigure power relationships which, during organizational change, are themselves unstable and inconsistent.

## Keywords

discourse, emotions, Foucault, Myers-Briggs Type Indicator

## Disciplines

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# **The Use of Personality Typing in Organizational Change: Discourse, Emotions and the Reflexive Subject**

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This article is based on a study of an organizational change program that sought to alter employees' self-perceptions, emotions and behavior through the use of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, a popular personality-typing tool. The program affords an opportunity to explore the various ways in which discourses advocating personal and organizational change work through employees' subjectivity. We argue that theoretical approaches that view the targets of such programs as passive – as either 'colonized' or constructed by discourses - fail to capture the complex and contradictory nature of organizational control, and subjects' changing positions within it. Drawing on symbolic interactionism, we argue that the power of discourses is mediated through an active, reflexive, and often emotional engagement on the part of individuals. Through their involvement, employees variously reproduce, resist or reconfigure power relationships which, during organizational change, are themselves unstable and inconsistent.

**Keywords:**

Discourse

Emotions

Foucault

Myers-Briggs Type Indicator

Organizational control

Symbolic interactionism

I used to slam my office door all the time. I'd just walk in and I'd be so angry - a conversation or a phone call or something. I'd just slam the office door or I'd yell at someone, or carry on. And I worked out that I really needed some time to myself and that was how I unconsciously achieved it. So instead of saying 'I just need some quiet time' - because that was a sign of weakness - I'd just slam the door instead (Sue).<sup>1</sup>

Sue works as a manager in a large, male-dominated industrial plant in Australia that we will call Sprogwheels. Established early last century, its management structures and practices have traditionally maintained a hierarchical 'servant and master' style. Managers enjoyed special privileges, industrial strife was common and the company was permeated with a tough-guy masculine ethos.

Sue joined the company as a trainee metallurgist in the early 1980s. Being a woman in a male-dominated industry was often difficult. By 1995, after some demoralizing experiences, she was ready to leave. As she was contemplating her options, she was nominated for the company's cultural change workshop, an intensive eight-day residential program run by external consultants and in-house human resources personnel. The program made use of quasi-academic psychological frameworks and techniques, such as neurolinguistic programming and the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), a personality typing tool, for exploring subjectivity<sup>2</sup> and the dynamics of interpersonal interaction. Sue described her experiences at the workshop as 'worthwhile', 'disturbing', 'really good', 'scary' and 'very hard but exciting'. According to her, it helped her to understand herself better, and to manage her anger.

Over the past two decades, many writers have explored how contemporary managerial discourses infiltrate the very cores of employees' identities and emotional lives (Casey, 1995; 1999; Fineman, 1993; 2000a; Hochschild, 1983; Kunda, 1992; Lively, 2000; Townley, 1993; Van Maanen & Kunda, 1989). Sprogwheels' cultural change program is another example of an attempt to inculcate new forms of emotional management, identities and behavior. The old traditional company was populated by people who occupied fixed positions in a hierarchy that constrained their actions and relationships with others. They did not reveal 'weaknesses'. They were not in the habit of reflecting on themselves, their feelings and relationships with others. If they were, they kept it to themselves. In the 'new' Sprogwheels, hierarchies are supposed to be flatter. People are supposed to be, or are allowed to be, 'softer', more diverse and complex. They are permitted to ask for some quiet time. They are encouraged, and sometimes required, to openly discuss their emotions, perceptions and relationships. Using knowledge gained at the workshops, they are expected to manage themselves and each other in a more 'emotionally intelligent' manner (Fineman, 2000b; Goleman, 1998).

This article uses data drawn from Sprogwheels to examine relationships among subjectivity, emotions and discourses of organizational control. Over a period of two years, the authors spent more than a thousand hours in the company observing meetings, participating in workshops, and conducting informal and formal conversations and interviews, mostly in a division of the company we have called Wheel Supply. This division was undergoing extensive organizational change, and many of the managers working there had attended the residential cultural change workshops. We also conducted semi-structured, taped interviews with 15 managers from other parts of the company who attended the workshops. Interviews lasted 45 to 90 minutes. Although most of the illustrative quotes in the article are taken from transcripts of these interviews, the analysis is informed by the understanding of the company that we developed over the period of our involvement as participant and non-participant observers of the company-wide organizational change.

The article proceeds as follows. Firstly, we describe the change program at Sprogwheels, and reports of its emotional impacts, in greater detail. Next, we consider some of the ways that theorists have conceptualized links among discourses, subjectivity and autonomy, and discuss how these approaches have failed to deal adequately with the complexity and variable nature of these links. Thirdly, we draw on work carried out in the tradition of symbolic interactionism, to explore how reflexivity and emotions generated by self-evaluation may help explain how and why subjects can and do take up different positions with respect to discourses. Finally, we illustrate this argument through an analysis of how people at Sprogwheels interpreted and deployed one particular discourse – the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator.

### **The Sprogwheels Cultural Change Program**

For many years after its establishment, Sprogwheels enjoyed captive markets, government import protection and comfortable profits. It was imbued with a masculine ethos that played itself out in attitudes of toughness, secrecy and expedient dishonesty. The following extracts from interviews with managers illustrate the patterns of power, the identities, and the emotional textures that characterized the old style of management:

I would put on a company face and I would negotiate across a table with a guy that I knew could do more than he was doing, but he was playing a game with me across the table about what he was prepared to do unless I was prepared to give him something (Stan).

[Sprogwheels] is too old at the top and too staid. If you look at very progressive companies around the world, particularly in America, they're not people who are so old and set in their ways. The majority of managers and directors in [Sprogwheels] are people who developed their careers in the [nineteen] fifties to the mid-seventies, which were the times that people were still inflexible or very hard in their ideas, and the leadership techniques back then were whoever was the person with the biggest shout and didn't care about who they were going to hurt or make fall around them were the ones that got promoted and are still at the top today (Sally).

While Sprogwheels enjoyed good profits, the inefficiencies created by conflict and spurious communications were tolerated. Over the past two decades, however, the situation has changed markedly. Increased international competition and reduced protection have created massive strain. In the early 1980s, many jobs were lost through forced retrenchments. Since then, many more workers have left voluntarily and have not been replaced. Escalating pressures led many managers to reassess their own and others' practices. Traditionally, management training in the company emphasized technical skills and rational decision-making. Senior staff now began to argue that managers needed new skills in order to deal, cognitively and emotionally, with the tensions created by change and uncertainty. Rigid, domineering styles of management had to be replaced by flexibility and improved interpersonal skills.

In the late 1980s, the company hired a consultant to conduct workshops using neurolinguistic programming.<sup>3</sup> According to our informants, several managers experienced powerful personal transformations as a result. They began lobbying for a training program that would focus on self-development, arguing that cultural change in the organization as a whole could only be achieved through personal transformation among managers. Against some opposition, the managers established and sustained a program along these lines from 1993 to 2001. New consultants were hired, who

broadened the scope beyond neurolinguistic programming to include other psychological concepts and techniques, such as the MBTI. Change workshops were held every few months at a location distant from any of Sprogwheels' offices and factories. Managers from different sites and levels of hierarchy were brought together. Using role play and real-life incidents from work and home, they were required to talk about their lives, mistakes, problems, habits and assumptions. They were confronted with different perceptions and ways of doing things. For many, the workshops were physically and emotionally stressful:

It did get to quite a few of us to the point that most of us cried or were upset, which I think is more due to sheer exhaustion because we were doing fourteen hour days. [...] Also, you're probably trying to challenge certain things that you normally place protective barriers around (Sally).

[The facilitators] can read your mind. That's disturbing. And the fact that they push when they find something scary. They don't let you retreat from it. They push and they make you confront things and that's scary. And yeah, you see things about yourself that other people see that you didn't see, and that you don't like (Sue).

When you grow up over 48 years, and you put 50 brick walls into your behavior, and the course sets out to challenge those brick walls - it becomes very hard. You start looking at yourself and saying, 'Shit, maybe I really am a bit more of a dickhead than I thought I was' (Samuel).

As well as indicating the arduous nature of the experience, these quotations shed some light on issues of identity and subjectivity before and during the change. References to 'protective barriers' and 'brick walls [in] your behavior' suggest that the old style of management was perpetuated by people who deemed it important to preserve an outwardly impassive appearance. It was important to hide or deny anything that might make one look vulnerable or weak. The change program involved a concerted attack on these defensive barriers in the interests of constructing new, more complex and reflexive selves, capable of more finely nuanced management of their own and other people's emotions. In the words of two of the managers:

To me, the course was very much about me, and it was very much what I learnt about myself and how I interact with other people and how, by what I do, or by what I don't do, I could possibly have some type of effect on what they might feel or think (Sebastian).

You get to understand the little nitty gritty parts about you that you denied ever existed, that you've hidden behind that façade. That was the good part (Samuel).

There are, of course, several ways of interpreting what has happened here. Before offering our own interpretation, we consider some approaches in the academic literature that have been very influential in shaping our understanding of the means by which organizational control is effected.

### **Discourses, Subjectivity and Agency**

Critical approaches to organizational change present different positions on the relationship between discourses and subjectivity, and hence on the degree of freedom, or type of freedom, that subjects possess. Those who are most critical see programs such as that conducted at Sprogwheels as

illegitimately meddling with employees' inner selves. Workers who once possessed stable identities shaped by families, communities and traditional occupational groups are being incited to alter their self-perceptions, and the selves they present to the world. According to the critics, the new practices are fundamentally different in nature to the more traditional hierarchical forms of management, as they are explicitly designed to infiltrate the private realms of subjectivity and emotion. This makes them particularly insidious and invasive (Casey, 1995; 1999; Hochschild, 1983; Jermier, 1998; Willmott, 1993).

In this view, Sue and her fellow managers have been invaded and manipulated. They may think they have benefited from improved self-knowledge, but this belief only accentuates the duplicity of the process. This critical interpretation is valuable for highlighting the power dimensions of practices that can appear, on the surface, to be neutral and benign. However, we argue that interpreting the change at Sprogwheels as a 'colonization' of the managers' subjectivities risks over-simplifying the issues at stake. It assumes a uni-directional flow of power, in which discourses infiltrate subjects that were, until the 'invasion', leading relatively free and authentic lives. In our view, the power relations found in organizations are much more complex than this. In Sprogwheels, many elements of the 'old style' of management were also experienced as oppressive. The women we interviewed found it particularly harsh. According to Sue:

When you have a population that's abnormal in the [gender] representation, like this, you get abnormal behavior. And it's not just against women in this place. It's men against men. Stuff like physical assaults and racial problems.

At Sprogwheels (and other established companies undergoing change), new practices were introduced into an organization already permeated with older social conventions that constrained emotions and behavior. Within their logics, the old and new management styles both carried elements of oppression and provided avenues for resistance.

Another influential, but also problematic, approach to the link between discourses and subjectivity draws on the work of Michel Foucault. Theorists who follow Foucault view power as dispersed, rather than emanating from a single dominant center. It is produced and disseminated through myriad social relations that construct particular subject positions from which people are authorized to make statements and act in certain ways. We are particularly interested in power that is mediated by discourses. In the Foucauldian framework, discourses are sets of interconnected statements that define what is real, possible, and true. They outline what is normal and desirable on one hand, and what is deviant on the other. Linked to the development of the social and medical sciences, they circulate in, and emanate from, institutions such as schools, hospitals, asylums and courts (Foucault, 1972; 1978; 1982).

Modern corporations are permeated with discourses that purport to define the motivated worker and the effective manager. They appear in a plethora of norms and techniques concerned with controlling behavior and performance (McKinlay & Taylor, 1998; Townley, 1993; 1994). We can view Sprogwheels as a place where proponents of change attempted to problematize old discourses that equated good management with hierarchy and a guarded impersonal style, in order to replace them with new forms of knowledge that defined competent managers as people who are more self-aware, flexible and emotionally diverse. The workshops, with their disciplinary techniques of confession and examination, were pivotal events in the production of new discourses, or new truths, about the self (McKinlay & Taylor, 1998: 182-3; Townley, 1994: 110).



Foucauldian analyses have contributed much to our understanding of the nature of power in organizations. However, there are contradictions in Foucault's statements about the subject, freedom and resistance. Much of his work, especially early in his career, was devoted to 'decentering' the subject – that is, to demonstrating that subjectivity as we perceive it is not a product of psychological essence or free will, but a discursive creation (Foucault, 1972; 1973; 1982). Despite this, Foucault sometimes claimed that subjects are free, and capable of resisting the discourses they encounter. In one of his later statements (1982: 221), he asserted:

Power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free. By this we mean individual or collective subjects who are faced with a field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving, several reactions and diverse comportments may be realized.

A capacity to choose among conflicting discourses, or to resist a discourse, implies some autonomy and agency on the part of subjects. Organizational theorists following Foucault thus face a problem - how to conceptualize this ostensibly free and reflexive subject without falling back into a mode of analysis that grants it essential qualities and free will, precisely those attributes that the project of decentering sought to remove (Burkitt, 1991: 91-100).

Problems of agency, freedom and resistance in Foucault have attracted much interest (Gabriel, 1999; Hekman, 1996; Henriques et al., 1998; Jermier, Knights & Nord, 1994; Newton, 1994; 1998; Thompson & Ackroyd, 1995). Various ways of overcoming or circumventing the apparent gaps and contradictions have been put forward. Nikolas Rose (1996), for example, asserted that the concepts of agency and freedom are themselves products of discourse. Rather than resolving the issue, however, this just shifts it to another level of abstraction. Others have called for a reading of Foucault that allows subjects to position themselves actively with respect to discourses (Knights & Vurdubakis, 1994). It is not clear, however, whether this can be done while remaining strictly within a Foucauldian frame.

Some theorists have incorporated a consideration of emotions into their analyses of the processes through which discourses construct subjectivity. As feminists have noted, Foucault did not account for the emotions experienced by individuals with respect to power relations (Bartky, 1993; Devaux, 1996; Probyn, 1993; Ransom, 1993). In an interesting synthesis, Henriques et al. (1998) combined Foucault with psychoanalytic theory to explore how emotions and perceptions, in the form of unconscious wishes and desires, can help explain discursively constructed subject processes. In this article, we also explore emotions as an element of these relations. However, rather than looking to the unconscious, we focus on emotions generated by social interactions, as subjects evaluate themselves with respect to discourses that define certain ways of being and acting as more desirable than others.

The conundrums posed by Foucault's statements on subjectivity and power will most likely challenge theorists for some time to come. We do not claim to resolve them here. Our purposes in discussing them are to present different ways of theorizing the mechanisms through which organizational control is effected, and secondly to raise and explore some of the issues involved. Managers at Sprogwheels were clearly immersed in discourses that purported to tell them who they were and how they should behave. From the brief review above, there are several ways we can conceptualize them as subjects within power relations. Firstly, we could see them as formerly free and autonomous agents, who have been 'invaded' by a change program. Secondly, we could decenter the managers' subjectivity, and portray them as passive constructions of the discursive practices circulating in the organization. However, we prefer a third interpretation. Drawing on Foucault's later work and symbolic interactionism, we view them as located within fields of conflicting discourses that offer a range of

possible identities and modes of behavior, among which they actively position themselves. This framework allows us to explore the following questions: From the subjects' point of view, what makes the adoption of some identities desirable, and others objectionable? How does a discourse like the MBTI work through people's subjectivities? How do they understand it, and use it on themselves and others?

### **The Reflexive Socialized Self and its Emotions**

Foucault's statements on freedom, resistance and technologies of the self indicate a recognition *that* subjects position themselves within discourses. However, he did not delve very far into *how* or *why* these active positionings might occur. To investigate these issues we turn to symbolic interactionism, a sociological tradition that, while not entirely compatible with the Foucauldian approach, has some interesting resonances with it. Both view selves as socially constructed. That is, they both attempt to dissolve the dualism that posits either an autonomous, voluntaristic self (outside of, or prior to, social influence) on one hand, and an overarching social structure (that acts without subjectivity) on the other. Both approaches view power as dispersed and mediated through myriad microsocial interactions (Castellani 1999).

The view of the self that symbolic interactionists put forward has its origins in the social psychology of George Herbert Mead (1934). According to this perspective, selves develop only through social interaction. Interactions do not *determine* selves, however. If this were so, there would be no room for individual differences, creativity, change, or the invention of new discourses. To capture both the socialized and the creative, agential aspects of self, and to theorize the means through which social experiences (or discursive practices)<sup>4</sup> produce an on-going subjectivity, Mead postulated a self consisting of two separate, but interrelated, phases – the 'me' and the 'I'. The 'me' is the more or less stable, socialized self – the identity (however flexible and multifaceted) that we develop over time as we are shaped by our experiences and the attitudes that others take towards us. The 'I' is the transient self that moves through time, encountering and interpreting experience. As Joas (1985: 83) expressed it: 'the "me" is the individual as an object of consciousness, while the "I" is the individual as having consciousness'. The 'I' is not continually remade anew, however. It arises out of the 'me', and interacts with it (Mead, 1934: 171).

Mead's scheme allows for a 'division in experience' (Willmott 1997: 1343) that creates a space for reflexivity and purposeful action. It is a space where people can constitute themselves as subjects, make choices about the fields of possibilities inherent in discursive practices, and perform 'technologies of the self' (Foucault, 1988: 18). For example, we can interpret the following statements as manifestations of reflexivity, mediated through an I/me dialogue: when Sue says about her workshop experience, '[Y]ou see things about yourself that other people see that you didn't see, and that you don't like' and Samuel reflects, 'Shit, maybe I really am a bit more of a dickhead than I thought I was'. These statements reflect an internal dialogue in which these subjects assess themselves against sets of norms. This form of reflexivity is vital for understanding the means through which discourses in Sprogwheels interacted with subjectivity. Norms enter consciousness through the self's ability to imagine itself through the eyes of others. Mead used the term 'generalized other' to encapsulate this aspect of the socialized self. It represents an internalized discourse, derived from social learning, that acts as a monitor and censor of the self's thoughts, actions and speech. Through reflexivity and judgements about the self in relation to generalized others, the social can get 'into' the subjective (Burkitt, 1991: 40-43; Mead, 1934: 154-155).

Mead and other symbolic interactionists have been criticized for concentrating too much on microsocial interactions, and for failing to pay sufficient attention to broader social structures and patterns of inequality (Metzler et al., 1975; Roberts, 1977). These criticisms are applicable to much, but by no means all, of the work that has been done in the symbolic interactionist tradition. There is nothing within the approach that prohibits analyses of conflict and unequal distributions of power (Hall 1972, Musholf 1992). Indeed, contrary to claims that interactionists ignore social structures and power, some have produced work that has considerably enhanced our understanding of these phenomena (Clarke 1991; Freidson, 1986; Hall, 1997; Maines, 1977; Mol, 1996). Another possible area of tension is created by the contrast between Foucault's anti-humanism and skepticism regarding the Enlightenment, and the Enlightenment-inspired social progressivism of Mead and other early interactionists. This tension only applies to some interactionist work, however. Recent scholars in the field have embraced Foucault and other post-structuralist theorists as providing valuable antidotes to the somewhat naive view of social interaction generated by their colleagues (Castellani 1999; Denzin 1992).

Another reason for drawing on symbolic interactionism is that it has produced some valuable work on emotions in social life (a topic that Foucault neglects). For interactionists such as Hochschild (1983), Scheff (1988) and Schott (1979), emotions are socially constructed and mediated. They link us to broader patterns of learning and control. The so-called self-conscious emotions are particularly important in this regard. These complex emotions - which include guilt, shame, embarrassment and pride - are *only* generated through reflexivity, in situations in which the self evaluates itself in relation to a set of perceived social values or norms. They are, therefore, closely bound up with a subject's engagement with generalized others (Lewis, 1993; Schott, 1979). Self-conscious emotions can help us understand how and why subjects take up different positions with respect to the discourses they encounter. Pride and feelings of self-satisfaction are experienced as pleasant, while shame and embarrassment are not. Subjects tend to invest in, or commit themselves to, discourses that elicit positive emotional experiences (Henriques et al. 1998). In this way, emotions can act as drivers, or motivators, of subjects' engagements with discourses (Giddens 1991, 63-69).

### **Emotions, Discourse and Power at Sprogwheels**

Thomas Scheff (1988) coined the term 'deference-emotion system' to capture the ways in which the self-conscious emotions regulate behavior. According to this scheme, as long as people conform to prevailing norms, they are rewarded with deference and its associated positive emotions. If they deviate, they risk humiliation and shame. The deference-emotion system helps explain why some of the managers at Sprogwheels found the residential workshops so stressful. In the old management style, people who adopted a tough attitude were accustomed to being treated with respect. Manifestations of 'softness' were considered deviant and weak. A major goal of the workshops was to penetrate the defensive barriers and 'feeling rules' (Hochschild, 1979) that maintained these old identities. The more the managers tried to uphold the customary 'façade', the more the facilitators 'pushed' (Sue's term) - that is, the more they withheld deference. Instead, they rewarded the managers for doing what had normally been considered weak - showing their emotions, talking about their fears and mistakes, and revealing what they usually kept hidden. In this way, the traditional norms against which people assessed themselves were thrown into turmoil, arousing feelings of embarrassment, shame, guilt and anger.<sup>5</sup>

The workshops were exceptional events, deliberately contrived to challenge identities in a forceful way. In normal daily life, Scheff (1988) claimed, the links among social control, deference and emotion are more subtle. 'Normal' interactions are often permeated with small signs of acceptance or rejection

that may be as slight as ‘a missed beat in the conversation’ (396). According to Scheff, this continuous and subtle mutual monitoring helps explain why, in the absence of overt punishments and rewards, most people conform to the dominant norms of the situations in which they find themselves. Moreover, because of the pervasiveness of these controls, ‘Adults are virtually always in a state of either pride or shame, usually of a quite unostentatious kind’ (399).

Reflexivity, generalized others, and the emotions of self-evaluation are concepts that can be used to understand the ways in which discursive practices operate within and between subjects. Individuals are embedded in, and constructed through, normalizing discourses that mediate organizational power. In organizations undergoing change, ‘normality’ may be contested, and conflicting discourses may provoke stress and mixed emotions. In some cases (for example, at the Sprogwheels cultural change workshops), discourses can be deliberately deployed to elicit intense feelings of shame and anger. These are formidable exertions of power.

By introducing new discourses that challenged customary norms and expectations, the Sprogwheels change program contributed to the creation of a more complex social environment, one in which the construction and maintenance of identities required a juggling of conflicting feeling rules, interpretations, and self-presentations. We turn now to a consideration of how one particular discourse, the MBTI, was deployed as an element in that change. Proponents of change used it to try to construct new criteria of normality and deviance in the organization, and new rules for social interaction.

### **The MBTI – A Discursive Technology of the Self**

Proponents of the MBTI claim that it can explain individual differences in personality and behavior by identifying how ‘people *prefer* to use their minds’ (Myers, 1980: 1, emphasis in original). Individual preferences are arranged along four dichotomies as follows:

1. Extroversion (E) versus Introversion (I), or ‘relative interest in ... outer and inner worlds’
2. Sensing (S) versus Intuition (N) - whether people perceive through their senses or through ‘indirect perception by way of the unconscious’
3. Thinking (T) versus Feeling (F) - whether people make decisions using logic or personal, subjective values
4. Judging (J) versus Perceiving (P). This refers to a general ‘method of dealing with the world’. Judging people like to order their lives, while perceiving people embrace uncertainty and ambiguity (Myers 1980: 2-9).

Using these dimensions, the MBTI identifies each individual as belonging to one of 16 possible types. For example, an Introverted, Sensing, Thinking, Judging person is an ISTJ. All types possess characteristic strengths and weaknesses. Proponents of the device claim that if people know their type they will be able to manage themselves and their relationships more effectively. These possibilities are promoted by literature that is circulated around Sprogwheels. The *MBTI Team Member’s Guide* (Hirsh, 1992), for example, devotes a page to each type, listing characteristics under 6 headings: - ‘Leads by’, ‘Contributes to the team by’, ‘Irritates team members by’, ‘Can maximize effectiveness by’, ‘Influences team members by’, and ‘Is irritated by team members who’.

The MBTI can be interpreted as a discursive tool that purports to define what sorts of people exist in the world. Its dichotomies and lists of weaknesses lay out ready-made directions for self-improvement. It can, therefore, be used as a technology of the self (Foucault, 1988: 18). In order to explore how

people use it this way, we need to go down what Alvesson and Kärreman (2000:1139) called ‘the ladder of discourse’. These authors distinguished between (upper case) Discourse, which is enduring and transportable over time and space, and (lower case) discourse, which consists of transient and situated language acts. The MBTI as presented above, in a form that draws on ‘official’ literature that is sanctioned and protected by systems of accreditation and registration, can be seen as Discourse. It is part of a vast discursive domain of psychological sciences (Rose 1996). Situated language acts, in which people at Sprogwheels deployed the MBTI in localized power plays, represents discourse. The two levels are, of course, inextricably linked. As Teri Walker, who made a similar distinction, noted (1988: 76) ‘what is said in Discourse becomes sayable in discourse [and] saying in discourse becomes, or stands for, what has been said in Discourse’. In the following sections, we explore how people at Sprogwheels, in their situated discourses, drew on the Discourse of the MBTI to reconfigure understandings of individual selves and the organization as a whole.

### **Engaging with the MBTI (1): Conformity and Deviance**

In 1994, an external consultant produced a report that classified Sprogwheels as an ISTJ organization. In his view, the company’s dominant culture – and its typical manager - was Introverted, Sensing, Thinking and Judging. According to literature handed out at the change workshops:

ISTJs are private people who take in great quantities of specific, impersonal information. They are likely to remember what others say and do. They are not so likely to be aware of their own emotions, nor are they quick to sense what others are feeling.

In other words, the typical Sprogwheels employee (a male) was technically competent but not very astute when it came to understanding and managing feelings – his own and those of others. This designation helps explain some of the informal rules according to which the traditional deference-emotion system worked. Seemingly emotionless patterns of behavior were the norm against which people evaluated themselves and others.

The MBTI’s dichotomies make it particularly appealing to proponents of change. If the dominance of ISTJ types in Sprogwheels was perceived to cause problems, then the solution was clear. The organization needed to find and value people who were Extroverted, iNtuitive,<sup>6</sup> Feeling and Perceiving. Categorizations and contrasts such as these enabled discussions about (undesirable) conformity and (desirable) deviance. In the following extract, Sally described a workshop activity that attempted to use the dichotomies to turn what had hitherto been perceived as deviant into something desirable:

There were about thirty of us and they split us up into four categories. There were two guys and myself in one group and then there were the other groups. Most were in the IJ category. I was in the EP group. I remember them saying that this category of three people – the EPs - are the doers and the other people were systems and procedural people. They then said we need more people in the organization like these three. If you had more people in this category as leaders then [Sprogwheels] would be a very dynamic workforce, because you need doers in leadership. Unfortunately they tend to use us doers as doers all the time, so you don’t get into a leadership position because they rely and depend so much on you going out and doing things. That’s fine, but I’m sure that we doers can certainly be effective in leadership too. You need the two to complement, right? [...] So, yeah, I probably gained a lot from the course

on that. But I don't think the procedural and systems people have really taken that out of the lesson.

In the old Sprogwheels, IJ-style behavior was respected. In the new company, the dominance of IJs was a problem, and (formerly) deviant EPs like Sally were supposed to be valued as sources of dynamism. In this way, proponents of change attempted to reconfigure the 'rules' according to which people were rewarded with deference or punished with indifference or disdain. Sally's final sentence indicates that, in her view, the attempt failed. Nevertheless, she seemed to take some quiet pride in the new identity she created for herself with the MBTI.

In a similar fashion Steve incorporated the MBTI into an internal dialogue that reconfigured his perception of himself:

I found it was really good. It's just more learning about myself and why I behave like I do. Before I went on the course, I used to think 'What's wrong with me?', but now you can read about it every day. I can read about my type every day and it's normal. So I know why I think like I do and why I behave like I do. It's good.

Again, there was an emotional component in Steve's engagement with the MBTI. The discomfort generated by comparing himself against the ISTJ generalized other, which led him to think that there was 'something wrong' with him, was turned into relief. A new identity, sanctioned by an expert discourse, had been created.

Many employees at Sprogwheels found the MBTI a fertile source of material for use in the internal and interpersonal dialogues through which they reconfigured their understandings of themselves and their positions in the company. In contrast to the narrow 'tough' and 'weak' identities that populated the old Sprogwheels, the MBTI furnished a richer field of possibilities. Simon, like Sue and Steve, claimed to have found the experience self-validating:

One thing that I found quite interesting was about my personality type - I'm an INTP. At the course there were probably another four in the same personality type. We got together at one stage and spoke about how we reacted to certain factors and without fail you could determine what the other person was thinking, in a very general sense [...] I feel - being who I am - under pressure, certainly in a meeting type environment, to say things when I really don't feel there is anything to say. I learned that it's all right to be like that [...] So that was good to know.

Another example of MBTI talk being used to try to foster solidarity and self-esteem in those who were not ISTJs comes from our fieldwork at Wheel Supply, a division of Sprogwheels that has traditionally been one of the least desirable areas of the company in which to work. In 1997 Ian, a manager with over 30 years experience, was appointed head of Wheel Supply. His brief was to create cultural change through job redesign. As part of this process, Ian conducted small, sometimes intense meetings with the six superintendents immediately below him in the hierarchy. All seven have attended the residential change workshop.

Ian expressed pride at being an ENFP – the direct opposite of the standard Sprogwheels type. According to literature handed out at the workshops, ENFPs are 'full of warmth, enthusiasm and ingenuity'. They 'consider intense emotional experiences vital'. In keeping with this designation, Ian (initially a chemist by training) said that he 'doesn't really operate in a technical world' and that he is

‘more interested in relationships’. In a phenomenon that apparently repudiated the claim that Sprogwheels was dominated by ISTJs, five of the six superintendents at Wheel Supply also fell into the intuitive category. At one of his meetings with them, Ian offered an explanation. The dominant manufacturing sector of Sprogwheels, he said, had a ‘a strong S [sensing] profile’. Many intuitive managers who worked there have been ‘squeezed out’ - either leaving the organization altogether, or joining the lower status Wheel Supply division. In this way, Ian used the MBTI to reinforce solidarity in his own team, and to explain some of the difficulties they experienced in their dealings with other people in the company. As we see below, he also used the typology to urge his fellow managers to change their behavior.

New identities provided by the MBTI did not always elicit positive self-evaluations. Sue needed some time to overturn the generalized other in her consciousness that upheld the ISTJ personality type as the ideal:

The guy I first worked for when I started as a trainee was a raging ISTJ and wouldn't let me go home at the end of the day without all the filing done. So for years that's the way I thought you worked, and I was seventeen when I started. So it took me probably six months to accept that it's OK to be an INFP. They're nice human beings, and you're actually allowed to be one, and it doesn't mean that you're weird or you're soft or you're strange [...] I was a girl and I was an INFP. So, that's probably the thing that took the longest time to come to terms with.

For Sue, the MBTI became an important element in an on-going reconfiguration of identity, that illustrates how subjects can actively maneuver and reposition themselves with respect to a Discourse. Some time after attending the course, she changed her identity to an ISFP. As she explained in an interview,

It's probably more natural in me. I'm not a raving S. It's only a slight change, but it does explain why I like to get lots of data. I don't always use it, but... And I don't think my intuition is as strongly developed as I thought it was.

She also noted that with regard to her colleagues, ‘I think they're more comfortable that I'm an ISFP than an INFP’.

It is worth noting that not everyone found the MBTI to be meaningful enough to alter self-perceptions or their perceptions of others. Some of the managers we interviewed did not mention it at all. Others said they found it unconvincing and/or irrelevant:

When I first did it, and for a long time after that, I basically didn't feel you could categorize people like that, and that circumstance or environment would influence it very heavily. Rather than say ‘the individual is that type’, the example would be ‘the individual is that type in those circumstances’. But change the circumstances and they would be a different type (Sean).

I found the Myers-Briggs useful but to me it was something that just didn't register much. A lot of people came back from the course, and there's a lot of terminology flying around. People try to group people - like ‘you're an INTJ or you're this or you're that’. It's just something that didn't really catch my attention (Sebastian).

## Engaging with the MBTI (2): Reconfiguring Relationships

Consultants have been successful in selling the MBTI to corporations largely because it promises to improve teamwork. It provides a set of tools employees can potentially use to alter the ways they present themselves to others, and also the lenses through which they perceive other people. At Sprogwheels, words and actions that, under the old regime, may have provoked withdrawals of deference were transformed by the MBTI into manifestations of personality type, thus rendering them more explicable and potentially forgivable:

It's amazing when you talk to people back here, you just compare the different types. The first question you're asked when you get back is 'What's your Myers-Briggs Personality Type?' and you can understand then why people behave like they do. And I suppose that has been pretty significant development at work. Once upon a time you would say 'That bloke's just a dickhead. He doesn't know what's going on' - arrogant, rude, blah, blah, blah. But now you can almost have a guess at his Myers-Briggs type and you can understand it. He's not really rude and arrogant. It's just the way he operates and that's fine, that's good. You just need to be aware of that when you talk to different people (Steve).

In a similar fashion, Sue reinterpreted some of the sexism she experienced as an outcome of personality differences, rather than discriminatory attitudes:

I can reasonably clearly distinguish now between whether someone I'm dealing with has a problem with me because I am a woman, or me being an ISFP, and them being an ESTJ. So, in my brain it's relatively clear now and it doesn't stress me. That's not to say that you still don't get treated a certain way because you're a woman, but it's a lot easier to manage.

Steve and Sue, and others at Sprogwheels, reported making subtle changes to the informal rules according to which they evaluated each other. By tempering their aggression and dissatisfaction, they contributed to a gradual, but tenuous and contested, reconfiguration of the deference-emotion system that helped to mediate power in the organization.

Knowledge of one's type could also be used to alter the self that was presented to the world. This aspect of the tool is highlighted in the official Discourse that suggests how different types can 'maximize effectiveness' and avoid 'irritating' others. An example of the MBTI being used along these lines comes from Wheel Supply. At one of superintendents' meetings, Ian, the general manager, offered the following advice:

Here we are - a group of Ns. The Ss get frustrated because we haven't got the data. How do we get from one point to another? We *know*, so we don't have to explain it to the others.[...] The next rung down, especially, expect that superintendents explain things. Getting out of the comfort zone for us is to behave in modes in which we may not be comfortable. We need to behave like Ss - gather data, do business plans and so on.

Ian could have told the superintendents they were incompetent because they failed to provide subordinates with sufficient information. However, he used the MBTI to exert power in a different way, by urging them to practice technologies of self through their knowledge of the sensate-intuitive



dichotomy. In their I/me dialogues (from a symbolic interactionist perspective), they were supposed to recognize their 'me's' (their more or less stable selves) as intuitive, and therefore potentially at odds with the sensate majority. In the interests of efficiency, they were expected to alter their 'outer' I's to conform to the expectations of others.

Ian's use of the MBTI in this case was in accordance with the intentions of those who advocated it as a tool for promoting better teamwork. However, the success of Ian's strategy – and of the change program in general - depended on the degree to which employees were willing to practice technologies of the self. This willingness was influenced by their perceptions of generalized others, and of the informal rules according to which they believed they would be accorded censure and respect. As our final example shows, feelings of pride and expectations of respect did not necessarily line up with people's willingness to fulfill the organization's goals. Stephanie, an ESTJ working in the finance section, made this complaint about a colleague:

I know people who are INFPs, who say 'Hello, I'm an INFP. I don't deal with detail'. And you think 'Terrific. Now we've got a job to do, and I really don't care [about your type]'. There are people who are using the [organizational change] stuff to make excuses for their own behavior. So instead of working together, it's an excuse - 'Well, I don't have to because I'm x% of the population' .<sup>7</sup>

Stephanie's colleague, it seems, used the rarity of his/her type as a source of pride. This emotion, with its associated expectations of deference, appeared to override any concern about irritating others by refusing to deal with detail. This use of discourse lends support to David Collinson's (1994: 37) claim that the phenomena of resistance, compliance and consent are often intertwined, and can co-exist, 'sometimes in the very same discursive practice'. Stephanie's colleague complied with the identity allocated by the MBTI, but turned it into a legitimation for defiance, rather than a tool for self-alteration. This interpretation was in marked contrast to Sue, who initially found being an INFP a source of embarrassment.

The MBTI, then, did not modify identities in any simple or deterministic fashion. The official Discourse, as promulgated by consultants and other proponents of its use, lays out avenues through which it is supposed to facilitate self-development and better teamwork. However, in practice it furnished a broader range of possibilities. It was used in discussions about deviance and conformity, and healthy and pathological organizations. It was associated with feelings of pride and embarrassment, and was used to seek validation. It was used as an excuse, and it helped people to sort out and reconfigure their responses to themselves and others. Finally, for some, it was an irrelevant and illegitimate pigeon-holing device. Nevertheless, through varied, tenuous and sometimes contradictory means it has, through its presentation and validation of a broader range of viable identities, helped to shift patterns of power in Sprogwheels. These shifts occurred through active engagements with Discourse, mediated through reflexivity and emotions that linked subjective experiences to broader patterns of control and resistance.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, we have used empirical data from a major cultural change program to explore links among discourse, identities and emotions. Proponents of change at Sprogwheels clearly tried, through discourse, to alter the ways in which employees perceived and managed themselves and others. The change program displayed many attributes that fit comfortably into a Foucauldian framework. Disciplinary techniques of confession were used. Packages of power/knowledge such as the MBTI

were deployed to ‘attach’ the managers to their identity (Foucault, 1992: 212). They were expected to use this knowledge to practice technologies of the self in the interests of the organization. However, we cannot grasp the totality of the change program by examining only the content of the discourses that were used, as subjects’ engagements with them were diverse and unpredictable. While Foucault acknowledged variability in subjects’ positionings with respect to discourse, he did not provide us with conceptual tools to explore factors that might influence the positions that subjects take up. It is our contention that many of the discourses of social control that work by outlining ‘deviant’ and ‘desirable’ behaviours do so by provoking self-evaluation in the individuals at whom they are directed. Self-evaluation can elicit emotions that are experienced as pleasant or distasteful which, in turn, can explain why subject invest in some discourses and resist others. These emotions are not located solely within individuals, however. They are linked to patterns of power that reflect socially constructed norms of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. At Sprogwheels, proponents of change tried to alter these norms, throwing customary measures of self-worth into disarray and inducing emotions that were sometimes quite powerful, at other times more subtle.

It is difficult to make generalizations about the power embedded within discourses, not only because subjects’ engagements with them are unpredictable, but also because patterns of control in organizations are frequently uncertain and ambiguous. For example, how should we interpret Sue’s statement that she suffered less stress when she attributed some of the behavior of difficult male colleagues to personality differences rather than gender discrimination? Was her reconfiguration of the problem a loss for feminist consciousness at Sprogwheels, or was her reported reduction in stress a positive outcome of the change process? Did the MBTI allow her (and other ‘deviants’) to maneuver more subtly, and at less personal cost, through the difficult social terrain at work, thus enhancing their possibilities for action? Sue was clearly controlled by the change program, but the very mechanisms that controlled her also allowed her to exert some control over others and her own reactions to them, an outcome that she viewed as positive. To interpret her as colonized by the change process assumes power is uni-directional and relatively unambiguous, and that Sue is a passive recipient of its effects.

Yiannis Gabriel (1999) noted recently that organizational theorists often simplify both the organizational subject and the concept of control. His depiction of the subject, not as a passive victim, but as

a struggling, thinking, feeling, suffering subject, one capable of obeying and disobeying, controlling and being controlled, losing control and escaping control, defining and redefining control for itself and for others (179)

provides an apt description of the Sprogwheels employee, as he/she maneuvers through the complex social milieu generated by people in an organization undergoing change. A recognition and exploration of reflexivity, and of the ways in which social controls are mediated through emotions and generalized others, can help us to form richer appreciation of the nature of organizational power.

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<sup>1</sup> The names of the company, its divisions and the people who work there are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> We define subjectivity as a process of constructing the self as a subject. This comprises ways of thinking and talking about relations between the self and other subjects and objects in the external world, and includes the construction of emotions internal to the self (for example, see Rose 1990: 1-11).

<sup>3</sup> Neuro linguistic programming (NLP) is difficult to sum up in a few sentences. It is an approach to corporate culture change and 'life coaching' that began in the 1970s as an integration of theories

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predominantly from linguistics and psychology. It's founders, John Grinder, and Richard Bandler, sought ways to model the processes of thought and interpretation employed by expert practitioners in various human-orientated fields. Adherents trace aspects of NLP to the Gestalt therapy of Fritz Perls, to the linguistics of Whorf and Vygotsky.

<sup>4</sup> We are deliberately mixing the vocabularies of the approaches in order to highlight concepts that we perceive to be sympathetic to one another. This does not imply that there are no tensions between symbolic interactionism and Foucault. For a full discussion of compatibilities and tensions see Castellani (1999).

<sup>5</sup> Psychologists claim that shame can often lead to anger and hostility (Tangney 1999).

<sup>6</sup> In MBTI discourse, the N (and not the I) in intuitive is highlighted in order to avoid confusion with the Introverted category.

<sup>7</sup> According to literature handed out in the cultural change workshops, INFPs constitute less than 1% of the population.