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## Identity and the Workplace: An Assessment of Contextualist and Discursive Approaches

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### Abstract

The issue of workplace identity – how and why employees develop an attachment with and affinity for aspects of their work environment, and how work and non-work influences interact in the identification process, is a topic of substantial interest among both critical and ‘mainstream’ management studies researchers (cf. Marks & Thompson, 2010). However, these streams of research have largely developed separately, with little cross-fertilization of ideas. This is also true of developments within the critical-management community (e.g., between labour-process and postmodernist approaches). This paper seeks to remedy this situation by analyzing what I call ‘contextualist’, ‘discursive’, and mainstream approaches to the study of identity, with an eye towards synthesizing their best ideas. This may help management scholars to develop an understanding of identity that will empower lower-level employees at work.

### Introduction

Critically-oriented social scientists regard “identity” as an important component of social life. For example, Stuart Hall’s work on post-colonial cultural identities (e.g., Hall, 1993), and Judith Butler’s (e.g., Butler, 1990) work on feminist and homosexual identities are reflective of the importance that this concept has for critically-oriented scholars. This interest in identity is also reflected in the work of critical researchers who focus more specifically on the study of organizational life. Organizational scholars who study employee identity tend to agree on at least one thing: an employee’s level of “identification” with workplace-related entities is an important influence on their experiences and behavior at work. As Albert et al. (2000) note, “whether an organization, a group, or person, each entity needs at least a preliminary answer to the question “Who are we?” or “Who am I?” in order to interact effectively with other entities” (p. 13). Within the critical management studies (CMS) community, an interest in employee identity traces back to Marxian notions of “class consciousness” (Marx, 1864), up through Critical Theory notions of “false consciousness” (cf. Burawoy, 1979), postmodernist concerns with “subjectivity” (cf. Willmott, 1990), while Thompson (1990) argued that the articulation of the “missing subject”, how employment relations influence an employee’s sense-of-self and capacity for agency at work, was the biggest theoretical issue yet to be satisfactorily addressed by labour process theory (LPT). The CMS community conceives of workplace identity as a nexus which links dynamics of power, control, resistance, race, gender, and skills (cf. Guowei, 2011; Jaros, 2010, 2001).

Nevertheless, or perhaps because of its import, theoretical disagreement within CMS about the nature of workplace identity persists, and it is this disagreement that is addressed in this paper. I argue that within the CMS tradition, two important meta-perspectives on this topic have emerged. The first is what I call a “contextualist” approach, exemplified by the work of Taylor, Bain, Marks, Hallier, Baldry, and colleagues (e.g., Taylor & Bain, 1999; Marks & Scholarios, 2007; Marks & Hallier, 2007; Marks & Locklear, 2004; Baldry & Hallier, 2007; Hallier, 2004; Vallas, 2003, 2007; Marks & Thompson, 2010); and the second, a “discursive” approach, exemplified by the work of Willmott, Du Gay, Knights, Winiecki and colleagues among others (e.g., Thomas, 2009; Du Gay, 2007; Willmott, 2008; Willmott, 2005; Winiecki & Wigman, 2007; O’Doherty, 2005; O’Doherty & Willmott, 2001; Knights & McCabe, 2003; Gagnon, 2008; Collinson, 2003; Halford & Leonard, 2006; Leonard, 2010). Note that these lists of works are not intended as all-inclusive for each perspective, rather as representative of the broad streams of research characteristic of each. Also, I do not claim that the analytical approaches of the authors I have categorized together are homogenous. To the contrary, they are sometimes characterized by significant differences in theoretical. Nevertheless, in this paper I will argue that these works do share significant commonalities, enough to merit classification under these two broader rubrics.

Specifically, the contextualist approach is characterized by (a) roots in Marxian materialism, but with an emphasis on overcoming some of its perceived limitations, particularly the concept of class-consciousness as the sole form of meaningful worker identity, (b) an occasional willingness to adopt “mainstream OB” concepts, such as Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Self-Categorization Theory (SCT), but with an eye towards improvement on them, particularly their neglect of emphasis on the conscious, self-interested agency of employees in creating selves, (c) a de-emphasis on “broad brush” approaches that tend to regard all employees of a particular “class” category, such as “managers”, “knowledge workers”, *across* organizations as presumptively having the same or different identities in favor of a focus on contextual elements of a specific workplace – such as education and training, career paths, power, hierarchy, workplace architecture, and skills – as drivers of specific kinds of organizational/self identity among particular groups of employees, and (d) an interest in studying how employee identity relates to resistance to management agendas, particularly forms of collective resistance that mount a ‘meaningful’ challenge.

In contrast, the discursive approach is characterized by (a) roots in postmodernist perspectives, such as Laclau and Mouffe’s (1987) conceptualization of one’s “identity as political” and Lacanian notions of “identity as lack” (Driver, 2009), but clearly the most influential ideas come from Foucauldian approaches to self-creation within the context of societal discourses, particularly the anxiety and insecurity characteristic of contemporary society; (b) an emphasis on the specific characteristics of particular workplaces but with an eye towards teasing out how they reflect societal discourses, such as power-knowledge regimes, which influence the creation of broad categories of identities, such as “knowledge workers”, (c) an eagerness to examine the interplay between workplace identities and those forged in broader social discourses such as those involving race and gender, and (d) an interest in studying the relationship between identity and resistance to managerial agendas, but resistance of a more individualistic nature, and also as a means of understanding employee compliance and consent to management agendas as well.

While the differences between these perspectives are reasonably clear, and will be briefly sketched in the paper, my goal is not to dwell on old conflicts between postmodernist and ‘core’ labour process perspectives. Instead, while seeking to avoid the papering-over of important differences, this work will focus on emphasizing commonalities between the two approaches, illuminating ways in which each can be leveraged to fill some knowledge gaps in the other, and thus better enhance our overall understanding of workplace identity and bridge intellectual gaps within the CMS community as well. For example, while traditional postmodernist perspectives are often criticized for being over-deterministic, regarding an employee’s identity as a “production” of social discourses, the discursive approach outlined here recognizes that limitation and shares the contextualist perspective’s focus on exploring how employees can be active agents in shaping their senses-of-self, albeit within discursive constraints. Both perspectives also reject under-socialized, purely psychological accounts of workplace identity, and both perspectives are concerned with how the workplace is a nexus of multiple identities, and how these identities may either reinforce or conflict with each other, and what these interactions mean for the employee’s ability to resist hegemonic/oppressive employment practices (cf. Boje, 2008; Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999). These avenues of intersection will be explored.

In my conclusion I will address the ever-vexing issue of praxis, the problem of how the critical identity researcher, whether discursivist or contextualist, can help employees develop identities that enable them to resist managerial agendas that work against their interests. Thus, the layout of the paper will be to first explicate the contextualist and discursive approaches to workplace identity, then comparative them to tease out common ground. Then, I discuss some approaches to praxis that might facilitate achieving this ‘emancipatory’ potential. Note that in the detailed discussion of the contextualist and discursive perspectives that follow, for purposes of brevity I do not discuss the work of every author

cited on page 3 as exemplifying each tradition, rather I choose a subset of those that is sufficient to describe them, and clarify their similarities and differences.

### Contextualist approaches to workplace identity

In addition to the characteristics described above, *contextualist* approaches to the study of workplace identity reflect a critical orientation to the study of work, meaning they are in a general sense anti-capitalist, having their roots in a Marxian intellectual tradition (Adler, Forbes, & Willmott, 2007). More specifically, they are derived from what might be called second-wave Labour Process Theory (cf. Thompson & Smith, 2001), the LPT that was both inspired by Braverman (1974) and developed as a critique of some of its perceived weaknesses, particularly Braverman's "neglect" of worker, and to a lesser extent managerial, subjectivity. Thus, as Vallas (2007) explains it, this form of LPT attempted to distance itself from the totalizing, deterministic characteristics of orthodox Marxism and to take seriously the context of specific work organizations in shaping labour process dynamics:

...it was precisely in recognition of these limitations that labour process theorists — from Edwards (1979) and Friedman (1977) to Burawoy (1979, 1985), Barker (1993) and Graham (1995) — so often sought to identify and explain the multiplicity of labour control systems that have historically emerged within the capitalist mode of production. (p.1381).

In the 1980s, researchers such as Burawoy (1979; 1985) and Knights and Willmott (1985) sought to leverage second wave theory to understand worker agency and consciousness. Thompson (1990), in evaluating this work, said that our understanding was still very limited, calling the explication of the "missing subject" the greatest theoretical and practical challenge facing LPT. Thus, interest in employee subjectivity and identity is rooted in LPT's critical-emancipatory tradition: a desire to understand what factors lead employees to resist managerial attempts to dominate and exploit them.

Nevertheless, it is the rejection of these perceived weaknesses in Marxian and early LPT perspectives on subjectivity - totalizing and deterministic - that merit calling this perspective "contextualist". To both Marx and Braverman, worker "subjectivity", their capacity for individual agency and ability to collectively identify with other workers, was analytically interesting and emancipatorily meaningful only to the extent that it took the form of class consciousness, since it is class consciousness that would form the social-psychological basis for the collective action that would inevitably result in the overthrow of capitalism. Thus, for traditional Marxism, worker identity takes either of two meaningful forms: the worker is either class conscious (i.e., identifies their interests correctly with the working class), or is falsely conscious (identifies with the interests of the exploiting class). Furthermore, the development of class consciousness is inevitable, as it results from the inexorable dialectics and logic of capitalist development. This also implies that the only relevant factors that shape an employee's identity are experiences at work, the crucible where these class dynamics unfold.

In contrast, the contextualist approach argues that workplace identities are varied and are the product of many causes. The contextual details that characterize particular workplaces and which Marxians dismiss as superficial - the specific control strategies enacted by management, the frontiers of control and resistance (cf. Friedman, 1977) that emerge as a result, the nature of the technology and skills that characterize work, the way work is organized hierarchically versus team-based, even the architecture of the firm's layout (Baldry & Hallier, 2007) are viewed as having a profound impact on who and what employees identify with, and that these workplace identities are meaningful in an emancipatory sense. Identification processes can lead to *collective* acts of resistance that hold out the promise of significant worker advances.

For example, Vallas (2003) studied 4 paper mills owned by 2 different firms to explore the introduction of team-work on worker identity, particularly management's attempt to build worker commitment to the "team" and "organizational family" and reduce the salience of perceived divisions between "salaried" and "hourly" employees. Contrary to what he calls "hegemonic" Marxian theories that posit that workers are "docile dupes" who unthinkingly absorb management propaganda (cf. Barker, 1993), Vallas found that in 3 of the 4 mills, instances of worker resistance *increased* among those workers who were organized into teams, compared to workers who remained in traditional hierarchical work arrangements. Far from being duped, these workers turned the tables on management, using the latter's rhetoric of "empowerment" and "participation" to demand better working conditions and force out managers who resisted their demands. Furthermore, whereas resistance among traditional workers was found to be "scattershot" and unorganized, the team-based structure facilitated the formation of collective identities, which resulted in a unified front among these workers vis-à-vis management.

The contextualist approach not only rejects Marxian-based notions of identity-hegemony, it also rejects what it perceives as totalizing accounts of identity that have emerged from the post-modernist domain. For example, Taylor and Bain (1999, 2003) and Bain and Taylor (2000) studied call-centre employees to examine claims made by Fernie (1998)

and others that call-centre surveillance reflected a new form of Foucauldian bio-power in the workplace, an all-seeing, all-knowing “wired cage” or “panopticon” that snuffs out resistance and creates compliant subjects who identify with managerial goals. Their detailed case-studies found evidence that contrary to the post-modernist view, “call centre operators are not passive occupants of a Foucauldian prison. Not only are they active participants in the productive process, but are capable of individual and collective resistance” (1999: 116). Taylor and Bain argued that their data showed that mentally, call-centre operators retained a critical-distance from management attempts to develop their organizational commitment via team-building, and found ways to “game” both the technical and performance-appraisal aspects of control to their advantage. They responded collectively by joining trade unions. Taylor and Bain conclude by arguing that their evidence suggests that the call centre, rather than being a site of domination, is a “contested terrain” where workers engage in active struggle against management exploitation.

More recently, while still largely maintaining a focus on what happens in the workplace, contextualists have expanded their view to encompass an analysis of work vs. non-work identities, and have leveraged mainstream theoretical concepts to do so. Baldry and Hallier (2007) theoretically analyzed how some organizations have re-designed office space (from traditional cubicles to “funky”, aesthetically pleasing architecture) as a means to get employees to identify more with the organization and less with non-work entities such as family, friends, and community groups. They argued that traditional architecture conveys signals of power/status differences between employees and managers, whereas the re-designed architecture was consistent with modern HRM-ideologies of teamwork, trust, participation, and the organization-as-family. The creation of a “fun workplace” is supposed to co-opt the employee’s need to find fun in non-work domains. Baldry and Hallier draw on ideas developed from “mainstream” organizational behavior, Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorization Theory (SCT), to explain why these management efforts are likely to fail. They note that according to SCT, people choose to identify with entities based on their perceived normative and comparative fit: do I share the same values as other people, and do I share a common self-concept with them? Baldry and Hallier argue that managerial efforts to instill a predominant organizational identity are unlikely to succeed because they will fail a “reality test”: Management, being obviously hierarchically superior to employees, and having different interests, is likely to be rejected as an object of employee identification, particularly compared to non-work friends and family.

Similarly, Hallier (2004) draws on mainstream theory, albeit of an earlier sociological sort, to analyze the identity of managers within an air-traffic controller environment. Hallier argues that a weakness of traditional LPT is that it was too narrowly focused on issues of control and de-skilling. The LPT approach lacks the nuance of earlier research, such as socio-technical systems theory, Goffman’s classic work in impression management, and Gouldner’s work on different types of bureaucracies, which appreciated the complex, situation-specific dynamics that can unfold between different levels of management and between management and workers, particularly when new technology is introduced. Hallier found that in the face of the introduction of new radar technology which disrupted the working relations of air-traffic controllers, middle-managers responded by protecting their own interests: they largely put up a ‘façade’ of identifying with top-management goals and values, while working behind the scenes to resist those aspects of the introduction that harmed the interests of their *work unit*, which was their primary identification, and which thus commanded their “real” loyalty. Identification with their units prompted middle managers to walk a mental tight-rope, sometimes enforcing top management dictates on recalcitrant controllers, other times putting on a “performance” for top management while secretly allowing controllers to maintain their traditional discretion over work decisions. This theme of performance is another characteristic of the contextualist approach: Following Thompson (2003), these researchers argue that even in the face of seemingly overwhelming or totalizing management identity-shaping efforts, employees typically maintain a cynical, critical “distance” from them, pretending to bow before elite power, but actually maintaining an inner, resistant “true self”.

Yet another characteristic of the contextualist approach is its skepticism about broad-brush identity categorizations, such as “knowledge workers”. Commenting on this, Marks & Scholarios (2007) argue that such categorizations “assume homogeneity within occupational groups ..ignoring their complexity and failing to account for the divergent experiences of (so-called) knowledge workers” (p.98). They conduct a case study of software developers and find that these workers are not homogenous: the ones with traditional university training have an elite status characterized by higher pay and relatively high creative autonomy. Others, who were trained via a craft-apprenticeship route and lack university credentials, had lesser status within the firm. Using both qualitative and quantitative methods, Marks and Scholarios find that craft-trained software workers tended to have high levels of organizational identification and professional identification, whereas the elites were characterized by lower organizational identification but also high professional identification.

Like Baldry and Hallier (2007), Marks and Scholarios draw on “mainstream” identification theory – SIT – to explain their findings, but go beyond it by arguing that one’s personal interests, not self-esteem, is the motivating factor behind collective identity formation. Because they were trained within the firm and are thus more dependent on it, craft-trained workers identify strongly with the organization. In contrast, university-trained workers feel no such need. But both cling to the professional identification as “knowledge workers” because it provides them with “cultural currency”, a kind of elite status, both within the firm and in the market/society more generally, providing them with a positive personal identity. For the craft-trained workers, this means adopting impression-management techniques to claim this cultural currency even as their work experiences contradict attributions of elite status. Even here, the authors found more contextual variance – within the craft and elite categories, levels of organizational identification also varied by age. As even elite workers get older, their university training is perceived as being dated, and they too become more dependent on, and thus have an interest in identifying more strongly with, the organization. Overall, very few software workers comported with the stereotypical “knowledge worker”. Marks and Scholarios, echoing other contextualists, argue that this supports the claims of LPT writers such as Thompson and colleagues (Warhurst & Thompson, 1998; Thompson & Smith, 2001) who argue that rather than constituting something radically new, what is commonly called “knowledge work” reflects *continuity* in capitalist-managerial control methods, in this case based on a hierarchical division of labor reflecting different qualifications.

### **Discursive approaches to workplace identity**

In contrast to the contextualist approach’s “materialist” intellectual tradition, the *discursive* approach to the critical study of workplace identity is rooted in a more ideational intellectual tradition, which focuses on the role of language, meaning, and discourse in the development of identification processes, drawing heavily on the work of Foucault specifically and post-modernist theory more generally. Thus, by-now familiar Foucauldian concepts such as bio-power, disciplinary power, and governmentality are deployed to explain managerial efforts to control the identities of, and hence the behaviors of, employees. A core belief is that employee identity/subjectivity is produced by discourses, some of which are enacted within the workplace, while others are broader-social in nature. Thus, as opposed to contextualists, who tend to focus more on what happens inside the organization, discursivists place a heavier emphasis on how what happens outside the domain of production, how societal-level discourses, such as neo-liberal ideology (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002), patriarchy (cf. Collinson, 2003; Halford, 2003; Halford & Leonard, 2006), post-colonialism (Leonard, 2010) and mass-consumerism (Du Gay, 2007), shape the identity of employees, who are viewed as being fundamentally motivated not by self-interest (contextual view), but by existential issues such as anxiety-reduction (cf. O’Doherty & Willmott, 2001). Management leverages this anxiety, implementing new forms of “identity regulation” that interact with social-level discourses to control employee identity; creating “compliant, dramaturgical, or resistant” subjects (cf. Collinson, 2003, 2006). Employees can express some agency in crafting their identity, but this agency is shaped by available discourses.

However, rather than placing a primary emphasis on the nuances in identity that specific workplaces produce, discursivists tend to conduct studies of organizations with an eye toward making more general, broader-brush claims about the emergence of new “types” of identity, such as that of “knowledge workers”. Similarly, whereas contextualists view ostensibly new forms of employment practices in the light of continuity with older, hierarchical forms, within the discursive approach there is a tendency to emphasize the ‘newness’ of emergent, technology-based forms of work structures and control methods – call center surveillance, cultural and normative control, self-managing teams - and the identities they shape. And while recognizing the existence of employee resistance to managerial control, discursivists tend to be more pessimistic about its efficacy. Resistance is viewed as more individual than collective, and more inward-looking (“how can I resist management efforts to de-stabilize my sense of self?”) than outward-looking, and thus less-challenging of Capitalism itself.

Responding to the failure of Marxian theory’s prediction that capitalism inevitably would create a mobilized, unified, class-conscious proletariat, the discursive view’s post-modernism itself draws on an intellectual tradition that seeks to explain why so many workers do *not* resist, tracing from Zizek and Lacan and Foucault back through Frankfurt School theoreticians who emphasized the role of culture in pacifying the masses and further back to Gramsci, who argued that capital’s social “hegemony” is rooted in the workplace, where Fordist industrial policy played a key role in “buying off” worker resistance. Thus, the role of the discursive researcher is to de-construct managerial rhetoric, exposing ‘false’ claims of rationality and objectivity, and thus “open the eyes” of workers to what is happening to them. Methodologically, this means writing theoretical papers that explain the ascendancy of certain discourses, but also conducting case-studies of

organizations to tease out how power-knowledge discourses operate in the “capillaries” of organizational life to create compliant, and resistant, subjects.

For example, Alvesson and Willmott (2002) assess how employees are impelled by management to develop self-images and work orientations that are deemed congruent with managerially defined objectives. These authors argue that traditional studies of work, both mainstream and critical (e.g., contextualist LPT), tend to emphasize the impersonal and material aspects of control without much regard for how culture and ideology are deployed as control mechanisms. Identity regulation via the formation of strong organizational cultures and managerial discourses of empowerment and participation can be effective because whereas in the past, a person’s identity was firmly rooted in one’s occupation, community, and religion, changes in societal discourses such as the fast-paced competitive world of globalization, rapid technological change, mass layoffs, skepticism towards religion, and the ascendancy of neo-liberal ideology that has undermined the security of the welfare state have all tended to de-stabilize the employee’s sense-of-self, making it much more precarious and prompting anxiety about it. Since Alvesson and Willmott posit self-stability as an inherent human need, this means that ...

“Given the accomplished and sometimes precarious nature of contemporary identity, much, if not all activity involves active *identity work*”, people are continuously engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a precarious sense of coherence and distinctiveness” (p.626).

Thus, managerial “normative control” efforts via rhetorics of the organization as “family”, “team” and cultural harmony are seductive because they hold out the promise of securing a stable, positive identity in the face of so much societal turbulence. Nevertheless, unlike some discursive writers who emphasize the existence of tight ‘panopticons’ and ‘wired cages, Alvesson and Willmott do not posit this control as totalizing. They argue that management should not be viewed as all-powerful and their identity-regulating discourses do not totally determine employee subjectivity. Counter-vailing discourses, from within and outside the organization, can subvert management’s message and provide employees with the discursive material to resist its imposition. Nevertheless, they do regard identity-regulation efforts, such as the ‘concertive control’ Barker (1993; 1999) finds in self-managing teams, to be a pervasive and increasingly significant form of control, something that is significantly different from the materialist/behavioralist forms of control (i.e., bureaucratic, technical, direct) that have preceded it. It represents the creation of the “employee as identity worker” who is continuously enjoined to incorporate these managerial discourses into his/her self-identity. Resistance isn’t necessarily futile, but is likely to be limited to “micro-emancipation”, in which managerial rhetorics of empowerment and participation can sometimes be leveraged by employees to achieve greater scope over their work activities.

While Alvesson and Willmott (2002) advanced a theoretical argument, other analysts have conducted empirical research to test the efficacy of discursivist ideas. Knights and McCabe (2003) studied the influence of call-centre teamworking as a form of Foucauldian “governmentality”, where employees end up participating in the intensification of their work. This happens because the discourse of teamwork appeals to an employee’s “humanistic desire for autonomy and responsibility. Thus, much like in Barker’s (1993) study, workers embrace teamwork, develop a strong team-based collective identity, and become self-monitoring, self-disciplining “subjects”, obviating the need for direct, heavy-handed managerial control. Their interviews with call-centre workers produced evidence that many workers had indeed embraced management’s rhetoric and requirements of “team discourse” and identified with its goals and values.

However, Knights and McCabe argue that this strategy is not completely successful. “Tensions” arise in teamworking that limit the extent to which management is able to capture the hearts and minds of workers. One such source of tension is the influence of external identities. Many workers reveal that “competing bases of identification”, and the demands these make on the employee’s time and behavior, such as family, and non-work recreational groups, militate against whole-hearted commitment to the team. As a result, Knights and McCabe, like Alvesson and Willmott (2002), criticize the “heavy-duty” form of discursive theory, such as Fernie and Metcalf (1998), who talk of the call centre as an all-seeing “panopticon”. Knights and McCabe argue that this heavy-duty perspective actually abuses Foucauldian theory, arguing that Foucault “never suggested that power is as totalizing as these authors suggest, even in prisons, let alone in the factory or office” (p. 1589) . They cite evidence from their case study that several workers perceived a contradiction between management’s rhetoric of team autonomy and egalitarianism and the harsher reality of strict surveillance and discipline in teamwork, resulting in a refusal to conform to team work-norms that called for sacrifice of non-work leisure activities. They also found significant evidence of “free-riding” by some team members, meaning that not all employees had been reconstructed as “unquestioning team players”.

Knights and McCabe do describe this resistance as “embryonic”, “collectively unorganized”, and “highly restrained”, a far cry from the more active and collective resistance identified by contextualist authors such as Bain and Taylor (2000). They note that much of the observed resistance came from part-time workers who by definition are less-immersed in the

activities of the team and thus less susceptible to attempts to control their identity, especially vis-à-vis non-work discourses. Nevertheless, they also challenge Bain and Taylor (2000)'s claim that for Foucault, meaningful resistance is impossible because it is always individualist and therefore cannot mount a collective challenge to management. Knights and McCabe agree that Foucault emphasized that employees seek to achieve a sense of individual autonomy, but they argue that this actually facilitates collective resistance because "the collective world is always bound up with our individuality" (p. 1594) and serves as a basis for developing collective identities that can lead to collective resistance.

Similarly and more recently, Winiiecki and colleagues (Winiiecki, 2009, 2007, 2004; Winiiecki & Wigman, 2007) have used a discursive approach to analyze the introduction of advanced technology on workplace identity-formation processes. Winiiecki (2009, 2004) and Winiiecki and Wigman (2007) studied the introduction of an "automated call distributor" (ACD) in to a call-centre. This technology distributes calls to employees, and collects a "blizzard" of performance data (time spent on each call, etc.). Drawing on Foucault's notion of disciplinary power, they find that management leverages a rhetoric that emphasizes the "rationality" and "objectivity" of the technology, which ostensibly will remove human bias from the allocation of customer calls and the measurement of employee performance. But in fact, the technology is not "objective", and is rational only from the perspective of managerial interests, because it collects only the "data that management wants to collect, and assesses performance based on standards established by management" for its own ends. The ACD disciplines workers by fining them appraisal-points for statistical deviations from management defined productivity norms, and rewarding them with bonus points for high performance. Since ACD results for all workers are posted in a common rest area, it has an individualizing effect on worker subjectivity, since workers engage in comparison with their peers, leading to jealousy, peer pressure, and either lower or higher self-esteem.

Winiiecki (2009 & 2004) finds that, for the most part, employees are receptive to this rhetoric and develop identification with the goals and values of management. In that sense, the technology succeeds in creating "compliant subjects". Nevertheless, Winiiecki argues that it would be "too easy" to say the ACD is a panopticon. Despite the comprehensive data it produces, much worker activity remains beyond or below its gaze, and so there is "space for resistance". Winiiecki found that some workers learned how to "game the system": by figuring out the patterns in the ACD call-allotment algorithm, they were able to identify time-blocks where assignment was unlikely and leveraged this to take unauthorized breaks, arrive late for work or leave early, while simultaneously still producing a statistical record that "looks good to management". Likewise, Winiiecki and Wigman (2007) found that employees refused to completely adopt management's rhetoric of customer service, using the mute button to make sarcastic or critical comments about customers while hiding this from management. Thus, similar to Baldry and Hallier (2007), and to Gagnon's (2008) and Collinson's (2003) notion of a "dramaturgical" identity, they found a performative dimension to worker identity: workers resisted, while successfully hiding it behind a façade of compliance. And like Hallier (2004), they also found evidence that lower-level managers found space to create identities that emphasized their stuck-in-the-middle location: In some cases where supervisors discovered what workers were doing, they informally sanctioned this by looking the other way, thus allowing workers to take these needed breaks while still producing a managerial performance record that looked good to upper management.

Nevertheless, in the end, Winiiecki et al. argue that these forms of resistant subjectivity do not add up to much. Even while only pretending to endorse managerial rhetoric, workers still are publicly endorsing it, and thus "even while resisting the rules .. workers actually reify the organization's way of seeing, measuring, and knowing workers" (Winiiecki & Wigman, 2007: 127). Winiiecki and colleagues (2004, 2007) call this resistance "contained secondary adjustment" because it doesn't disrupt the official rationality, much less actual organizational practices. The "wired cage" isn't without its loopholes, but its effect on worker subjectivity and behavior is nonetheless pretty tight.

### **Comparing the discursive and contextualist approaches: Common ground**

As many researchers have noted, much ink has been spilled contrasting post-modernist and materialist versions of critical/labour process theory. Indeed, I've spilled a little in the preceding sections of this paper. So rather than plough that worn-out ground, in this section I discuss what I believe are commonalities in their approaches, at least as far as the issue of workplace identity is concerned. Furthermore, doing so isn't necessary because while the contextualist and discursive views on identity draw on materialist and post-modern theory, they largely avoid the pitfalls associated with those general social theories. Thus, my view is that rather than representing incommensurably competing points of view (as they are commonly represented in the literature, see Jaros, 2010; Marks & Thompson, 2010; Webb, 2006), in their essentials they are actually largely consistent with each other, and are in some respects complementary.

First, both the discursive and contextualist approaches emphasize the importance of the *workplace* in shaping individual and collective identities. Despite its roots in Marxian-materialist theory, the contextualist approach breaks with

that tradition in how it conceptualizes the development of employee self-concept. Whereas Marxian theory posits the formation of collective identities on the basis of social class (e.g., capitalists, proletariat) that transcend what happens in particular workplaces, contextualists argue that what happens to employees in different organizations, or who work for different departments or units within the same organization, might result in very different personal and collective identities, and these identities are non-trivial: they influence the employee's quality of life, their behavior at work, and their ability pursue their interests on the job. The context of the workplace – job characteristics, whether work is organized on an individual basis or in teams, the type of technology employed (Taylor and Bain, 1999), hierarchical level (Hallier, 2004), the history of conflict or cooperation between management and labor (cf. Vallas, 2003), even the architecture and design of office space (Baldry & Hallier, 2007) and other factors can influence how employees shape their identities.

Likewise, despite its roots primarily in post-modernist theory, the discursive approach outlined in this paper are characterized by significant breaks with that tradition re identity formation. Whereas the post-modernist theory of Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari, and the early writings of Foucault propose that social discourses produce subjectivities that are mostly uniform across organizations, at least within the context of a particular power-knowledge regime, discursivists, like contextualists, believe that workplace context does matter. For example, Collinson (2006, 2003) argues that depending on how power-resistance dynamics unfold in a particular work setting, employees might respond to material or symbolic insecurity by developing conformist, dramaturgical, or resistant identities. Likewise, both Winiecki and Wigman (2007) and Knights and McCabe (2003) found that amongst call centre employees, some developed “docile, compliant” identities linked to management goals and objectives, while others drew on their family and other non-work identifications to resist management's attempt to instill such identities. In neither work setting did a power-knowledge discourse produce uniform subjectivities. The nuances of each workplace, even as differently experienced by individual employees, moderated the impact on the kinds of “selves” that emerged.

Also, this emphasis on the import of the context of workplaces in shaping identity has caused both the discursivist and contextualist perspectives to largely eschew the use of quantitative, survey-research methods in favor of in-depth qualitative methods. Marks and Scholarios (2007) seemingly speak for both perspectives when they argue that “Although survey methods are appropriate for ascertaining formalised work role and academic attainment, they are not ideal for understanding the nature of identity. Identity may not always be explicit, even for the individual involved... and its socially constructed nature makes it difficult to reduce to simple measurement.” (p.103).

True, unlike contextualists, discursivists are clearly more willing to generalize what they observe in a particular workplace, identifying different types or categories of identity, such as “knowledge workers”, “dramaturgical identities” or “confessional” and “introspective” selves (cf. Gagnon, 2008) that can be found in different workplaces, thereby running the risk of reifying these kinds of categories. But in my view, this tendency actually complements the contextualist emphasis: Of necessity, theory-building requires aggregation and generalization/abstraction from specific observed phenomena. To the extent that in a particular instance the aggregation is unwarranted (or warranted), additional case-level data can be collected to refute or support it. Marks and Scholarios's (2007) study of how some employees typically lumped in the category of “knowledge workers” actually experience different organizational and professional identities depending on their qualifications history, is an example of such a corrective. Both discursivists and contextualists play useful roles: the former theorize broader categories, while the empirical work of the latter (and sometimes the former) can provide a basis for refuting or refining them.

Second, both perspectives emphasize the role of personal *agency* in identity formation. Whereas traditional Marxian theory, and early Labor Process Theory (cf. Braverman, 1974) view employee identity as class-conscious proletariat to be the inevitable result of the dialectic of capitalist historical development, i.e., something that “happens” to the worker rather than something they have conscious control over, the contextualist approach emphasizes the role of choice or agency in identity formation. A personal or collective identity isn't something given, the individual plays an active, conscious role in its construction. As Vallas (2003) puts it, “conforming to the structural determinism of (early) LPT, hegemony theorists seldom attach much significance to the worker's capacity to respond to the work structures they confront, yet ... subordinate workers can wield sufficient material and symbolic resources to challenge or defy elite-defined norms and values” (p.208). Vallas found that when management adopted team-based production and attempted to deploy an identity-instilling rhetoric of the organization as one big happy team, workers were able to turn the tables, seizing the rhetoric to press demands against management for what they, not management, defined as substantive participation and power-sharing. Likewise, Hallier's (2004) work among air-traffic monitors found that middle-managers were able to consciously deceive upper management, putting on a show of compliance with new work rules, while actually subverting rules that they perceived as threats to the interests of their work units, which they strongly identified with. In effect, they faked an



organizational identity to cover for their “true” identification, with their work-unit. Contextualists do not argue that employees are completely free to shape their selves. Societal power dynamics and material structures constrain such choices; nevertheless there is considerable room for agency.

Similarly, the discursivist perspective described here rejects the more totalizing, “heavy-duty” (cf. Knights & McCabe, 2003) forms of post-modernism that posit people as *subject to* and their identities as the *product of* power-knowledge discourses. While acknowledging that such discourses limit and shape the agency that can be exhibited, the discursivist approach argues that there is always space, even if only in the “interstices” of such discourses, for conscious choice. These writers draw on later-Foucauldian work, particularly the concept of “technologies of the self”, to explicate these spaces. Alvesson and Willmott (2002), in describing “identity regulation” as an emergent management control strategy, state that they “.. reject any suggestion that management is omnipotent in its definition of employee identity. The organizational regulation of identity is a precarious and often contested process involving active identity work ..Organizational members are not reducible to passive consumers of managerially defined identities.” (p.621). Indeed, the concept of “identity work” implies that employees consciously make choices about what norms and values they adopt as part of their self-concept. It is what allows one to establish, however precarious, a stable sense-of-self in the face of so many anxiety and uncertainty-inducing societal discourses. For example, Winiecki’s (2004) call-centre study found evidence that despite the “seemingly thoroughgoing rationalizing power” of newly-introduced automated call distributor technology, some employees were able to reject management’s rationalization discourse, maintain an autonomous sense-of-self apart from the organization, and subvert the system for their own personal benefit. Similarly, Hoedemaekers’ (2010) analysis of public-sector worker identity from a Lacanian perspective found that managerial efforts to ‘suppress the indeterminacy of meaning’ via promulgation of an ‘ideal employee’ identity was characterized by ‘slips and contradictions’ that presented plenty of opportunities for employee rejection and resistance. The discursivist approach rejects the rhetoric of omniscient, irresistible “wired cages” and “panopticons” in favor of a more nuanced post-structuralism that recognizes the existence, and import, of employee agency in shaping identity.

Also, both perspectives seemingly agree that a manifestation of this agency is that identities, rather than being fixed and stabilized by one’s structural position or totally determined by societal power-knowledge discourses, tend to be multiple and fluid. Both the contextualist view and the discursive view agree that an individual can identify with many collective entities, some of which are forged in the workplace, such as to teams, organizations, and occupations, and others which pertain to non-work domains – identifications as different types of consumers, as members of ethnic or racial groups and one’s gender or sexuality. True, social structures/discourses create constraints and limits on our ability to choose multiple identities, and they create tendencies and incentives to identify with some groups rather than others (e.g., societal discourses or structures of oppression against ethnic groups, gender, or sexuality create tendencies for people who have characteristics marked for oppression to forge collective identities to emancipate themselves from it – Willmott, 2005). Nevertheless, both perspectives argue that the individual’s capacity for agency means that to a certain extent at least, these multiple identities are forged via conscious choices that people make.

Furthermore, there is evidence that both perspectives agree at least somewhat that the salience of these multiple identities are not fixed: Depending on the circumstances, different interests or anxieties might create tendencies for us to value or prioritize one type of collective workplace-forged identity over another (cf. Marks & Scholarios’s (2007) study of the salience of software worker’s professional vs. organizational identification, depending on their standing within a firm’s division of labor), or to prioritize a non-work identity over a work-forged one. An example from the discursivist perspective being Knights & McCabe’s (2003) finding that prioritization of “competing bases of identification” such as family and recreational groups caused some workers to reject management’s attempt to forge a strong organizational identity. Work and non-work circumstances can also interact to produce identities. Zanoni and Jannsen (2007) studied how minority-group employees alternately endorsed, leveraged, and contested organization-sponsored diversity rhetoric, in the process forging collective identities that furthered their interests.

Also, despite some apparent differences, the two perspectives are also complementary in how they view the relationship between workplace identity and *resistance on the part of lower-level employees to the imposition of managerialist work practices and ideologies*. In my view, both approaches have gone a long way towards debunking, both theoretically (cf. Thompson, 2003) and empirically, the notion that modern methods of control and culture-management inevitably create compliant subjects who are unwilling or unable to engage in meaningful workplace resistance, a problem that has plagued both the materialist perspective (e.g., the Marxian notion that only mass-level class struggle is meaningful) and original post-modernist perspective (e.g., the notion that rationalization discourses create ‘iron’ or ‘wired’ cages in which resistance is not only futile, it doesn’t occur because these discourses have ‘captured the hearts and minds’ of employees).

The terrain of identity and resistance might seem an unlikely place to find common ground, because the contextualist and discursivist literatures are characterized by frequent jousting between authors on either side (e.g., Taylor and Bain (1999)'s critique of Foucauldian views of the identity/resistance nexus, particularly its alleged denial of collective resistance; Knights & McCabe's criticism of Taylor and Bain for their rejection of Foucauldianism, etc.). However, to a certain extent, this is a case of contextualists "refusing to take yes for an answer": as illustrated by the work cited here in section II, more recent work in the discursive tradition has backed away from the totalizing claims of earlier, "heavy duty" (Knights & McCabe, 2003) research, acknowledging that no "wired cage" is ever air-tight, and that space for resistance is always present.

As Alvesson and Willmott (2002) argue, for discursivists this capacity for resistance is not just theoretical or trivial. It means that employees can achieve "micro-emancipation", autonomy and freedom that is limited, to the extent that it doesn't result in the overthrow of capitalism or management's general control of work processes, but which nevertheless is meaningful in enhancing the employee's self-esteem and in improving their working conditions. Criticism by contextualists deserves credit for enlightening discursivists on this point.

However, the discursivist point of view should be credited for being a corrective to some claims about collective resistance made by contextualist researchers, which might be guilty of expressing excessive enthusiasm about it. For example, Taylor and Bain (1999) noted that at their research site, the emergence of a unified social identity among call-centre workers had manifested in the collective resistance of joining trade unions. Disparaging post-modernists who were more cautious about the import of such developments, they called this movement of "great significance", an important "challenging of management hegemony over an intensive labour process" and concluded that the prospect for future union-led collective gains "must be considered favourable" (p. 114). Yet twelve years later, there's little evidence that workers have made significant headway in reducing managerial domination of these kinds of workplaces.

Also, contextualists who tend to criticize the concept of micro-emancipation as not very important (cf. Bain & Taylor, 2000; Marks & Thompson, 2010) should keep in mind that the contextualist perspective itself rejects the traditional Marxian view that workplace resistance inevitably, or even likely, results in mass-scale class conflict with "macro-emancipation" potential. In the end, both sides agree that in the current political-economic climate of neo-liberalism and globalization, workplace resistance is likely to be local in its scope and ramifications. Call centers and other similar "high-tech" workplaces many not be wired cages or sites of normative mind control, but as Leidner (2006) notes, "the failure of normative control measures to win workers' full commitment does not mean they are necessarily ineffective in undermining active opposition in some settings" (p. 446). Indeed, the discursivist research cited above is useful not only because it has documented the existence of resistance to these managerial practices, it has also shown that, however it may bother critical researchers to admit it, these control measures can, in some situations, produce a lot more 'compliant' identities than resistant ones. Like it or not, compliance does exist, and the discursivist approach has tackled the problem of explaining it much more effectively than has the contextualist view, which seems to emphasize resistance and misbehavior to its neglect.

Finally, the two critical perspectives share a goal of apprehending the motives that drive people to identify with collectives, but differ on what the core-motive is. For discursivists, it is often existential, reflecting an inherent need to reduce anxiety and insecurity about one's self (cf. O'Doherty & Willmott, 2001; Karaman & Alvesson, 2004; Collinson, 2003). Whereas in the past, established institutions like the hereditary state, the official Church, and the guild system pretty much established from birth what someone's salient identifications would be, the emergence of capitalism has changed all that, challenging and subverting established cultural norms and economic categories. More recently, within the context of capitalist social relations, the relative stability of the post-WW2 welfare state has been replaced by the dynamism of neo-liberal ideology, rapid globalization and technological change, and new social movements, all of which have further undermined the individual's ability to experience a stable, positive, taken-for-granted sense of self. This insecurity provokes anxiety, and "identity work" – the continuous, conscious need to manage one's identities, and reformulate/reconstruct them, in the face of constant battering by swirling, ever-changing societal discourses that either undermine their stability or challenge their legitimacy.

In apparent contrast, the contextualist view argues that it is interests, not anxiety reduction, that prompt social identification processes. For example, in their study of formally and informally trained software workers, Marks and Scholarios (2007) found evidence that all software workers, regardless of their age or type of training, identified strongly with their professional identity as "knowledge workers" because it provided cultural currency that could be leveraged to their advantage in the market-place. In contrast, whereas informally educated workers tended to also strongly identify with the organization, those with formal university qualifications did not. Marks and Scholarios ascribed this to differences in interests: non-technicals have firm-specific skills, meaning they know their economic interests, both present and career,

are tied to their employing organization and thus strongly identify with it. University-trained workers know their qualifications are broadly recognized by all IT firms, and thus feel no compelling interest to identify strongly with any single one, even the current employer.

So which perspective is correct? In my view, the apparent differences are again somewhat deceiving, since the concepts of interest and insecurity reduction are closely related. As an example, a discursivist could read the Marks/Scholarios study and argue “well, the reason they perceived different interests was because the division of labor created different anxieties and uncertainties about career prospects”. And likewise, contextualists could plausibly reinterpret discursivist papers that identify anxiety-reduction or self-esteem as the motive force in terms of interests. To me, both concepts share a common theme: the general desire to achieve a stable, positive sense-of-self. Beyond that, I do find Marks and Scholarios’s (2007) distinction between self-interest as an instrumental concept and self-esteem as an emotional one intriguing, because mainstream writers make the same distinction: according to SIT and Self-Categorization Theory, identities have cognitive, emotional, and evaluative components (cf. Meyer et al., 2006). Perhaps it is the case that in some settings, the emotional component is more salient in identity formation than the cognitive or evaluative ones (e.g., if employees are performing emotional labor), in other settings the reverse might be true. Also, more generally, the discursivist view is also hard to discount: the recent collapse of global economies and financial markets, mass layoffs, and wild swings in the prices of essentials such as fuel and food has surely increased anxiety and uncertainty, and it makes sense that this could influence identification processes.

So rather than committing the essentialist sin of clinging to either as THE primal motive force, best to treat them as being hypotheses subject to empirical testing. Either might be more or less salient as a motive force for creating social identities, depending on the circumstances people find themselves in.

### **Conclusion: Critical approaches and the problem of Praxis**

The preceding comparative analysis of the contextualist and discursive approaches to identity within CMS reveals a significant number of commonalities, shared ground, among them; enough to warrant claiming that this ground is strong enough for collaborative research to proceed, work that would involve teams of researchers conducting joint studies of workplace identity that draw simultaneously on the strengths and insights of both theoretical traditions. How should such research proceed in a way that helps CMS scholars achieve praxis, the goal of helping low-ranking employees resist management agendas?

One obvious similarity between the two perspectives is that they share a critical heritage: they are both more or less anti-capitalist, viewing the worker-management relationship as inherently antagonistic, and seek to help employees forge individual and collective identities that will serve to advance their interests against the agendas of management. In this regard, an age-old problem for critical researchers is that we seek to not only identify workplace and broader social discourses and structures that oppress and exploit employees, but also to do something about it, to come up with action steps that further the goal of employee “emancipation”, if not in a grand, Marxian sense, at least at the local level of how workers and lower-level employees experience meaningful work, gain greater autonomy, and ultimately a better standard of living. One reason that critical/LPT researchers are interested in identity and identification processes is because they hold out, at least theoretically, the hope that by forming collective identities, workers will be able to use their combined strength to leverage some level of emancipation from the agendas of management and other elites. So far, not much progress has been made. When they discuss employee emancipation, discursivists tend to focus on what employees can do for themselves, e.g., documenting how workers manage to out-wit managerial control strategies and forge identities that facilitate ‘micro-emancipation’ (cf. Zanoni & Janssens, 2007). The researcher’s role is one of enlightening the employee about the mind-sapping character of obsessive identity-work, and thus opening their eyes to the emancipatory value of seeing how collective action with other workers could eventually lead to changes in employment relations that would reduce their personal insecurity and anxiety (cf. O’Doherty & Willmott, 2001; O’Doherty, 2005). However, it’s not clear how the typical lower-level call-centre employee or emotional labourer is likely to gain access to the obscure academic journals and conferences (such as the LPC) where these ideas are discussed, or even know of their existence to begin with.

Like discursivists, contextualists document linkages between identification processes and resistance to management agendas, but unlike the discursivist concept of ‘micro-emancipation’, which is essentially individualist, they tend to focus on collective acts of resistance. Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that this collective resistance is local in character, and unlikely to have broader effects outside of the particular workplace. The key to broader emancipation is seen to lie in State action – efforts like the proposed USA “employee free choice Act” that would make it easier for workers to join unions, and the negotiation of multi-country treaties that would limit the ability of global corporations to develop ‘exploitative’ pan-country supply chains. Webb (2006) advocates these kinds of steps and others such as the development of

“intermediate organizations” such as local authorities, voluntary groups, and social movement organizations that would provide a public domain for “forms of self-fulfillment, freedom, and dignity” (p. 206). For their part, discursivists do not object to any of this.

Of course, these intermediate organizations are more likely to be effective in helping empower lower-level employees if they can identify with them. As described by self-categorization theory, if workers do not see their interests and values reflected in a broader collective, they won’t be motivated to identify with, and thus participate in, their functioning. Thus, a key challenge for critical identity research is to determine how lower-level employees can be assisted in forming these kinds of collective identities. What can critical researchers do to help?

In this regard, Haslam et al.’s work (2003) might be helpful. These researchers develop the ASPIRe model of identification, which they describe as an effort to translate the insights of SIT and Self-Categorization Theory, two “mainstream” social-psychological theories of identity, in to a model of organizational practice so as to help organizations develop their social capital. Inspired in part by Actor-Network Theory, they conceive of this model as a means by which organizations can harness social identification to improve organizationally-desirable outcomes such as team productivity, diversity management, and employee satisfaction and commitment. The authors describe a 4-stage process in which managers, with the help of researchers using interviews and survey-methods, first identify the potential bases for self-categorization (e.g., race, gender, skills, education, work area, etc.) that employees believe are most salient to improving work performance. Once these key bases are determined, management divides employees into groups along those critical bases, and creates forums in which they can caucus, debate and discuss how they can improve their work processes. This facilitates and focuses the “natural” self-categorization processes that lead to the formation of collective identities, while also generating practical ideas about improving the work process. Haslam et al. emphasize that “management has to be viewed as facilitating, not forcing, this process, otherwise employees will resent the perceived manipulation of their identities and might form collective identities that take a cynical, anti-management shading” (p. 255). In stage 3, representatives of the groups formed in stage 2 meet to caucus about issues that pertain to everyone’s joint interests; in other words, to create a strong organizational identity out of the various group-level identities. Finally, in stage 4, top management exercises executive-level leadership to shape the emergent organizational identity and determine if the goals and values identified are “appropriate for the organization”.

Critical identity researchers, whether contextualist or discursivist, will object to some of this, particularly because the overall goal is to help management extract more productivity out of workers. Nevertheless, it is possible that the process might be adaptable to more emancipatory ends. The model has appealing characteristics. Stage one tackles the problem of helping people who are individually quite weak to form collectives that could be stronger forces for advancing their interests. And importantly, the identification of relevant possible collective categorizations is identified by the employees themselves, not imposed from above by researchers. Also, stage three addresses the persistent problem of creating unity out of diversity. In a given workplace, employees might be, in theory, unified as “workers”, but do not see themselves this way, because other identities, such as ones based on ethnicity, age, pay grade, seniority, gender, or religion might be more salient to them. Thus, they fail to develop a unified workplace identity and remain fractured in the face of management control agendas. By bringing representatives from diverse collectives together and facilitating the discussion of workplace related issues, stage three enhances the chances that a broader collective identity based on economic status or level can emerge. Haslam et al. (2003) emphasize that a higher-level collective identity cannot come at the expense of group-level identities, but must respect and leverage their goals and values. Thus, the caucusing at stage three is done via a process of “integrative problem solving” in which differences are explored and mutual understanding is achieved. The goal is to create an individual with multiple collective identities, to both their group and the broader collective, not replace one with the other. This maintains the dignity and pride people take in their group identifications, while also providing a hedge against the creation of a monolithic broad-scale identity characterized by “groupthink” and norms that enforce conformity at the expense of individual and group-level autonomy.

In my view, this model, or something similar to it, could be implemented by critical researchers, working through labor unions or other community or social-movement organizations, to help lower-level employees develop collective identities strong enough to challenge management agendas both between and across organizations. They might help employees develop ‘antenarratives’ (Boje, 2007) that can transform the future in an emancipatory direction not just within but across workplaces as well. There is a growing recognition among authors that I have identified as contextualist (cf. Marks & Thompson, 2010) and discursivist (cf. Guowei, 2011) that critical identity research must be judged in terms of its ability to help employees foster collective identities not only within workplaces, but across them as well, so that broader social change can be effectuated against the predations of global capitalism. Along this line, action-researchers such as Gustavsen and colleagues (cf. Gustavsen 2003; Toulmin & Gustavsen, 1996, Ennals & Gustavsen, 1999; Grootings,

Gustavsen, & Hethy, 1989) have long been wrestling with the problem of linking identities forged by employees in individual workplaces to the broader global social-political economy, and this work has not been highlighted in CMS identity research. These researchers recognize that praxis at the workplace level is a necessary but insufficient condition to fostering workplace democracy that would improve conditions for the mass of low-level organizational participants. Linkages with new social movements might be one way to accomplish that. After all, the vast majority of organizational employees find themselves in the 99% (as identified by the grassroots Occupy social movement) of those in western countries disfavored by state policies, not the 1% that control most work organizations and benefit most from them. Greater understanding of the commonalities among contextualist and discursivist perspectives, as delineated in this paper, might pave the way for more collaborative research among adherents of these perspectives, leading to greater understanding of identity as an organizational phenomenon, and creating intellectual common ground for addressing the problem of employee emancipation.

Using our research to help employees in many different organizational circumstances identity as part of this 99% could be one common basis for identification that leads to greater collective action across workplaces and in the political realm.

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