RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN VOICE, SILENCE AND IDENTITY FORMATION IN ORGANIZATIONS

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Abstract: Language and voice are very important in the formation of identity, but if that very language/ voice is absent because of censorship, silencing or lack of voice, limited discursive or symbolic resources, how are individuals going to construct their identity? On the one hand, the challenge of identity is to incorporate multiple and diverse elements in order to build a sense of self-continuity and coherence. On the other hand, multiple and diverse moments and contexts offer people the possibility to tell many different identity stories which can be contradictory, changing, disparate and fundamentally unstable. This latter view leads to a more postmodern definition of identity that will be analyzed here in relation to voice and silence.

Key words: voice, silence, identity, social constructivism, postmodernism, dramaturgy, self-narrative.

1. Introduction

Language and voice are very important in the formation of identity, but if that very language/voice is absent because of censorship, silencing or lack of voice, limited discursive or symbolic resources, how are individuals going to construct their identity?

Voice and silence are tightly connected to the identity formation process because they are strategic communicative resources that individuals use in order to construct a sense of self that will enable them to survive, get by and advance inside their organization.

This article strives to present not only the interplay between voice, silence and identity, but also multiple connected ways in which individuals construct their identities inside organizations.

Four main approaches will be discussed in relation to the identity formation process:

- Identity as self-narrative – how actors make sense of and project their self through self-narratives and how these could be stable and coherent or changeable and fractured.

- Identity between agency and structure – how actors are torn between accepting symbolic or discursive resources and creating new ones, adapting or changing existing ones.

- Identity as dramaturgical endeavor – "how the looking glass of other's reactions" [5, p. 385] becomes not only a means to construct, anchor, verify and

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repair narrative identities, but also a source of anxiety and control.

- Identity in context – how actors draw upon single or multiple contexts in order to construct their sense of self.

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2. Voice and silence – short theoretical introduction

Voice and silence are interrelated and intertwined [4] strategic forms of communication [8],[13] which denote expressing or revealing ideas, opinions and aspects of identity, respectively withholding or non-disclosing them [4], [11], [15]. Characterized by being active, conscious, intentional and purposeful, voice and silence become critical components of social interaction [15]. Voice and silence presuppose each other and social actors have both voice and silence because they operate at multiple levels and deal with multiple issues at different moments in time.

Voice and silence are conceptual opposites only at a first sight, since one signifies expressing, while the other one withholding [15]. In fact, voice and silence presuppose each other. Voice cannot exist without silence and silence cannot exist without voice. One gives meaning and significance to the other in such a way that the absence of one would minimize completely the importance of the other one's presence.

This re-conceptualization brings several implications into the foreground, the most important of which is that voice and silence should be considered as social activities, rather than a state of being/state of affairs, since they are strategic and communicative forms of interaction. Social actors <u>are not</u> voice or silence. Social actors can <u>have</u> voice and silence; they can <u>do</u> both. This places more emphasis on agency, dynamicity, change and opens up the road to emancipation, while viewing

them as a state of being/state of affairs removes their strategic nature and leads to a certain determinism which minimizes the possibility of change and transformation.

There are three main concepts that are tightly connected to voice and silence: power, discourse and identity. Of all three, the most important concept is **identity**, which "not only constitutes a way of seeing or classifying myself that distinguishes me from other people but it also simultaneously allows me to see myself as similar to a class of individuals with whom I most closely associate myself or with whom I would like to be associated" [17, p.19].

3. Identity as self-narrative

Identity and identification are tightly connected to voice and silence, since the presence or absence of language provides actors with the possibility to make sense of and project their self through self-narratives. Identity is subjectively and publicly available through self-narratives that actors construct inside themselves or in interactions with others [3, p. 324].

Identity's self-narratives could be stable, coherent and unified, or changeable, fractured and diverse. On the one hand, the challenge of identity is to incorporate multiple and diverse elements in order to build a sense of self-continuity and coherence [18, p. 13] and [3, p. 326]. On the other hand, multiple and diverse moments and contexts offer people the possibility to tell many different identity stories which can be contradictory, changing, disparate and fundamentally unstable [3, p. 326]. This latter view leads to a more postmodern definition of identity which goes hand in hand with voice and silence as interrelated and intertwined strategic forms of communication. Identity becomes a paradoxical collection of forms clustering in moments of time, similar to a

garbage can full of meanings where streams of identity, which condense and vary in moments of time, are forming from fragments of meanings, statements, names etc., that are held together, at the same time [17].

Social actors have fragmented, multiple identities where "who we are" is no longer "who we say we are", but also those parts of the self that are silenced, or are not talked about, as is the case, for example, with the Canadian mistreated soldiers in Pinder and Harlos (2001), the gay and lesbians in Ward and Winstanley (2003), or with the gay and lesbian Protestant ministers in Creed (2003). As a result we can no longer conceive of identity as that which is central, distinctive and enduring [17] about one individual, group or organization.

4. Identity between agency and structure

Although language and discourse are a primary medium of control and power [3, p. 331], social actors can choose when, where and what to speak up. The complexity implied by identity is simplified and broken apart in self-narratives voiced in interactions which take place in different moments and contexts. Choosing to speak up implies those parts of self that not only depart from organizational expectations, but also have been historically marginalized [3]. There is a tension between claiming and preserving valued aspects of the self. Therefore silence and voice appear to be aspects of not only agency but also self-authorship.

Clarke *et al.* (2009, p. 341) support the argument of agency by positing that individuals are active in positioning themselves in the way they story their lives. Down and Reveley (2009, p. 382) sustain the same argument when they present employees as being far from passive in the face of discursive pressures

and more agential, creative and generative. They can choose among or play with competing discourses (voice) and they can resist (silence) specific discursive regimes in creating a sense of self. As Ashcraft (2007) contends, we are talking about intersectionality, which presupposes that different discourses are brought together to function as integral players in the organization of (occupational) identity.

However, Clarke et al. (2009) limit their model to a single context (the organization as the site for realizing the project of the self) and a single set of available discourses (identities constituted within organizationally based discursive regimes).

In contrast, Down and Reveley (2009) see identity work as reflective self-narration that draws not only on organizational, but also on socially supplied narratives and discourses, thus widening the array of discourses that come into play in the identity formation process. Ashcraft (2007, p. 28) argues that there are multiple discourses beyond organizational boundaries that still function to organize work and influence identity. Upholding the same argument, Kuhn (2006) posits that not only organizational, but also social discourses shape identity in the identity regulation process. Additionally, Kuhn (2006, p. 1339) emphasizes large scale social, economic and technological changes, which constitute the reflexive modernity, as the antecedents and determinants of personal identity. The twist is that discourses shaping identity construction vary with local cultures, as the surrounding field provides the cultural meaning system with which both individuals and organizations assert their legitimacy and construct their identities [9, p. 1355]. Although reflexive modernization argues for generalizability of resources appropriate for identity construction [9, p. 1355], culturally

varying visions of self, temper these claims allowing for local adaptation and variation.

If individuals were to choose only from organizationally based discourses, and discursive practices contribute to the reproduction of existing social and power relations, thus exercising pervasive control over employees, then the agency would be reduced to a minimum. Employees can only choose the position they occupy on a certain continuum comprised of discourse based descriptors, or if they position themselves on that continuum at all.

Not even multiple discourses necessarily create a space of action that enables resistance to managerially defined selves through counter or dis-identification, or through self-consciously fake performances [9, p. 1354]. The multitude of discourses creates a vision of the organizational self that provides greater or fewer options for self-creation [9, p. 1354]. It follows that voice is just a surface act of speaking and being heard, because from a post-structuralist point of view, discursive practices eliminate certain issues from arenas of speech and sound [14]. One example for this normative view on silence could be that by foregrounding issues such as productivity, efficiency and growth, the organization is conceived as primarily an arena for masculine endeavor, while issues of gender are silenced. Women, for example, may be encouraged to voice their differences, experiences and opinions, but they often encounter difficulties being heard. There are already established ways in which we must talk that constitute our experience of our reality and that influence our attempts to account for ourselves or for reality to others around us [9, p. 1341].

If discourse contains both voice and silence, if the dominant discourse can also contain oppositional discourses [6], than actors still have a chance to become stronger and resist the hostile discourse. As long as hegemonic discourses contain references to minority discourses, the latter maintain their legitimacy and can strategically use it to increase their discursive domination and thus power.

A small sense of freedom against corporate seduction and identity prescriptions is achieved by contesting and ridiculing, as well as through humor, counter-narratives, cynicism and irony [3, p. 345]. For example, in their analysis of the identity of sexual minority in the workplace, Ward and Winstanley (2003, p. 1261) contend that even though "discourse can be used as a straitjacket to limit the ability of gay and lesbian people to construct their identities in organizations, the agency is not extinguished entirely". Resistance and the use of reverse discourse can make minorities stronger and empowered, and thus enable them to work against hostile discourses [16].

In conclusion, identity as self-narrative becomes a game of continuing dialectic between agency and structure [3, p. 347]. Identities are constructed within discursive contexts (structure), but individuals are able to influence and shape these contexts [5]. Organizations and organizational prescriptions do not completely determine and explain identities, as the self is crafted through practice and is thus achieved. In interaction, actors can choose what to voice and what to silence, but these choices are frequently made from existing organizational discourse. The same agency-structure dialectic is also presented by Kuhn (2006, p. 1339), who affirms the distinction between individual efforts to portray a positive and distinctive identity (identity work) and the organizational and social discourses shaping those identities (identity regulation). From a constructionist point of view, identity signifies "the conception of the self reflexively and discursively understood by the self" [9, p. 1340]. Therefore, identity is shaped by local and distal discourses

which provide scripts, roles, subject positions that tie actors to social structures and orient their feelings, thoughts and values in a particular direction. In response to these multiple and conflicting scripts, roles and positions encountered in daily organizational and non-organizational life, actors struggle to create a coherent sense of self, sometimes complying and sometimes resisting to organizational goals [9].

5. Identity as dramaturgical endeavor

When "who they are" is not fully answered through the organizational [3] or social [5], [9] supply of discursive resources, or when there is a lack of locally relevant symbolic resources, the identity formation process requires an additional element: encounters. In the dramaturgical-behavioral perspective promoted by Down and Reveley (2009) identity formation consists of not only narration, but also dramaturgy. The two elements are used simultaneously in order to display and confirm/ verify identity. In the identity formation process, voice and silence are strategically used as forms of communication not only to draw upon, select and play with discursive/symbolic resources, but also to adapt to face to face interactions, reactions and to mount credible dramaturgical performances.

Silence and voice as strategic communicative resources employed in the identity formation process can be viewed as rhetorical masks or as political strategies [4]. This shifts the analysis from structure to agency: silence becomes an individual strategic choice.

In the identity formation process, as a rhetorical mask, silence signifies active accomplishment where employees hide more radical voice and action behind a veneer of passivity. As a political strategy, silence signifies complicity and cooptation.

Voice may be complicity when it appears in the form of lip service or politically correct speech and hollow gestures where non-action speaks louder than words [4].

Therefore, "the looking glass of others' reactions" [5, p. 385] becomes not only a means to construct, anchor, verify and repair narrative identities, but also a source of anxiety and control. Actors voice only those discursive resources constrained by organization and locale that align not only with their own self narratives, but also with the expectations of relevant others in the workplace [9, p. 1354]. The power moves away from discourses towards the haunting and continuous confirmation or disapproval of surrounding others.

In this sense, Simpson and Lewis (2005) attack an important issue of identity: gender. Women may be encouraged to voice their differences, opinions and experiences, but they often encounter difficulties being heard: women who speak up in meetings but their ideas are ignored, only to find out that the same ideas get credit later on in the meeting, when voiced by male colleagues; or women who present solutions which everybody agrees upon, but nobody enacts. Silence is a state of absence and neglect, while to speak up and stand out in the crowd (visibility) is to be seen as different and to be isolated and marginalized from the dominant group. The conclusion is that voice without listening and acting is in fact silence. Without the approval, confirmation and acceptance of the surrounding other, neither voice nor identity have any value.

6. Identity in context

Identity accounts presuppose interaction. However, any interaction gains value when discussed in context. There is a variety of personal, social and organizational interests that generate a multiplicity of discursive resources available for identity

work and regulation [9, p. 1342]. These accounts present explanations for past and future activity that guide interactants' interpretations of experience while molding individual and collective action. Although individuals are subject to and progenitors of multiple discourses in social life, identity work should not be expected to reflect a single category of experience, rather, identity work should involve the construction of multiple selves [9, p. 1345].

There are two main contexts that bear importance to the discussion of identity in relation to voice and silence: the socio-historical context and the cultural context. First, by socio-historical context I understand Ashcraft's (2007) contention that jobs have core features or essences, which span sites, levels and time and which lend themselves to certain fates and particular types of people (*e.g.* jobs possess features that are regarded as male or female). This essentialist ideology argues that the task content of an occupation is a determinant of their initial sex composition. Only social constructionism can counteract the essentialist ideology by changing discourse and communication from inertial elements into generative forces [2, p. 14]. It follows that it is not task content but discursive struggle over the meaning of jobs that is a principal determinant of their initial sex composition.

When people occupy a certain position, they do not automatically start wearing abstract occupational selves or job identities because they become involved in a constant negotiation process which brings us back to the agency-structure dialectic. Although actors are confronted with an occupational image, a public discourse of occupational identity manifest in conversational representations of the essence of a job and those who perform it, they must enact the job and make sense of

the work they do through micro-practices (communication) thus building a coherent narrative regarding what counts as legitimate work, what tasks matter more and why and who naturally belongs in particular jobs [2]. It follows that routine role communication suggests the practical limits, tensions, variability and negotiability of image discourse that tilts the balance more towards agency.

Even though identities have histories, and the historical origins of occupations are important, identities are eternally in process, constantly reproduced and altered in dynamic interaction, an ongoing persuasive endeavor that traverses time and space, macro and micro messages, institutions and actors that manages the dialectic of lived pressures and material circumstances [2].

The second context of importance to the discussion of identity is the cultural context. On the one hand, there is the view that nowadays discourses and symbolic resources are generalizable across cultures due to globalization, global markets and trade, and increased interaction and communication between cultures. It would imply that, regardless of culture or local surroundings, actors would beneficiate from the same discourses and symbolic resources in their attempt to construct, negotiate and make sense of their identity. On the other hand, there is the view that discourses shaping identity construction vary with local cultures. Culturally varying visions of self temper reflexive modernization's claims about plasticity and generalizability of resources one may appropriate for identity construction [9, p. 1355]. Discursive resources are formed and constrained by the Discourses of the locale. The surrounding field provides the cultural meaning system within which both individuals and organizations assert their legitimacy and construct their identities [9, p. 1355].

7. Conclusion: silence, voice and the identity formation process in organizations

I have demonstrated in this article that a "both and" conceptualization of voice and silence, where multiple levels, moments in time and issues are taken into consideration, is much more suited not only for a more complete understanding of the concepts themselves, but also for gaining a deeper insight into other organizational dynamics, such as the identity formation process. Hence, social actors have fragmented, multiple identities where "who we are" is no longer "who we say we are", but also those parts of the self that are silenced, or are not talked about.

Voice and silence are interrelated and intertwined strategic forms of communication that allow individuals to construct multiple identities depending on the context or moment in time, utilizing both local/ organizational and distal/ social and cultural discursive and symbolic resources. This opens up the road towards emancipation, while viewing them only in a functionalist paradigm where individuals have a coherent single identity formed only by local/ organizational discursive and symbolic resources removes the strategic nature of the identity formation process and leads to a certain determinism which minimizes the possibility of change and transformation.

This is not to say that a functionalist paradigm is not suited to analyze the identity formation process. A functionalist paradigm can yield significant analysis results. However, by employing a multi-paradigmatic approach with social constructivism and postmodernism in the foreground, the analysis of the identity formation process can yield richer results. Thus, the individual is free to construct its single or multiple identity/identities in interaction, depending of the context and moment in time, depending on the reactions of relevant others and by embracing, introducing or changing discursive and symbolic resources from both the organization and the social and cultural surroundings.

Acknowledgements

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