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“In the Name of Capability”: A Critical Discursive Evaluation of Competency Based Management Development

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Abstract

This paper illustrates a number of ways in which competency or capability-based management development (CBMD) can work simultaneously both for and against the interests of organizational agents. It does so by demonstrating how CBMD might usefully be understood as both ideological and quasi-religiously faith-based. These features are shown to provide opportunities for resistance and micro-emancipation alongside those for repression and subordination. The study employs a combination of ‘middle range’ discourse analytical techniques. In the first instance, critical discourse analysis is applied to company documentation to distil the ideological stance of an international organization’s CBMD programme. Critical discursive psychology is then used to assess the ways in which employees’ evaluative accounts both support and resist such stance. The analysis builds upon previous insights from Foucauldian studies of CBMD by foregrounding processes of discursive agency. It also renders more visible and discussible the assumptions and dilemmas that CBMD might imply.

Keywords: competency; capability; identity regulation; ideology; religion; management development.

Introduction

Modern day managerial usage of the term *competency* can be traced back to the late 1970s in the USA, where it was popularized as a result of research carried out by the McBer consultancy (Iles, 1993). Since then, the term has been defined in a number of different ways (Bolton et al, 1999) although Woodruffe's (1993) widely quoted definition sees it as "the set of behaviour patterns that the incumbent needs to bring to a position in order to perform its tasks and functions with competence". The turn to competency can be seen as an attempt to capture the nature of management in taxonomic form via behavioural statements which might typically allude to knowledge, skills and/or ability in areas such as: leadership; problem-solving; dealing with pressure; decision making; creativity; teamwork; entrepreneurship etc (Townley, 1994, 1999). Such behavioural statements purport to identify those key characteristics associated with superior job performance. As such, they often form the basis for an integrated and structured approach to the recruitment, appraisal, training and development of managers (du Gay et al., 1996). Alongside the literature on competencies, there is a parallel body of literature that deals with the arguably synonymous idea of *capability*. We say 'arguably' because, just like competency, the term has been defined and used in a variety of different ways. One popular usage of the term emanates from the resource based view of the firm where capability typically refers to distinctive strengths at the collective or organizational level of analysis (Luoma, 2000). In contrast, authors such as Bolton et al (1999: 588) use the term at the individual level of analysis. In doing so, however, they distinguish capability from competency by claiming that competencies "are concerned with the ability to demonstrate now what has already been acquired, while capability is concerned as much with future potential as with immediate needs." Meanwhile, Mayo (1998) has tended to use the terms competency and capability almost interchangeably at times. For the purposes of this paper, we are less concerned with debates over any definitional differences between the two terms than we are with the way in which both might be similarly used as discursively constructed 'cultural resources' (Williams & Demerath, 1998). As such we shall regard the two terms as being sufficiently similar for the literature on (individual-level) competencies to be broadly applicable to the study of (individual-level) capabilities and vice versa.

Competency or capability based management development ('CBMD') has been a major and growing organizational activity over the past decade and a half. A recent estimate put the number of UK employees covered by such schemes at over 3.2 million (Rankin, 2001). Despite this, there remain serious concerns about the basis for many of the practices or indeed the very purpose of CBMD (Clarke, 1999). Meanwhile, it would appear that practitioners remain largely committed to the approach, with any perceived 'failure' being put down to a need for refinement, as opposed to any fundamental questioning thereof (du Gay et al., 1996; Grugulis, 2000). There is a dearth of evaluation research in the field and any such research that *is* carried out (e.g. Boam & Sparrow, 1992; Sparrow, 1994; Winterton & Winterton, 1997; all cited in Kamoche 2000) tends to take a functionalist view, where stated managerial objectives are taken as read and where the criterion for evaluating CBMD is largely restricted to the extent to which such objectives have been met (James, 2001). Such an approach has been criticised for failing to adequately deal with

causality (Kamoche, 2000) and for taking a unitarist perspective, where organizational members are assumed to share a single set of motives and interests and where issues of politics, power, control and divergent needs are assumed to be either non-existent or of little importance (Burgoyne & Jackson, 1997). Given such criticisms, it is perhaps unsurprising that such functionalist evaluations typically prove inconclusive at best. This often leads towards conclusions of the type that CBMD (and indeed MD more generally) is broadly ineffective (Clarke, 1999) or that it remains an act of faith (Kamoche, 2000). We argue in this paper that CBMD can indeed be understood as an act of faith, but in a way that transcends mere analogy based on a lack of evidence for its functional effectiveness. We do this by analysing CBMD as a quasi-religious discourse in its own right and by examining the wider (i.e. extra-functionalist) interests that such a discourse might be serving.

Tentative clues as to why organizations continue to invest increasingly large amounts of resource in CBMD activities for so little (apparent) return can be found within the burgeoning body of theorizing and research into alternative roles and functions of MD. Much of this alternative literature takes an overtly critical view, seeing MD as a largely one-sided attempt by senior management to impose control or advance ideological power interests rather than a means to 'develop' employees in any kind of holistic or benevolent sense (Ackers & Preston, 1997). Other critiques (e.g. Grugulis, 1997, 2000, 2002) regard CBMD as a bureaucratic and potentially harmful irrelevance, where standardized portrayals of management bear little resemblance to the diverse worlds of 'real' managers. In contrast to these broadly negative critiques, other authors have suggested that deeper insight might be gained by trying to look beyond questions of good or evil (Townley, 1998), success or failure (du Gay et al., 1996) and by searching for more multi-faceted ways in which CBMD might simultaneously work for and against the interests of any particular agent. Such authors have approached the issues largely from a discursive perspective, favouring a predominantly Foucauldian form of discourse analysis.

The aim of this paper is to present a piece of research into CBMD that builds upon the insights from this Foucauldian perspective, whilst at the same time addressing a number of methodological criticisms that such work has provoked. In doing this, we will also be filling other gaps in the literature by analysing CBMD as both an ideology and a quasi-religious discourse. Before getting into the details of the research, however, we commence with a review of existing Foucauldian critiques of CBMD, followed by a more detailed look at issues of identity and subjectivity. We will then conclude this opening section with a brief look at ideology, faith and religiosity and their relevance to CBMD.

Foucault, Discourse and CBMD

CBMD has been analysed from the Foucauldian angle by a number of authors (e.g. Townley, 1994, 1998, 1999; Iles & Salaman, 1995; Holmes, 1995; du Gay et al., 1996; Brewis, 1996; James, 2001). What all these authors share, is a view of CBMD as discourse, or in other words a system of constructed knowledge. Townley (1994) in particular draws on the Foucauldian concepts of the examination and the confession in theorizing the link between the knowledge of CBMD and power. Examinational practices such as selection, assessment and appraisal serve to

objectify organizational members, by constituting them as objects of knowledge, providing ways in which they can be known, seen, calculated, discussed and thus governed. Such procedures become confessional when the individual actively participates in a discussion or assessment of the self according to these same norms, categories and rules. In this way, employees participate in the constitution of their own subjectivities by embracing, to the point of taking for granted, a technology that becomes part of their basis for self-knowledge and identity. This typically happens via methods that purport to *reveal* supposedly innate qualities of the managerial self as opposed to *producing or constituting* them (du Gay et al., 1996). Such processes permit individuals to be calibrated and quantified via systems of precise categorization and measurement, the scientific aura of which typically belies their constructed nature.

Where Foucauldian writers on CBMD tend to differ is in their consideration of the power effects of the competency discourse and the related role of agency. Writers such as Holmes (1995) take an essentially pessimistic view, considering that any sense of voluntarism, autonomy, liberation or empowerment that individuals may feel by participating in the discourse of competency is largely illusory. In a similar vein, du Gay et al. (1996) suggest that any attempt to resist the discourse of competency inevitably takes place within the confines of that same discourse, thus perpetuating its power effect (Newton, 1998). Townley (1998) takes a more optimistic view, arguing that CBMD operates as a “technology of the self” (Foucault, 1988) whose positive/productive identity-effects should not be underestimated or neglected. Even for Townley, however, it remains the case that identities constituted through mechanisms of power/knowledge are also made vulnerable by those same mechanisms. In this way, Townley remains faithful to Foucault’s own conception of power/knowledge as being positive and productive as well as negative and repressive

Notwithstanding such divergent theorizing, du Gay et al. (1996) remind us that the degree to which the discourse of competency meets with resistance, along with the forms and effects that such resistance might take, are all matters for empirical investigation. However, and despite the fact that the above analyses can be considered insightful and innovative extensions of Foucauldian social theory (Keenoy, 1997; Newton, 1998), Foucault-inspired empirical work that pays attention to close-up textual analysis remains relatively rare. This is perhaps due to the fact that Foucault’s writings offer little (if indeed anything) in the way of techniques for this kind of analysis (Fairclough, 1992). In order to deal with this, Fairclough proposes a textually oriented form of discourse analysis, on which we shall be drawing (and about which we say more) later in this paper.

Subjectivity and Identity Regulation

A common theme running through all of the Foucauldian studies cited above is one of subjectivity or how individuals come to be constituted via powerful processes of identity formation and identification with the organization. Others, however, have drawn attention to claimed insufficiencies in Foucauldian conceptions of power-knowledge, which have a tendency to portray individuals as largely passive receptacles of the subjectivising power of discourse, thus underplaying the role of agency and negating the role (or indeed the very concept) of ideology in terms of

analytical usefulness (Fairclough, 1992; Findlay & Newton, 1998; Newton, 1998; Fournier & Grey, 1999; Alvesson & Karreman, 2000; Reed, 2000). Newton (1998: 430) in particular has emphasized the limits of Foucauldian approaches (with specific reference to Townley, 1994 and du Gay et al., 1996) in terms of their methodological inability to demonstrate how actors “agentially play with discursive practices”. In a similar vein, Fournier and Grey (1999: 125) have mounted a strong critique of du Gay et al. on the basis of their lack of engagement with empirical work on organizations. According to them, this has resulted in a neglect of (agential) resistance and a consequent over-emphasis of the power of enterprise discourse, both in the context of CBMD and more generally. Alvesson and Willmott (2002: 622) take the debate forward by arguing that whilst the manufacture of subjectivity via discourse can be a significant (though empirically neglected) mode of organizational control, it should not be conceived of as placing “totalising, unmediated constraints upon human subjects.” They present a triadic/dialectic model of nine distinct ways in which discursive practices may be used, intentionally or otherwise, in an attempt to accomplish organizational control via practices of identity regulation. The nine practices are: (1) defining the person directly; (2) defining a person by defining others; (3) providing a specific vocabulary of motives; (4) explicating morals and values; (5) constructing knowledge and skills; (6) group categorization and affiliation; (7) hierarchical location; (8) establishing distinct rules of the game; and (9) defining the context. The model is triadic/dialectic in the sense that the above practices of *identity regulation* both prompt and are informed by *identity work* (i.e. agential interpretive activity) which in turn both re-works and is induced by *self-identities* (i.e. precariously positioned narratives of the self) which in turn are accomplished through, but also responsive and/or resistant to, *identity regulation*. Whilst these authors write from a general organizational perspective as opposed to a specific focus on CBMD or even HRM, they do make the point that practices of training and development typically have implications for the shaping and direction of identity. As such, we consider their framework to have real potential for enhancing our understanding of agency and ideology within the realm of CBMD. We shall thus be drawing upon aspects of it later in this paper (and specifically practices 1, 2 and 5 above) in order to build and expand upon insights provided by previous Foucauldian studies of the topic. In so doing, we shall be paying particular attention to Alvesson and Willmott’s argument that the fluidity, instability and reflexivity of identity regulation processes present opportunities for micro-emancipation and resistance as well as for subordination and oppression.

Before briefly exploring the concept of *micro-emancipation*, we draw on Alvesson and Willmott (1992: 432) who define *emancipation* as “the process through which individuals and groups become freed from repressive social and ideological conditions, in particular those that place socially unnecessary restrictions upon the development and articulation of human consciousness.” Emancipation is a term emanating from the traditions of Critical Theory (CT) which has itself been criticised for its tendency towards intellectualism, essentialism and negativism. For example, Alvesson and Willmott (1992) characterize CT as tending towards a one-sided dismissal of modern management theory as a tool of distortion, manipulation and deceit which denies agents the possibility of critically rationalizing their own way towards ‘true’ self-determination. In the light of such critiques the authors introduce

the term micro-emancipation as a means of tempering the grandiose aims of CT projects. Micro-emancipation focuses on the dilemmas, ambiguities, contradictions and uncertainties in management tools, activities, forms and techniques i.e. the visible manifestations of management ideologies. As such, these ideologies might be expected to serve not only as means of control but also as objects and facilitators of resistance and thus as potential vehicles for liberation, however fleeting, localized and partial. In summary, this micro view of emancipation moves away from dualistic conceptions of consciousness within CT (i.e. “false” versus “true”) and towards a more precarious, endless enterprise of (ontologically subjective) critical reflection, which has inherent limitations in terms of space, time and success. With this in mind, one of our aims in this paper will be to demonstrate how CBMD can be understood to serve simultaneously as a transmitter of management ideology *and* as a vehicle for micro-emancipatory reflections amongst organizational agents.

We now turn our attention to a more detailed consideration of ideology and its relation to faith and religiosity within the context of organizational studies.

Ideology, Faith & Religiosity

Fairclough (1992: 87) describes ideologies as “significations/constructions of reality (the physical world, social relations, social identities), which are built into various dimensions of the forms/meanings of discursive practices, and which contribute to the production, reproduction or transformation of relations of domination”. He goes on to state that ideologies are most effective when they become “discursively embedded” i.e. naturalized, accepted as common sense or indeed hegemonic. Billig (2001) also relates the concept of ideology to that of common sense, but stresses that the latter typically contains contrary themes or “ideological dilemmas”. As such (and in implicit sympathy with the above discussion on micro-emancipation), he claims that people can often be heard to jostle with such contrary themes in the course of ordinary conversation, particularly when the topics are explicitly ideological. Focusing on ideology and its inherent dilemmas can thus be analytically useful in terms of uncovering processes of resistance or hegemonic struggle (Chiapello & Fairclough, 2002). With regard to CBMD however, certainly within the Foucauldian literature on the topic, there is little if any consideration of its ideological currency. This can perhaps be attributed to the fact that “Foucault’s notion of power/knowledge challenges assumptions that ideology can be demystified and, hence, that undistorted truth can be attained” (Diamond & Quinby, 1988: xi). We, on the other hand, do not feel that paying attention to ideology automatically equates to the search for any kind of objective, singular or ‘undistorted’ truth. Like others (e.g. Fairclough, 1992; Alvesson & Deetz, 2000), we feel that ideology critique remains a valid and potentially useful avenue for the critical appraisal of phenomena within a socially constructed world.

The notion of ideology can be closely related to that of faith in the sense that both terms imply beliefs that cannot be proven but which nevertheless provide a source of behavioural guidance and psychological security. The concepts diverge however in the sense that *ideology* carries distinctly political connotations, with associated images of hegemonic power and domination of the collective (Fairclough, 1992; Geertz, 1985) whereas *faith* is more typically equated to more voluntaristic (and

often religious) forms of belief at the individual level of analysis. Of course this distinction begins to break down when we consider the ways in which faith (religious or otherwise) can itself perform ideological functions (Bocock, 1985). However, a central aim of our paper is to demonstrate how (and with what effects) the discourse of CBMD can be understood to serve functions that are both ideological and (quasi-religiously) faith-based. Although there is no shortage of authors who have used religion heuristically as either metaphor or analogy in analyses of secular organizational functioning (e.g. Ackers & Preston, 1997; Case, 1999; Kamoche, 2000), the examination of religiosity as a distinctive discourse within secular organizations is far less prevalent. One of the rare examples of the latter is Pratt (2000) who examined how a direct selling organization (Amway) was infused with Christian religious values and beliefs. Another more recent example is a study by Bell and Taylor (2004) who discerned a distinctly religious discourse underpinning certain forms of management development. They suggested that such a discourse served to define identity in terms of the inner self thus placing responsibility for personal development on the individual. By downplaying the existence of structural constraints, such forms of management development were suggested to become potentially repressive rather than enlightening. Whilst our study is in broad sympathy with the above analyses it differs in a couple of key respects. First of all, our argument will present a contrast both to Pratt's portrayal of ideology as a fortress that is largely impervious to attack and to Bell and Taylor's emphasis on the potentially repressive aspects of religious discourse within MD. Rather, we will focus on the inherent contradictions, dilemmas and tensions within organizational ideology and the ways in which these present opportunities for resistance and micro-emancipation as well as subordination and repression. Secondly, both sets of authors characterize the religious discourses within their case organizations as emanating primarily from explicit (or 'top down') design factors. In contrast to this, we will be characterizing religiosity within Capco's CBMD programmes as emanating, primarily, from the 'bottom up' constructions of its participants.

As mentioned, studies such as those set out above are a relative rarity. Like others (e.g. Pattison, 1997; Demerath & Schmitt, 1998) we regard this as regrettable since one can expect there to be religious dimensions to most if not all 'secular' organizations. This is particularly the case if one chooses to understand religion not in "sacerdotal, sectarian and spiritualistic" terms but rather as "any mythically sustained concern for ultimate meanings coupled with a ritually reinforced sense of social belonging" (Demerath & Schmitt, 1998: 382).

In summary, clues as to the increasing popularity of CBMD, despite its 'failure' to deliver on its apparent (i.e. functionalist) 'objectives' can be found within a growing body of critical/discursive theory on the topic, with many authors favouring a Foucauldian approach. This approach has been acknowledged, even by its critics, as providing valuable insights into the ways in which the discourse of CBMD can be seen to function in the constitution of organizational members as objects of constructed knowledge, which in turn opens up avenues for processes of subjectification and identity regulation. Notwithstanding the acknowledged value of such theorizing, relatively little empirical work has been done in relation to it, certainly in terms of incorporating a concern for close-up textual analysis. It has thus

been criticised for understating the role of agency and for neglecting related processes of ideological resistance, hegemonic struggle and opportunities for micro-emancipation. Other authors have suggested that insufficient attention has been paid to the existence, workings and effects of religious discourse within secular organizations. We now turn our attention to a piece of research that we recently carried out, the results of which specifically address these gaps in the literature. The study forms part of a wider [university name] research project partly funded by the European Commission.

The Research Study

Background and Research Question

Our object of study was a comprehensive programme of capability based MD, administered by a large UK-headquartered multinational that we will refer to using the fictitious name of 'CapCo'. CapCo is a major international player in premium branded consumer goods, trading in 180 countries with approximately 25,000 employees worldwide. Our main research question (intentionally broad) asked: *Which interests are being served by the company's capability-based approach to management development?* The reader will have noted the exclusive use of the 'capability' term in the formulation of the research question. The reason for this is that CapCo abandoned the term 'competency' in favour of 'capability' upon the instigation of the current MD programme. This change in terminology was regarded as material to the research question and is subjected to critical scrutiny in a later section.

Research Design and Methodology

In describing our study, the term 'data construction' is preferred to the more common one of 'data collection'. The former term more adequately reflects the underlying ontological and epistemological assumptions of a study such as this, which takes reality and the resulting knowledge thereof to be socially and discursively constructed (i.e. as opposed to being objectively pre-existent), with the researcher taking an active role in such processes (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000).

There were two distinct phases of data construction. The first of these was the gathering of relevant company documentation regarding CapCo's CBMD programme. Such documentation included the capability frameworks themselves, an initial briefing pack sent out to the organization's 'leadership' population at the launch of the programme along with a broader array of presentational and briefing materials setting out the nature and apparent intent of each specific development intervention within the overall programme (e.g. learning workshops, assessment programmes, appraisal formalities etc). See Box 1 for an explanation of how the company's capability framework is structured.

BOX 1 (see page 33)

A second phase of data construction involved nine managers taking part in one-to-one interviews, each lasting around an hour. A list of potential participants was identified in discussions with CapCo management and an invitation to take part was extended to each by the researchers. It was stressed in the invitation that participation was purely voluntary but, in the event, all those invited to take part chose to do so. The main concern in the choice of potential participants was one of obtaining a meaningful range of discursive forms within the constraints of time and cost. As such, participants consisted of both HR and line managers with a mix of grades, nationalities and geographical (including overseas) remits. It should be pointed out that three of the nine participants were of non-English mother tongue. Transcript extracts have not been modified to correct the sometimes tentative English of such participants. The sample size reflects the study's discursive nature, which lays no claim to achieving generalization based on the statistical representativity of populations (Kamoche, 2000). The unit of analysis being language (Marshall, 1994), a key part of the research philosophy was to treat all accounts on their own merits and to avoid any grouping of participants into arbitrary categories on the basis of any assumed homogeneity of interests (Wolfe & Putler, 2002). All interviews were loosely structured in approach (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). As such, the interview protocol contained only a few principal questions, formulated with the overall aim of soliciting participant evaluations of CapCo's capabilities approach to MD. See appendix 1 for examples of the types of questions asked during these interviews. This was designed to be an explicitly inductive piece of evaluation research. As such, the various discursive themes (including the religious aspect that we will go on to analyse in some detail) emerged during the process and were not being specifically 'searched for' during the course of our interviews.

Data analysis drew upon elements of critical discourse analysis or 'CDA' (Fairclough, 1992, 2001a, 2001b; Fairclough & Hardy, 1997)¹ and critical discursive psychology or 'CDP' (Edley, 2001). Whilst CDA and CDP both draw from Foucauldian discourse analysis, these techniques explicitly address criticisms of the Foucauldian perspective regarding a lack of attention to human agency. They do this by not only exposing how discourse functions as a subjectifying system of knowledge at the broad societal level, but also by providing methods for close textual analysis, thus providing a means to appreciate how discourse can be reinterpreted, transformed and thus used as a resource for resistance and micro-emancipation at the level of the individual (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). As such, CDA/CDP can be characterized as "middle range" techniques that allow the researcher to examine close, situational specific discursive activity without disregarding the influence of long range forms of "Grand Discourse" (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000). See appendix 2 for a glossary of CDA and CDP terms used herein. For ease of reference throughout this paper, the first use of any such term is shown in *bold/italics*.

Given the research focus on ideology and subjectivity, two theoretically grounded frameworks were used heuristically in order to guide the analysis. These were Alvesson and Deetz' (2000) taxonomy for ideology critique (supplemented in part by Shrivastava's (1986) earlier taxonomy) along with Alvesson and Willmott's (2002) taxonomic model of identity regulation. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed according to a simplified Jeffersonian convention adapted from Potter

and Wetherell (1987) (see appendix 3). The results of our data analysis will be presented in two broad sections. A first section will set out an analysis of the company documentation, which will then serve as a backdrop against which to present our analysis of the interviews.

The Company Documentation

CDA techniques (i.e. as opposed to CDP) were primarily used to critically analyse the company's written documentation. The aim was to uncover the ways in which such written texts worked to discursively construct ideological themes and to identify the taken for granted assumptions on which such themes rely. We begin by setting out what we consider to be the key passages from the documentation that illustrate its ideological stance and we then link these to some of its identity-regulating features. This will serve as a foundation upon which to set out the discourses and a range of taken for granted assumptions we were able to pull out from the documentation. In terms of the documentation's ideological characteristics, we will focus on: the factual under-determination of action norms, naturalization, the universalization of sectional interests and the predominance of instrumental reasoning (Alvesson & Deetz, 2001; Shrivastava, 1986).

Factual Under-Determination of Action Norms

The 'factual under-determination of action norms' occurs when the impression is given that prescriptions have been factually determined whereas a closer scrutiny would reveal that they either haven't been or indeed could not be (Shrivastava, 1986). A wealth of such occurrences can be gleaned from the company documentation, typified by the following extract drawn from the main briefing pack supporting the programme launch:

The first phase of CapCo's evolution is behind us [...] Recent results are encouraging but our *investors* are not yet convinced that our strategies will deliver the *value improvement they require*. We must now execute the next phase of CapCo's evolution and speed is critical. [...] CapCo *needs* swift market based execution that will drive profitable growth. This in turn requires *empowered, energised management teams who are passionate* about growing our brands by continually satisfying the needs of our consumers. However, to leverage the intellectual capital of *the organization*, those teams must be bound together by common values, behaviours and leading-edge business processes. [...] *The CapCo Way* is about those beliefs, behaviours and processes and is an important first step in ensuring that decentralized operating units operate in a way that will *maximize the value* of the enterprise; [...] The CapCo Way, coupled with the aggressive business strategies already in place can and will *drive CapCo to greatness*.

The *interpersonal* features of the above text demonstrate a highly declarative *mood* with strong and frequently obligatory forms of *modality*. The predominant *ideational functioning* is passive and relational with little agency. All in all, the audience is being 'told', without any kind of equivocation, about how things 'are' and, as such, the statements are represented as being facts rather than opinions. However, it is unlikely that statements such as these could ever be 'proved', certainly for example in terms of what the 'organization' (itself a *nominalization* that removes any sense of agency from activities of 'organizing') actually 'needs', when 'value' is likely to have been 'maximised', what 'greatness' might actually mean, and exactly how or why the CapCo Way² might be instrumental in bringing all this about.

Naturalization / Universalization of Sectional Interests

Staying with the above extract but moving to the ideological feature of 'naturalization' (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000), the text presupposes and thus seeks to naturalize a social order where CapCo's ultimate *raison d'être* is to deliver 'the value improvement [investors] require'. Naturalization here appears to go hand in hand with the 'universalization of sectional interests'. Portraying the organization as an evolving, organismic whole, functioning in harmony to serve the ultimate need of the shareholder, effectively ignores any conflict in terms of competing interests of other stakeholders, notably the employees. This unitarist image is reinforced by other passages in the briefing pack, such as:

The purpose of the '*Be the Best*' *Development Plan* is to create a world class plan for *everyone in the company* that will drive professional development and enhance every individual's contribution to the achievement of *personal and business goals* [...] Our goal is to ensure that everyone has the *opportunity* to become the *brightest star* they can be.

This passage contains a notable *presupposition* in the very naming of the development plan itself i.e. that it is natural that 'everyone in the company' should strive to 'be the best' they possibly can be in the work context and that this happily fulfils both 'personal *and* business goals'. There is no recognition here of any conflict, contradiction or trade off that this might involve in terms of work versus non-work identities. What's more, using the word 'opportunity' to imply choice belies the fact that these 'Be the Best Development Plans' were in fact confirmed to us as constituting a mandatory element of the CapCo performance management system.

Instrumental Reasoning

The ideological stance of the documentation is further reinforced by an emphasis on 'instrumental reasoning' (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000) to the exclusion of all other forms. This is exemplified in the company's 'Managing for Value' (MFV) ethos, which is described as:

...a passion and a practice, throughout the entire organization, to increase the value of our brands and businesses on behalf of their owners, our shareholders.

MFV is a management accounting technology that permits all key decisions to be seen in terms of how they enhance or detract from the economic or 'shareholder' value of the enterprise. This accounting logic and the instrumental reasoning it implies extend to how individuals within the organization are exhorted to view even themselves:

The programme represents significant *investment* in CapCo's leadership..... This is an *all too rare opportunity* for our leaders to really *invest in themselves*.

Once again the vocabulary of choice (Fournier, 1998) is at play in terms of this 'all too rare opportunity' casting the recipient of the initiative into the role of autonomous consumer of development. The above passage also gives a flavour for how employees, by 'investing in themselves', are being encouraged to see those selves in economically instrumental terms or indeed as 'mini-enterprises' or 'corporate clones' (du Gay & Salaman, 1996; Covalleski et al., 1998).

Having briefly distilled the ideological stance of the company documentation, we now turn our attention to how such characteristics can be seen to function as a

dynamic of identity regulation. Of the nine practices within Alvesson and Willmott's (2002) taxonomy listed earlier, we focus on the three which we found to be particularly instrumental within the company documentation i.e.: defining the person directly; defining the person by defining others; the construction of knowledge and skills. As such, these provide key contextual material for our subsequent analysis of employee accounts.

Defining the Person Directly / Defining the Person by Defining Others

Alvesson & Willmott (2002: 629) point out that “defining the person directly” serves to “suggest expectations for people who occupy the social space that is thereby defined for them”. In this sense, the very label of ‘leadership capabilities’ for something that could equally have been called a set of ‘management competencies’ serves to re-define the person and set correspondingly aspirational expectations. No longer is ‘competent management’ sufficient. From henceforth, what the company expects is ‘capable leadership’. This also serves to ‘define the person by defining others’. It does this by differentiating CapCo employees from those of other organizations (who might typically employ the vocabulary of competency) and also by differentiating the ‘new’ CapCo from previous incarnations of itself (which certainly *did* employ the vocabulary of competency). In fact it was explained to us during several of the interviews that the capabilities came into being as a result of the need to forge a common identity subsequent to a series of mergers and a major business reorganization. The *capability* statements themselves were originated and developed using, amongst other sources, the various *competency* profiles existing within the disparate parts of the business prior to the reorganization. Finally, no employee was able to offer any convincing explanation as to the difference between a competency and a capability, with the two terms often being used interchangeably in their talk. This is perhaps unsurprising when we consider that CapCo's written documentation defines capability as “a behaviour developed from a combination of skill, knowledge and experience/judgement that is used every day to do one's job”. There is little if any substantive difference between this and Woodruffe's (1993) definition of competency that we set out in the opening section of this paper.

Constructing Knowledge and Skills

Alvesson & Willmott (2002: 630) single out the construction of knowledge and skills as being key resources for the regulation of identity, inasmuch as “knowledge defines the knower: what one is capable of doing (or expected to be able to do) frames who one ‘is’ ”. Of relevance here is the way in which the CapCo documentation endows the capabilities with an aura of scientific objectivity, effectively obscuring the socially constructed nature of such knowledge. This is epitomized in its ‘Benchmarking for Development’ initiative, which involves employees spending time with an external firm of organizational psychologists, undergoing interviews, psychometrics and using 360-degree feedback to draw up an individual profile of capability, which is then compared to external and internal norms and used to prepare development plans. Here are some extracts from the briefing pack aimed at potential participants in this programme:

The CapCo Way is *designed* to ensure we focus on the keys to our business success [...] by putting in place the processes and behaviours that will *guarantee* consistent and sustainable excellence across CapCo.
[...]

To get the most out of the [Benchmarking for Development] experience you will need to be open-minded and be prepared to open up and take a few risks. This won't always be easy or comfortable but is likely to enhance the quality of feedback and learning you gain.

[...]

The first session will focus on mapping out your experience and functional skill base and your leadership capabilities. Where psychological assessments are used they will be fully explained. The second session, which will take place shortly after the first, will focus on *drawing out* your strengths and *development* needs

[...]

The process outlined above allows *effective diagnosis* of the factors that underpin capabilities and development needs.

The above passages display a revealing blend of *genre*. In the first paragraph, the genre of advertising is drawn upon with the CapCo Way and its related development programmes being presented as a form of commodity (Fairclough, 1992) that has been specifically 'designed' to 'guarantee' success. Commodifying development in this way casts the employee into the subject position of consumer, thus reinforcing an image of free choice, materialism and enterprise (Fournier, 1998). The next paragraphs draw much more upon a technical/medical/scientific genre that conjures up images of a prospective patient needing to be reassured about an impending 'diagnosis'. All in all, metaphor and genre combine to portray capabilities as being innate properties of the individual that simply need to be uncovered (or 'drawn out') with the help of expert techniques, combined with self-exploration and the 'opening up' of oneself in front of others. As part of this, Foucauldian processes of examination and confession (Townley, 1994) are very much in evidence, providing clear indications of the objectifying/subjectifying potential of such developmental activities.

In summary, our analysis of the company documentation demonstrates the potential³ for CapCo's capability development programme to be ideologically implicated in activities of identity regulation. The documentation draws upon discourses of scientific objectivity and accounting to construct an image of capability that resides within the individual, needing only to be 'drawn out' in order to then be measured, quantified, recorded and compared. As part of this process, the genre of advertising is drawn upon to commodify the related development programmes, portraying them as a voluntaristic means to 'guarantee' success for both employee and organization. This discourse of unitarism, where development and performance become almost synonymous (Antonacopoulou & Fitzgerald, 1996), combines with those of accounting, enterprise, consumerism and the career to conjure up an image of the employee as an enterprising project of the self (du Gay et al., 1996; Fournier, 1998; Covalleski et al., 1998) in which it is as natural for the employee to self-actualise in the service of the organization, as it is for the organization to maximise its own value in the service of the shareholder.

Given the ideological nature of the company documentation, it is perhaps unsurprising that we were able to identify a large number of implicit assumptions therein, a non-exhaustive sample of which reads as follows:

- That ‘capabilities’ reside within the individual and can be drawn out with expert help so as to be objectively measurable, quantifiable and comparable against a naturally occurring norm.
- That capabilities are broadly stable and can be applied in a context free manner to accurately characterize both people and the requirements of their jobs.
- That capabilities have a start/end point and that they progress in a hierarchical/linear fashion.
- That capabilities can be enhanced or developed via specially ‘designed’ development activities
- That ‘development’ and ‘capability’ as generic terms, along with the specific identified capabilities, all have single essential meanings that can be accessed by all via the dissemination of adequately worded frameworks underpinned by briefings, training and coaching.
- That these frameworks can be used to adequately capture (on paper) people’s desired work behaviour.
- That individual development needs and wider organizational needs happily coincide, with the individual being a naturally self-actualising entity in the context of the workplace.
- That there are direct causal relationships between human capability, individual performance and organizational performance and that everybody agrees on what ‘performance’ might actually mean.

The above analysis, including these implicit assumptions, will form the backdrop against which employee evaluations of the capabilities programme will now be assessed. The objective of this assessment will not be to test the veracity or falsity of the above assumptions but rather to discern how they might be functioning within the talk of participant employees (henceforth referred to as ‘agents’), for example in the effective regulation of identity or in any other observable processes, including those of ideological resistance or hegemonic struggle.

Analysis of Agent Accounts

Analysis was performed using primarily CDP techniques (Edley, 2001) with CDA playing a more minor role here. Three principal concepts underpin CDP: *interpretative repertoires*, *ideological dilemmas* and *subject positions*. The analysis (including the identification of relevant subject positions / ideological dilemmas) will be structured around the identification and explanation of three interlinked interpretative repertoires: (1) Capabilities as scripture; (2) Essentialist; (3) Interpretist. These labels are all social constructions of the authors based on our reading, analysis and collective interpretation of predominant themes in the original transcripts.

‘Capabilities as Scripture’ Repertoire

This repertoire is characterized by the use of metaphor and terminology that carries distinctly religio-evangelical tones. By participating in this repertoire, agents appeared to attribute almost canonical (Fairclough, 1992; Murphy, 2003) or scripture-like properties to the capability statements themselves. We begin to see this, for example, in the way in which the following agent describes herself as a

‘believer’ in the capabilities, having been effectively converted from an initial stance of scepticism:

When I first saw them, I thought oh my god these are a nightmare. But having used them I actually think they’re really good. [...] I wasn’t necessarily a believer [laughs] at the beginning of the day

Appreciation of the capabilities as a means of producing self-knowledge, eliminating self-doubt and producing a sense of orientation in a chaotic world is taken to the extreme of ‘love’ in the following extract, which also speaks of the capabilities as being able to ‘provide responses’ in the same way as a religious believer might seek such responses from a set of holy scriptures:

I love the leadership capabilities by the way [...] if you need to... localize yourself... [...] be sure about something... if you are in doubt and if you have some (1) lots of things to... to... deal with all at the same time you take a look and you find some responses in there

Such evangelical enthusiasm is reinforced by the same agent in the following extract, where the capabilities are described as the very embodiment of ‘truth’ and ‘perfection’ and where ‘everything is written’:

the capabilities set a standard.. and people start to.. overuse it.. in a way that suddenly.. everyone needs to be perfect as the capabilities are perfect... [...] people are not perfect as the capabilities are perfect [...] for me it’s all written there... [...] if you have doubts... honestly... go there... take a look... there are responses in there so [...] lots of things that we sometimes feel are unknown or unresolved in the company for me it’s there written... and if it is written I just say assume that it’s true...

Consistent with this scriptural theme, the CapCo documentation makes great play about how the capabilities approach provides a common language for internal communication. For example, the CapCo Way briefing pack proclaims:

The business benefits [of the capabilities] will be significant. We will be able to talk about people and their development across CapCo with a common language.

Whilst the availability of this ‘common language’ was often alluded to by agents as a benefit, there was also much talk of the language used in the capability statements themselves as being difficult, convoluted and divorced from the real world:

the overall headings... they’re useful... some of the words around them... are a bit... umm... kind of... er... what’s the word... er... disconnected I think... from what actually happens and what you can make sense of

As such, the language of the capabilities, as one might expect with a more overtly religious set of scriptures, was not represented as a language to be ‘carried around in the head’ or an everyday means of ‘speaking to oneself’:

I don’t go wandering around the office... with those in my head... or referring to them on a piece of paper

It’s not a language I speak to myself particularly [...] I don’t think ooh I’m mastery at this and you know I don’t think in those terms really

However, the difficult and convoluted nature of this ‘language of capability’, rather than being spoken of as a serious flaw, was often represented as a challenge to be overcome in the cause of producing authentic self-knowledge, with much use of terms such as ‘grapple’ or ‘struggle’:

I actually think some of the words in the boxes [of the capability frameworks] are really helpful ... um ... and for some people when they are struggling to understand what a particular capability means, getting into some of the words that are in the boxes is quite helpful

So rather than being for everyday use (because of its difficulty and the need to 'struggle' with it), the language of capability was spoken of much more of as being something that was reserved for special occasions, such as the organizational 'rituals' (Pattison, 1997; Kamoche, 2000) of performance appraisal, organizational review or career planning discussions:

I guess if I'm really honest though um... do [boss's name] and I really sit down... and have (1) big value discussions [slight laugh] based on [the capabilities]? No we don't... but I know exactly when it'll happen. It'll happen... in about six months time when it comes to talking about my next move

All this combines to illustrate how the language of capability development could be seen as separate from the lifeworld (Fairclough, 1992) and thus almost sacred in nature. Bocock (1985: 208) defines sacred as being "set apart from the everyday, secular, utilitarian, profane area of social life" and thus "special, not part of the everyday world". Rituals are also separate from the everyday world. They are an important part of social regulation because they help in the construction of a common identity, a shared meaning and a hegemonic consensus to the prevailing order (Bocock, 1985). The 'difficulty' of the language is also an important aspect here, not least because the greater the difficulties encountered in accessing knowledge, the more 'truthful' such knowledge is generally seen to be (Townley, 1996).

We now pick up on this theme of 'truth' and self-knowledge in an examination of our next repertoire which we have chosen to call the 'essentialist' repertoire.

'Essentialist' Repertoire

This repertoire is characterized by a tendency for agents to talk about the capabilities (individually and/or collectively) as having some kind of objective or essential meaning in and of themselves, irrespective of the words that go to describe them and irrespective of context. Indeed several agents at some stage during each interview talked in terms of various capability attributes having a 'real meaning', a 'spirit' or indeed an 'essence' all of their own. In an important respect, the enunciation of this repertoire supports the ideological stance of the company documentation, which portrays the capability attributes as being objectively observable properties of an essential self and as offering a politically neutral technology for getting to know and develop that self. Similar to the capabilities as scripture repertoire, this essentialist repertoire was often associated with agents speaking of how the capabilities facilitated a distinctly uplifting and optimistic form of insight into their own strengths and development areas:

By using the capability frameworks you can really focus in on what you're great at... and build upon those and leverage those... so the Be the Best Development Plan is all about strengths you can leverage as well as... development areas that you can address.

This attributed property of the capabilities to produce supposedly 'true' knowledge of the essential self was strongly reinforced by the following agent who had participated in the organization's 'Benchmarking for Development' initiative:

I've got a report... on me from [the psychologists]... which I do refer back to around both assessing me against you know desired leadership capabilities... where I'm at at the moment... [...] so I could describe you know some of my stronger areas against the leadership capabilities and slightly less strong

The truth effect of such self-knowledge appeared undiminished for this agent, even when he later began to reflect on the lack of robustness to the (supposedly 'world-class') benchmarks, which had formed the basis for his capability profile. The agent talks of maintaining a kind of faith or 'trust' in the 'expertise' and 'judgement' of the consultants, despite his surprise and disappointment at the subjectiveness of the benchmark:

...the bit of the process I was a bit disappointed with... was the... robustness of... the [worldclass] benchmarking bit of that process [...] I pushed them on it but it was explained as... 'its based on our experience of dealing with leaders'... and they have got huge experience I mean don't get me wrong they are... expert occupational psychologists so... it's not that I don't *trust their judgement*

There appears to be an unresolved tension or ideological dilemma surfacing here, in terms of the agent expressing a claimed belief in the 'essential' and 'expert' self-knowledge that the capabilities offer up, whilst simultaneously wrestling with the inherent subjectiveness of such knowledge.

In summary then, whilst not being dilemma-free, the adoption of this 'essentialist' repertoire (in combination with the preceding scriptural one) serves very much to support and reinforce the ideological stance in the company documentation that portrays capabilities as neutral and objective ways of accessing knowledge of the self, which in turn can be compared against naturally occurring norms (such as 'world class' benchmarks) and thus serve ostensibly as a basis for individual development (but also, as we shall see later, for the ordering and control of populations).

'Interpretist' Repertoire

In contrast to the essentialist and scriptural repertoires described above, the 'interpretist' repertoire encapsulates the ways in which agents had a tendency to talk about the capabilities as relying on subjective processes of interpretation for their very existence:

I find it all very subjective as to where you say you are, where you're going to be, and what your role really needs [...] and it depended how you interpreted it really

Although in one sense this interpretist repertoire could be understood to call into question the essentialist one described above, in another sense the two repertoires could be understood to be mutually sustaining. This is because any 'essential' meaning that the capabilities might be deemed to have depends on linguistic / interpretive processes for bringing such essence into being. As such, agents could often be heard jostling with these two repertoires simultaneously:

If you actually look at what it says about 'Edge'... it's actually quite a broad definition about... umm (1) getting stuff done essentially [...] but its *interpretation* in CapCo has been actually quite focused... around... the kind of courage to put your head above the parapet...

The above illustrates an ideological dilemma that surfaced in the course of our interviews more generally. On the one hand, agents appeared keen, via the essentialist repertoire, to subscribe to the organizational ideology of capability as objective neutrality. This provides the means by which they can discuss themselves

and others in terms of having a stable, meaningful or essential self that is consequently amenable to transformation and ‘development’. However, such an ideology quickly becomes unsustainable, unless one simultaneously adopts a repertoire that acknowledges, if only implicitly, the socially constructed nature of the capabilities. This is because, as Murphy (2003: 55) points out, words “do not [have] meaning in and of themselves. They only mean in relation to other elements.” As such, the capabilities inevitably depend on human agency (including one’s own) for their linguistic expression and interpretation, thus rendering their meaning negotiable, context-specific, inherently unstable and ultimately manipulable:

They [the capability statements] are open to some interpretation which means we can manipulate them and do manipulate them to make them relevant to our team

Simultaneous adoption of these two repertoires also opened up a variety of similar and sometimes almost evangelical subject positions that could be collectively described under the banner of “masters of the truth” (Foucault, 1986). The following extracts serve to illustrate how these repertoires worked together in forming such subject positions:

By reading the exact words [of the capability statements] you couldn’t say no this is definitely not what you’re doing [...] I think you have to think about *what they’re trying to articulate*... what’s behind that

I think there’s an element of just *trying to make the links* for people in terms of where they are within the capability frameworks [...] you know a lot of the time it’s just sitting with people and coaching them through

You tend to be just quite selfless about it. You tend to want to do all of the good work for the groups of people that you support... rather than focus on you know what does it mean for you

Trying to get your head round things like ‘Edge’... and ‘Emotional Energy’ and really understanding what that means. I think you can do it if you’ve had a really good conversation with your manager [...] that brings it down to a specific level of behaviour rather than... you know some *poor individual* having to really [slight laugh] *plough through the words* and think about what it means

The basic effect of such mixing of essentialist and interpretist repertoires seems to be one of communicating that (a) the capabilities *do* have an essential meaning that (b) certain people (such as the speakers above) are lucky enough to carry around in their heads, thus (c) laying claim to subject positions from which they can interpret this truth (sometimes ‘selflessly’) for other organizational members who are (d) less fortunate, insightful or gifted and can’t be expected to ‘plough through the words’ and who (e) wouldn’t be able to grasp the essential meaning of the written capability statements even if they did so, because (f) the written words can only ‘try to articulate’ such meaning, but with only partial success.

We have already seen how one agent laid claim to the ‘correct’ interpretation of ‘Edge’ in opposition to those who might interpret it differently. Here she adds a new dimension to interpretation (referring once again to ‘Edge’) in terms of how

interpretive processes can also extend to the relative importance of one capability cluster versus another:

Some of [the capabilities] have kind of taken prominence over others... and I think some of that's been around... the interpretation that they've been given by the CapCo executive themselves... there are certain capabilities that are kind of quite prevalent in individual members of the board [...] so there was a kind of a tension in myself in... thinking through my own development [...] around well... am I gonna have to change myself so fundamentally as a human being kind of thing... [...] in trying to address this behaviour that's kind of expected within CapCo [...] and er I actually came to the conclusion that actually what I need to do is to be *true to myself*

We can see from the above how the capabilities can be used in attempts at identity regulation, by not only constructing individuals in terms of pseudo-scientific and socially constructed traits⁴ (such as 'Edge', 'Emotional Energy', 'Ideas' etc), but also by reinterpreting both their meaning and the relative importance of each. However, as we saw earlier, the above agent resists such attempts by reinterpreting Edge in her own 'correct' way (i.e. as 'getting stuff done') thus permitting her to remain apparently 'true' to what she claims as her essential 'self'.

Such dynamics were reinforced and extended by another agent who resisted the way in which performance against the capabilities has come to be closely linked to career progression within the organization:

The... capability development process [...] in my view needs not be [...] brought across as... 'this is the only path through which you know you can progress in the organization...' (mm right)... because if you do that then human beings are only human... then people come across differently they will behave differently (mm).. or you may actually end up identifying the wrong development areas

It is worth noting that this particular agent was subject to close scrutiny and regular appraisal as to how he was 'performing' against his supposed development needs, even to the point of being rated (in 360 degree fashion) against the capability standards by an *external* party with whom he was working. This provides a vivid illustration of the "panoptical" functions of CBMD when linked to appraisal, with the agent being permanently subjected to the "normalizing gaze" of the organizational control system (Townley, 1994).

However, despite the resistant tones of the above two extracts, both agents expressed elsewhere in their interviews an appreciation of the capabilities' role in their own development as managers. An ideological dilemma therefore emerges in terms of how the power/knowledge of CBMD enables a productive (and to some extent micro-emancipatory) construction of the self whilst also rendering that same self vulnerable to manipulation in the interests of others (Townley, 1998). It also provides an indication of how CBMD has the potential to produce superficial and self-fulfilling 'performance' effects, inasmuch as agents may simply surface act (Clarke, 1999) against the capabilities in order to gain recognition and career progression. This in turn generates the potential for CBMD to act as an 'institutional anchor' with a consequent risk of inhibiting adaptation (Demerath & Schmitt, 1998) by suppressing diversity, innovation, creativity and spontaneity (Antonacopoulou & Fitzgerald, 1996; Ackers & Preston, 1997; James, 2001). Ironically these are the very things that the capability statements themselves purport to encourage.

An important observation during data analysis was that not all agents talked in terms of having bought into the unitarist essentialism that the capabilities might imply. The following agent remained largely interpretist in her talk, implicitly resisting the essentialist themes made available by the capabilities. We have already shown in the opening extract to this section how she spoke of the capability frameworks as arbitrary and subjective, a theme which she goes on to develop by speaking of the capability approach as having been ‘forced down’ and ‘dictated’ as a structure for performance appraisal and self-development:

It was basically the boss’s initiative because it had been *forced down*... effectively... um... so... it had to be done in that structure. It was *dictated*

Despite remaining broadly interpretist in her talk, however, she does speak of the language of capability as being a useful way (albeit only one way) to initiate and structure a narrative about performance or development:

I guess it’s a tool that you can use to sit down and start a discussion with and from that point of view... good... um... it allows you to air your view as to why you think you are one particular thing or the other and then for your boss to come back and say well have you thought of this or that

Another agent made use of the interpretist repertoire to initially align himself with the careerist and entrepreneurial ideology made available by the company documentation:

[The capabilities] are important to me because they’re part of my development plan [...] and it’s there that they become vitaly important to me... I don’t move on unless I can demonstrate... performance and development against those particular things

However, rather than continuing with this careerist and entrepreneurial self-maximizing subject position, later in the interview this same stakeholder, when reflecting on the enduring politics of the career system within CapCo, adopted a starkly contrasting subject position which might be aptly described as ‘materially satisficing cynic’:

Are the capabilities, management competencies really valued...? Umm... they will be... and they can be if we make them work... I just don’t... [...] and you might think I’m a little cynical about it... yeah there is a cynical... tag on me... um about this stuff but er... what they don’t show is that there might be some glass barriers, some glass ceilings which you can’t see... and they’re the bits of... around personal development which... if there are unwritten rules.. and unwritten things which well... if you want to progress you have to go out and spend time... going and flogging yourself... constantly... um... otherwise individuals naively assume that by performing against... capabilities and objectives they will get recognized and seen [...] I can... be mastery on everything... but still be in the wrong flavour of the month department... and er... [chuckles] if your face doesn’t fit you know then... um... then yeah you have to realize it and make... be big enough to say OK I’m gonna make a big change and go somewhere else.. and people know this place is quite comfortable... um... financially and when you’ve been in as long as I have it takes quite a step to jump out and find something else to do

The above indicates a clear dilemma in terms of the stakeholder switching between an initial subject position that buys into the unitarist, objectivist and apolitical ideology of the company documentation and a later, resistant one which represents such ideology as a deceptive illusion that only the ‘naïve’ should believe in. This also demonstrates how employees might knowingly participate in such apparent (and

effectively mutual) deception or ‘calculative compliance’ (Willmott, 1993) if nothing else for the sake of financial satisficing.

In summary, we can see how this interpretist repertoire was used in a creative fashion to both adopt and resist, at times almost simultaneously, the ideological messages in the company documentation. Agents accomplished this by both embracing and resisting (if only implicitly) the taken for granted assumptions within such documentation, particularly with regard to the capabilities being a neutral means of accessing truth and knowledge about the essential, ‘developing’ self. The aim of the section to follow will be to draw the strands together in terms of the interests being served / neglected by CapCo’s approach to CBMD.

Discussion

In the preceding pages, our aim has been to demonstrate how CBMD can be understood as a cultural resource that serves not just as a carrier of organizational ideology but also as a vehicle that offers up possibilities for instances of micro-emancipation. We have sought to do this by using a methodology which draws attention to the inherent dilemmas, tensions and contradictions that can be expected to characterize any ideology, but which can be easily missed by failing to pay close-up attention to the talk of organizational agents. It is precisely these aspects of organizational ideologies which open up possibilities for micro-emancipation, alongside their more obvious potential for repression. A key plank of our analysis has been to demonstrate how the capability statements within CapCo served as a form of scripture that one might more typically expect to encounter within the realms of mainstream religion. However, in doing this we have endeavoured to go beyond the use of religion as mere metaphor in our analysis of CBMD. Rather, our purpose has been to demonstrate how, and to what effect, CBMD can be understood as a quasi-religious discourse in its own right. In this respect, Lindbeck (1984, cited in Pattison 1997: 170) describes religions as “comprehensive interpretive schemes, usually embodied in myths or narratives and heavily ritualized, which structure human experience and understanding of self and world.” We would argue that all of these aspects are functioning within CapCo’s CBMD programme, as illustrated by the three interpretative repertoires we have set out. In order to develop this point, we now examine in a little more detail the juxtaposition of these three repertoires with explicit reference to Murphy’s (2003) semiotic theorizing of religion. Murphy draws on Smith (1982) to describe a ‘canon’ (or body of scripture) as the lexicon of a language, the sum of available resources for meaning- or sense-making. However, as Murphy also points out, words in a language have no meaning in and of themselves. As such, elements from the canon need to be combined and rendered meaningful by a ‘hermeneute’ or in other words by an agent via acts of interpretation. A religion is thus considered by Murphy to be both its canon and the interpretation of that canon, with the canon being at once a product of interpretation and a definer of the very parameters thereof. Interpretations may be either conservative, by remaining within the bounds of received tradition or they may be innovative, by claiming to find the “real meaning” in the canon, thus departing from previous interpretations. We saw these same processes going on in CapCo via the mixing of essentialist and interpretist repertoires and it is primarily here that opportunities for resistance and micro-emancipation can be seen within our data to present themselves. Indeed, as

Murphy (p.56) points out, “every element of the canon can, must and will, given enough instances of its deployment, take on multiple meanings.... and [can] engender infinitely new contexts in an absolutely nonsaturable fashion.” As such, we would argue that all activities of interpretation, so central to CBMD in its scriptural aspect, can be understood as potential acts of resistance and micro-emancipation as well as potential acts of subordination and oppression.

Our contention here is that to understand CapCo’s CBMD programme as both ideological and quasi-religiously faith-based, is to provide a grounded lens through which to gain insight into the multi-faceted interests being served by the programme, such interests being manifest in the multitude of discursive acts, both productive and repressive (Townley, 1998), that organizational members, via their own agency, are able to perform in the name of capability.

On the productive side for example, we saw how the ‘capabilities as scripture’ and the ‘essentialist’ repertoires worked together to provide an image of CBMD as a means for the elimination of existential doubt and the creation of self-knowledge. The basis for this was the discursive adoption of an organizational ideology which portrays ‘capabilities’ as scientifically neutral and pre-existent properties of an objectively measurable self. The resulting self-knowledge was seen to perform productive identity work for certain agents, who drew upon it in representing themselves as experiencing an optimistic and uplifting sense of being, belonging, orientation and purpose. The notion of an objectively knowable, visible, measurable, discussible and calculable self (all expressed in capability terms) is clearly a necessary precursor to rendering such self amenable to processes of capability ‘development’ and to the uplifting sense of personal progression (not to mention the material rewards) that might go with it. CBMD also enabled organizational agents to creatively construct and adopt a variety of subject positions, some of which were aligned to the organizational ideology and some of which were directly (albeit implicitly) opposed to it. In terms of alignment we saw, for example, how some agents creatively combined ‘essentialist’ and ‘interpretist’ repertoires in order to construct themselves as repositories of some kind of essential meaning that the capability statements were represented to possess. This in turn opened up subject positions reminiscent of Foucault’s (1986) “masters of the truth,” that on occasions appeared almost evangelical or missionary-like in nature. In terms of productive opposition and resistance, we saw how one agent drew upon her own ‘correct’ interpretation of Edge in explicit opposition to alternative interpretations, thereby constructing a ‘self’ to which she could remain ‘true’. We also saw how another agent declined to adopt the essentialist repertoire at all whilst discursively acknowledging that the language of the capabilities provided at least a structure for initiating and maintaining a conversation, during which an (inevitably partial) narrative or ‘story’ of the self (Brewis, 1996) could be actively negotiated. Finally, we saw how one agent constructed and adopted a subject position of ‘materially satisficing cynic’ in creative opposition to that of ‘self-maximising entrepreneur’ made available by the company documentation. This same agent drew creatively from the interpretist repertoire in constructing a pluralist, political and manipulative image of the organization that stood in stark contrast to the unitarist, objectivist and politically neutral image portrayed in the company documentation.

The repressive aspect of CBMD might, in many respects, be understood to be the flipside of the productive side, since an adherence to any one representation of the truth inevitably suppresses a multitude of potentially legitimate alternatives. For example, the productive capacity of the capabilities to constitute identity via constructed self-knowledge brings with it an equal capacity to render such identities vulnerable, by subjecting organizational members to panoptical and normalizing forms of regulation and control (Townley, 1994; Pattison, 1997). Linked into this, is the uniquely performative (Lyotard, 1989, cited in Townley, 1996) conception of development implicit in the CapCo approach to CBMD, which portrays it as a narrow, career-linked and commodified form of shaping activity, thus ignoring other ways in which development might be conceptualised (Lee, 1997). We also saw how such a conception of development (and indeed ‘performance’ at the individual level) might easily become self-fulfilling due to surface acting or indeed calculative compliance thus driving out diversity, innovation, creativity and spontaneity, the very things the capabilities purport to encourage.

Conclusion

In conclusion, CBMD within CapCo has been shown to depend on a number of ideological assumptions. The fact that these assumptions have not been (and probably could not be) proved did not prevent them from being appropriated (and sometimes resisted) by organizational members to discursively construct, via their own agency, a sense of truth, meaning and identity. As such, CapCo’s CBMD programme can usefully be understood as both ideological and quasi-religiously faith-based, properties which, we argue, serve interests that are both productive as well as repressive. In this way, our research builds upon previous studies of religious discourse in organizations. It does so by presenting a contrast both to Pratt’s (2000) portrayal of religious ideology as a fortress that is impervious to attack and to Bell and Taylor’s (2004) emphasis on the potentially repressive aspects of religious discourse within MD.

In this paper, we have also sought to build upon previous Foucauldian studies of CBMD. We have done so by applying middle range discourse analytical techniques that answer the call for more attention to be paid to processes by which organizational members might agentially ‘play’ with discursive forms alongside an examination of the effects thereof. We believe that this provides a valuable extension of such previous work, which typically contains little if any empirical material that incorporates a concern for close-up textual analysis, thus tending to over-emphasize the potentially totalising influence of “Grand Discourse” (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2002). The research is offered up in the spirit of helping to render more visible and discussible the dilemmas that a competency or capability based approach to MD might imply. If CBMD can be legitimately understood as both ideological and quasi-religiously faith-based, then we would also argue that Foucauldian insights allied to techniques such as CDA/CDP can play a quasi-theological role in helping to render such features more explicit and open to scrutiny. We do not argue here that there is anything inherently misguided in CBMD functioning in these ways. We do argue, however, that such functioning might be usefully rendered more visible, as an

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alternative to CBMD's more common portrayal as a neutral, quasi-scientific and universally applicable/beneficial form of corporate self-knowledge.

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Appendix 1: Principal Interview Questions

(Note: The following represent only those principal questions intended for all participants. In line with the loosely structured nature of each interview, a contingent variety of more spontaneous subsidiary questions were posed in order to follow up on emerging themes).

How important would you say the capabilities approach to management development is to Capco and why?

In what respects would you say the capabilities approach has changed the organization?

How do you think the capabilities approach might change things going forward?

Can we talk about the implications of the capabilities approach for you personally?

Are there any ways in which you'd like to see the capabilities approach used differently than at present?

Can you tell me a little about the specific capability interventions that you have personally participated in or been affected by?

Are there any that stand out for you as being particularly impactful for you personally, either in a positive or negative way?

Appendix 2: Glossary of Terms (CDA/CDP)

1. CDA

| Term | Explanation |
|------------------------|--|
| Discourse | A three dimensional concept that encompasses and links: pieces of text; instances of discursive practice; and forms of social practice. At the textual level, CDA draws attention to how any part of a text will be simultaneously: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Representing and constructing a particular reality; 2. Projecting and negotiating social relationships; 3. Setting up links with other parts of the text and with the overall context. These accomplishments are achieved respectively via 'ideational', 'interpersonal' and 'textual' functions (Fairclough 1992), each of which are more fully explained within this glossary. |
| Genre | A way of using language associated with some particular form of social activity, examples being the genres: of interview; of advertising; or of a textbook (Fairclough and Hardy 1997). Genres within a text constitute tools that agents can use for interpretation, thus motivating them to use such texts by incorporating them into their own actions and texts (Phillips et al 2004) |
| Ideational function | Serves to represent and construct reality using different textual processes. These can be actional (incorporating agency), mental (incorporating cognitions e.g. beliefs, recollections etc), or relational (incorporating statements of being). Scrutinizing the ideational function of a text helps to appreciate the political/ideological significance of nominalization (see below) and metaphor (Fairclough 1992). |
| Interpersonal function | Serves to project and negotiate identity and social relationships via textual choices that include those of mood and modality. |
| Modality | An aspect of interpersonal functioning. Refers to the strength of commitment or affinity with propositions in the text. Un-moderated or 'objectivist' forms of modality often imply a form of power. |
| Mood | An aspect of interpersonal functioning. The overall mood of a text can be gauged by assessing the extent to which it uses declaratives, questions or commands. |
| Nominalization | Occurs via the use of nouns as opposed to actional forms. Heavily nominalized texts can have ideological significance in that they mask processes of agency and strengthen presuppositions, thus increasing the likelihood that assumptions will be taken for granted or regarded as fact (Fairclough & Hardy 1992). |
| Presupposition | An aspect of intertextuality. Relates to aspects in a text the meaning/significance of which are taken by the text's producer to be evident or given, frequently because they are assumed (correctly or otherwise) to have been dealt with in some previous text. Presuppositions can be sincere but they can also be used manipulatively as they are often difficult to challenge due partly to their opaqueness. They can also serve to place the consumer of texts in certain subject positions (by assuming prior textual experience) thus contributing to the ideological constitution of subjects. |
| Textual function | Relates to the ways in which the text is bound together (and linked to the external context) using terms such as 'and', 'but', 'yet' etc. Textual functioning can vary in its degree of complexity. Complex functioning is often indicative of argumentative style (which in turn invites counter-argument) whereas simple functioning indicates a more descriptive style, which invites less counter argument. Simple functioning also presupposes the making of logical linkages by a knowing audience, thus setting up subject positions for that audience to adopt. |

2. CDP

| Term | Explanation |
|---------------------------|--|
| Interpretative repertoire | An identifiable collection of terms and metaphors that one or more actors draw upon to characterize and evaluate actions and events (Potter & Wetherell 1987). The concept is similar to that of discourse but less monolithic, more fragmented and therefore suited to the analysis of interactive spoken text (Billig 2001). |
| Ideological dilemma | Utterances that arise in everyday conversation and result from there being no unitary meaning to common sense. The concept is useful in showing how dilemmas, contradictions and ambiguities in ordinary conversation can be understood to question the apparent consistency and coherence in ideological discourse, thus providing an insight into possibilities and processes of resistance (Billig 2001). |
| Subject position | Identities that are constructed and made relevant by specific ways of talking. Just as such ways of talking can vary within and between conversations, so too do the identities of the speakers. The concept provides a means of analyzing how agents are variously positioned and subjectified, by others and by themselves, in the course of discursive interaction. Examining processes by which subject positions are offered, taken up and/or resisted can provide insight into motives and interests served by such interaction (Billig 2001). |

Appendix 3: Transcription Convention

| | |
|-------------|--|
| [...] | Material deliberately omitted |
| [text] | Added clarificatory information |
| <i>text</i> | Emphasis added by the authors during transcription |
| (text) | Interjections by interviewer |
| <u>text</u> | Words uttered with added emphasis or volume |
| text... | Audible gap of short duration (less than 1 second) |
| (1) | Gap of more than 1 second. Number denotes length to nearest second |

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| | |
| Drives business area performance against clearly defined priorities. | |

Notes:

¹ These publications, along with the glossary herein, contain fuller explanatory detail of all CDA terms and techniques used in this paper.

² The “CapCo Way” is an umbrella term that covers the capabilities approach to MD within the organization along with a number of other related business processes.

³ We caveat here by adding the word ‘potential’ since “meanings are produced through interpretations of texts and texts are open to diverse interpretations which may differ in their ideological import” (Fairclough 1992 p.88-9)

⁴ This ‘pseudo-scientific’ label is entirely merited since it was confirmed during interviews with HR personnel that the capability statements were derived judgementally with no processes of criterion validation or factor analysis having been considered necessary.