



Provided by the author(s) and University of Galway in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite the published version when available.

Title	Heeding the stains: Lacan and organizational change
Author(s)	Kenny, Kate
Publication Date	2009-03
Publication Information	Kate Kenny, (2009) "Heeding the stains: Lacan and organizational change", Journal of Organizational Change Management, Vol. 22 Iss: 2, pp.214 - 228
Publisher	Emerald
Link to publisher's version	<a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/09534810910947226">http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/09534810910947226</a>
Item record	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10379/2699">http://hdl.handle.net/10379/2699</a>

Downloaded 2024-04-26T19:48:20Z

Some rights reserved. For more information, please see the item record link above.



# HEEDING THE STAINS: LACAN AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE<sup>i</sup>

Kate Kenny

Judge Business School, Cambridge University

*Kenny, K. (2009) 'Heeding the Stains: Lacan and Organizational Change'. Journal of Organizational Change Management, 22 (2).*

Abstract

**Purpose:**

The purpose of this paper is to add to current discussions on the use of Lacanian psychoanalysis in organizational change. Specifically, I argue that critiques of Lacan's work must be acknowledged and incorporated into these discussions. To date, there remains a silence surrounding these critiques within organization studies.

**Approach:**

I present existing studies that draw upon Lacan's work in the context of organizational change initiatives. I highlight the value of this theory. Next, I outline critiques of Lacan's concepts of phallus and incest taboo, and show how these concepts can be exclusionary.

**Findings:**

I find that there remains little debate within organization studies around such critiques. Lacan tends to be employed in ways that risk reproducing particular, exclusionary aspects of his theory. A homophobic and patriarchal legacy persists in appropriations of his writing. I outline alternative ways of reading Lacan, which aim to avoid such exclusions. I show how introducing such alternatives is a difficult project, firstly, given the silence surrounding critiques of Lacan in the organizational change literature. Secondly, following Foucault, I argue that language has power: a patriarchal schema is self-reinforcing in its persistence within a particular discipline, and thus difficult to dislodge.

**Implications:**

Given these findings, I conclude that organization theorists and practitioners ought to engage with critiques of Lacan's work, when employing it in their own. The silence surrounding such legacies is dangerous. I argue that the first step in engaging with Lacan's work should be to give voice to such critiques, if his writing is to be employed in the practice and study of organizational change.

**Value:**

This paper provides a unique engagement with Lacan's work in the context of the study and practice of organizational change interventions. It presents an evaluation of well-known critiques and useful recommendations for theorists and practitioners considering a Lacanian approach to this area of management studies.

**Keywords:**

Conceptual paper, Lacan, Change Management, Organization, Feminism, Butler

## Biographical Note

**Dr. Kate Kenny is a University Lecturer in Human Resources and Organization, at Cambridge University's Judge Business School. Her research interests include critical approaches to the study of contemporary workplaces, with a particular focus on issues of identity, power and emotion. Her work draws upon postcolonial theory, feminist approaches, ethnographic research methodologies and poststructural theory, in particular the work of Professor Judith Butler. Dr. Kenny currently lectures in Organizational Behaviour and the Philosophy of Management.**

**Email: [k.kenny@jbs.cam.ac.uk](mailto:k.kenny@jbs.cam.ac.uk)**

**Address: Judge Business School, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, CB2 1AG, UK**

**Tel: +44 (0)1223 339700**

**Fax: +44 (0)1223 339701**

**Website: <http://www.jbs.cam.ac.uk/people/faculty/kennyk.html>**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, a growing number of organizational scholars and practitioners have drawn upon psychoanalytic theory to help bring about change in organizations. Psychoanalysis is seen as holding the potential to shed light on aspects of organizational life that have previously remained beyond the scope of more mainstream management theory. Of late, the work of Jacques Lacan has grown in influence. However, there remains a lack of critique of Lacan's writing, by scholars and practitioners interested in organizational change: there is little evidence of this theory having been questioned in the relevant literature. In this paper, I address this silence. I outline some well-known critiques of Lacan's work from feminist and cultural studies, which highlight the potential for this theory to reproduce patriarchal and homophobic perspectives: excluding particular groups of people. I discuss the consequences of ignoring such critiques for studies of organizational change. Finally, I present a number of alternative readings of Lacan, and discuss whether these can be drawn upon for a more 'open' Lacanian psychoanalysis.

## 2. LACANIAN PSYCHOANALYSIS AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

The literature on Lacanian psychoanalysis and organizational change is a useful place to begin. Psychoanalysis has been proposed by a number of authors as offering a valuable contribution to the study of contemporary organizations (Gabriel, Hirschhorn et al. 1999; Driver 2003; Kets de Vries 2004). For example, an increasing number of researcher-consultants have drawn upon

psychoanalytic theory in order to diagnose problems and recommend *changes* in organizations (Catlaw 2006). Studies such as Czander and Eisold (2003) and Diamond and Allcorn (2003) describe how, using such theories, authors engage in ‘action-research’-style interventions within particular organizations (see Driver, 2003, for an overview). According to a leading researcher-consultant, the idea is that psychoanalysis enables practitioners to ‘try to create healthier organizational cultures’ (Diamond, 2002, quoted in Driver, 2002: 46). The aims of such change interventions are to ‘promote healthier relationships and to improve the quality of life for everyone’ (Driver, 2002: 46). In this way, psychoanalysis has been employed to intervene in, and change, organizational practices. Of particular relevance for this paper are the growing number of interventions drawing upon Lacanian theory. Some of these are described next.

## 2.1 Lacan and Organizational Interventions

This paper addresses authors and practitioners who draw upon Lacanian psychoanalysis to theorize and to bring about organizational change. Lacan’s writings have much to offer this field. For example, an influential part of Lacan’s work is his account of how humans develop into maturity (see Lacan 1993). This account highlights, for example, how the sense of control over the world that people enjoy, is something of a fantasy. Contemporary ways of thinking may lead us to feel that we have the capability to control the world around us, to a large extent, but according to Lacan, this feeling is illusory. The illusion stems from identification with an other, which occurs at an early age and is an essential part of how infants develop. The identification is, however, ‘never attained’ and thus continually escapes the subject ‘at every moment’ (Lacan, 1993: 166). The ego continually searches to overcome this lack, to gain a lost sense of unity and coherence. As Roberts notes, in business and management studies, notions of control act as a ‘foundational fantasy for management’ (Roberts, 2005: 630). The above idea from Lacan has been influential in

dismantling that fantasy: authors have used it to problematize the idea that, for example, a manager can control the world around him/ her (Roberts, 2005)<sup>1</sup>. Lacan offers a way to understand how this idea of the manager-in-control comes to be taken for granted in business discourse, and how it is a necessary illusion (Harding, 2007).

Arnaud (2002, 2003) is among those who draw on such ideas from Lacan, to bring about organizational change. For example, he employs the above account of human development in carrying out a programme of executive coaching (Arnaud, 2003). The top managers Arnaud works with struggle to adjust to the ‘complexity, uncertainty and paradox’ that accompany situations of turbulent change (Arnaud, 2003: 1132). Faced with such situations, managers find it difficult to relinquish a sense of control, and Lacan’s ideas can help make sense of this struggle. In this way, Lacanian theory is used to change such managers’ perspectives on the world, and adjust existing organizational practices. In an earlier study, these ideas inform Arnaud’s (2002) diagnosis of two individuals: a company director and a business development manager. As above, the company director was experiencing problems in delegating tasks and relinquishing control. The business development manager, Françoise, was struggling to adjust to a new commercial policy. In this intervention, Arnaud describes how, during a series of three coaching sessions, he was able to draw on Lacanian theory and go ‘beyond the sole imaginary dimension’ in the context of Françoise’s problem, and ‘accede to the underlying symbolic chain’ (Arnaud, 2002: 704). This technique enabled him to explore Françoise’s perception of his situation.

---

<sup>1</sup> Authors have used other ideas from Lacan’s work, including desire, jouissance and the Real. In this paper, I only draw on the concepts that relate to the studies being discussed here.

Other examples of such Lacanian-inspired interventions include Vanheule and Verhaeghe (2004) who argue that the concept of *professional burnout* can be usefully informed by Lacan's theory. They argue that burnout is influenced by the imaginary stance that people hold towards their experiences at work, in particular, towards the products of their labour. The authors recommend a series of Lacanian-inspired intervention possibilities, which are proposed to change existing levels of burnout within contemporary organizations. Viadellet (2007) demonstrates how the Lacanian idea of the fragmentation of the subject, which emerges in the technique of 'full speech', was useful for intervening in a situation where workplace envy was a problem (2007: 1694). Drawing on Lacan's work, the notion of coherent, unified speech is problematized. Lacan's account of human speech draws on his concepts of the symbolic, which represents the domain of language (the 'big' Other). The Lacanian subject is in a continual process of identification with the signifiers offered by this domain. As was the case in the formation of the subject, identification with the symbolic continually fails (Stavrakakis, 2002; Žižek, 1993). A certain coherency is maintained in our position as subject, through continued symbolic identification, although again, this coherence is never finally reached. Drawing upon these ideas, Viadellet (2007) describes how he used a technique that enabled his analysand to let go of attempts to develop a coherent, unified account of her feelings. Through such interventions as these, it is clear how researcher-consultants have drawn upon Lacanian psychoanalysis to bring about changes in organizations.

The above examples describe how Lacan has been employed to bring about practical changes in contemporary organizations. In addition to these more overt influences, Lacan's work has, of late, inspired organizational theorists (Fotaki, 2006; Harding, 2003; 2007; Hodgson, 2005; Jones and Spicer, 2005; Roberts, 2005)<sup>2</sup>. Through publication and teaching in the business and management sphere, his theories are likely to have indirect effects in how organizations are run, and change is managed.

## 2.2 A Lack of Critique?

Whether theoretical or practice-based, the above studies share one feature- an absence of critical evaluation of Lacanian theory (Harding, 2007). This is particularly surprising given the critiques of Lacan emanating from disciplines such as gender studies and cultural studies over the last thirty years. A central 'charge' is that through his concepts of the phallus and the incest taboo, which will be explained in the next section, Lacan's work risks reproducing homophobic and misogynistic perspectives. Organization theorists Jones and Spicer (2005) do give brief mention to these critiques, alluding to what they term the unfortunate 'stains' that persist in Lacanian theory. Beyond such fleeting references, there remains a definite silence surrounding these aspects of Lacan's work in relevant organization studies research. The stains are notably absent. In the remainder of this paper, I inspect these stains, following Harding's (2007) call for debate around their exclusionary potential. I focus on the concepts of the

---

<sup>2</sup> In addition, a special issue on *Lacan and Organization Theory* is planned for a leading journal in 2009, along with a number of seminars, and sub-themes taking place at leading management conferences, in which Lacan's work features strongly.

incest taboo and the phallus. These are understood by some to be ‘foundational’ aspects of Lacan’s work: key concepts that anchor the full corpus of his theory. However, they are seen to be exclusionary, leaving out women and homosexuals (Butler et al., 2000; Stavrakakis, 2002). Such concepts are, therefore, dangerous. In what follows, I examine these arguments and see whether such legacies of patriarchy and homophobia *can* persist in appropriations of Lacan’s work. I show how, rather than foundational and unchanging, these concepts can be conceived of as revisable, although this is difficult to do. I conclude by drawing out a number of implications for organization theory and the practice of organizational change consulting.

### 3. INSPECTING THE STAINS: PATRIARCHY AND HOMOPHOBIA IN LACAN?

As described in the previous section, Lacan’s ideas on subject formation, language and social life are valuable for unpacking particular taken-for-granted assumptions about the world. For example, highlighting notions like control and coherence as being illusory, even if we continue to strive for them, is a powerful way of coping with the chaos and complexity of our lived experiences at work. However, Lacanian theory is not without its baggage, and if organization scholars and researcher consultants are to do justice to this work, it is important to examine this baggage and understand the theoretical legacy that comes with. In the following section, I outline a number of the stains alluded to by Jones and Spicer above, drawing on well-known critiques of his work.

#### 3.1 The Lacanian Phallus

The concept of the phallus, which acts as a privileged signifier in the structuring of social life, is somewhat foundational in Lacan’s work (Lacan, 1993). The

phallus represents the centre of the symbolic order, of language. In the unconscious, the chain of signifiers is floating and unfixed, always sliding and shifting. The phallus anchors this chain and arrests this shifting, so that signifiers can have stable meaning, albeit fleetingly. For Butler, this central role means that the Phallus is a signifier with a difference from other signifiers; it is *privileged* because it can ‘designate as a whole the effects of the signified’ (2002: 285).

Lacan refutes the link between the Phallus and the penis. In *The Signification of the Phallus*, he argues that the phallus is ‘a signifier’, located in the symbolic register (2002: 285). As such, it does not denote any positive meaning: it does not necessarily refer to a penis. Although, contra Freud, the phallus is ‘not a phantasy’ (Lacan, 2002: 285), neither is it to be understood as constrained by the biological reality of ‘the organ, penis or clitoris, that it symbolizes’ (Lacan, 2002: 285). Various theorists have used these reflections to refute any charge of phallogocentrism in Lacan’s work (Stavrakakis, 2002; Žižek in Butler et. al, 2000). After all, they argue, Lacan perceives the phallus as, finally, an idealization. As an idealization, it can never be fully articulated onto a biologically ‘real’ body part. It therefore represents something of a ‘transferable phantasm’ and can conceivably be released from any historical association with the male body (Butler, 1993: 86).

However, for some critics, this refuting isn’t good enough- the metaphorical linkage persists. Critics argue that the choice of the name phallus to denote a privileged signifier implies a symbolization (Butler, 1993), and as such, Lacan is unfortunately using a patriarchal language of sexuality to represent his schema (Leeb, 2008). In doing so, he is reifying an exclusionary system. The choice of the term phallus invokes a ‘specifically masculine’ account of subject formation and social life (Butler, 1993: 77).

In particular, the *central* place afforded to the Phallus, in the Lacanian schema, contributes to this reification; the privilege that Lacan affords to the phallus risks entrenching this phallogocentric schema. As Jameson (2002) argues, the ‘notorious “phallic” symbol dear to vulgar Freudian literary criticism’, comes to be seen as ‘neither image nor symbol, but rather... the fundamental signifier of mature psychic life, and thus one of the basic organizational categories of the Symbolic Order itself’ (Jameson, 2002: 12). Butler agrees that in his implicit shift from ‘penis’ to ‘phallus’, Lacan performs a kind of ‘synecdochal extrapolation’, whereby the part status of the penis, a mere body part, is suddenly elevated to the position of privileged signifier (Butler, 1993: 83). Critics query whether we ought to accept the privilege given to a particular body part in the Lacanian schema, where it is ‘elevated/ erected to the structuring and centring principle of the world’ (Butler, 1993: 79). In particular, Butler’s essay *The Lesbian Phallus and the Morphological Imaginary* forms a detailed account of this refusal to accept (1993). It does seem reasonable to assume that through the continuation of this choice of name to represent such a foundational concept, the privileged position of the masculine body is implied, and persists. This appears so, even where this privilege is refuted and renamed by the author himself.

The debate revolves around some critics arguing that Lacan’s choice of language leaves a legacy that is damaging, while others argue that scholars and practitioners should return to Lacan’s original work in order to regain a sense of the idealized nature of the phallus. It is useful therefore to ask, what does the concept of phallus *do*, in studies drawing on Lacanian theory? Asking such a question might help us to evaluate the alleged dangers inherent to the concept.

### 3.1.1 The Phallus: Evaluating the Dangers

The concept of the phallus appears in some of the Lacanian-informed organizational interventions described above. For example, Arnaud invokes the notion of ‘phallic signification’ to make sense of the symptoms exhibited by the

executive coaches he worked with (2003: 1138). Thus the term can persist. The problem is that language is political (Foucault, 1990). The choice of particular phrases is an important one, particularly when it comes to concepts that are deemed to anchor an entire theoretical schema. Language has effects; as Wittig notes, language ‘casts sheaves of reality upon the social body’, which are not easily discarded (Wittig, 1992 in Butler, 1990: 115). A theory that holds the phallus as central is clearly an unfortunate new development for management, which, after all, is an area where people continue to experience marginalization based on their gender (Ferguson, 1984; Thomas and Davies, 2005). This is the case in both management theory and practice (Casey, 2004). Therefore, even if we follow the advice of some Lacanians and avoid more simplistic interpretations of how the phallus functions, where biological woman ‘is’ the phallus and biological man ‘seeks to have’ it, the political implications inherent to the choice of the name remain. This choice ensures that the penis is elevated to a foundational ‘principle’ that anchors the symbolic chain, thus inscribing our interpretation of ‘all knowable objects’ (Butler, 1993: 78). We can see, therefore, that the use of Lacanian theory in organizational change interventions risks instating a misogynistic, patriarchal system, which excludes, for example, biological women. Even though Lacan’s own writing refutes such charges, the persistence of the concept, and the centrality afforded to it, can have ontologically violent consequences (Butler et al., 2000; Stavrakakis, 2002), dominating and excluding those left outside such privilege.

### **3.1.2 The Phallus as Privileged Signifier: Alternative Readings**

Having pointed out this issue, it would be of little help to argue that organization change practitioners should simply call a halt to their use of Lacan’s writings, which are clearly valuable. Rather than merely pointing to the problem of phallogocentrism, it is therefore helpful to suggest alternatives. In particular, I argue that organization studies might ‘perform’ Lacan differently, and in doing so, avoid reinstating the phallogocentric language critiqued above.

It is clear from recent organization studies that utilise Lacan's theories, that the notion of being and having a privileged signifier is extremely valuable in understanding aspects of organizational life. These ideas can be retained, but without the invoking of a particular male body part. Butler's essay, *The Lesbian Phallus and the Morphological Imaginary* (1993), is useful in this respect. She draws on Derrida's notion of differance in the persistence of social structures to remind us that the privilege of the phallus is, after all, gained through its own reiteration and citation (Butler, 1993). Viewed temporally, a particular entity is always different from itself; this ongoing play of difference is what constitutes identity (Borgerson, 2005). While iteration is the condition of possibility for the persistence of a given entity in social life, the temporal difference between successive iterations creates a discontinuity. This discontinuity yields a space for subversion. With respect to the phallus, therefore, Butler argues that in the 'very force of repetition' there lies the 'possibility of deprivileging that signifier', and resignifying it elsewhere (Butler, 1993: 89). In this space of resignification we might see room for 'destabilizing the hegemony of current conceptions of the phallus itself' (1993: 88). Organization theorists could, for example, 'take Lacan seriously' and treat the Phallus as the transferable phantasm it is claimed to represent. Theorists could jettison the word phallus, roving this privileged signifier onto other body parts for the purpose of representation.

If, as Zizek (2000) and Stavrakakis (2002) argue, the phallus in Lacan is a transferable phantasm, then it should not be overly problematic to 'transfer' the way the privileged signifier is represented. Perhaps the concept can be reclaimed by all bodies, not just masculine ones (and also, perhaps, by non-human forms of life) (Butler, 1993). As Butler points out however, this kind of reclamation must involve an alternative 'phallus' that is not continually reinstated as an a-priori privileged signifier, even one that is symbolizable by all bodies. There would be little point in introducing a replacement signifier that is

as immutable and exclusionary as the phallus it displaces. Instead, the alternative ‘phallus’ must remain a necessary fiction, which acts to remove the idea of ‘being and having’ the signifier from its symbolic association with maleness and, relatedly, masculine dominance (Butler, 1993). To do this, however, we must consider the phallus as not necessarily linked to some originary moment of the signifying chain, but rather, as that which is part of an ongoing play of reiteration and thus open to resignification, ‘signifying in ways and in places that exceed its proper structural place within the Lacanian symbolic’, and in ways and places that ‘contest the necessity of that place’ (1993: 88). In doing so, the alternative phallus must not be instated as a ‘foundational principle’ that brings with it new types of exclusions for different forms of life. Butler’s Lesbian Phallus is just one way of rethinking the foundational, and the exclusionary, in appropriations of Lacan’s work. It is useful here because it is ‘both occasioned by Lacan’ and exceeds the constraints, and potential exclusions, that can arise from misappropriations of his work (Butler, 1993: 90). Other writers have developed Lacan’s work along similar lines (e.g. Brennan, 1993). Such alternative readings are useful in the context of organizational change. However before considering them, organization theorists must acknowledge that they are necessary, by paying attention to the kinds of critique detailed here (Harding, 2007). The first step must be to take the ‘stains’ in Lacan’s work seriously.

### 3.2 The Incest Taboo and Homophobia

Having examined the well-known critique around the potentially phallogocentric nature of Lacan’s work, it is useful to draw out a second point of contention: the persistent incest taboo. To understand a person’s entry into the symbolic order, Lacan draws on this concept as it is developed in Levi-Strauss’s *Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1969). Levi-Strauss writes that the incest taboo is the primordial rule that transforms a group of biological creatures into a human

society. This fundamental prohibition on incest is central to the establishment of kinship relations, and thus to the establishment of a functioning social order.

Although this taboo operates in the realm of the symbolic, in terms of its importance in subject formation it is, for Lacan, something of a universal. This prohibition inaugurates the Oedipus complex, which is central to Lacan's account of subject formation: it covers 'the whole field of our experience with its significance' (Lacan, 1968: 40). This appears to be reasonable, since the prohibition of incest is found in numerous societies. In order to enter the symbolic, a child must internalize the prohibition against incestuous relations and in doing so, repudiate their desire for the parent as sexual object. Critics point to this legacy of a foundational incest taboo, as acting to reify a particular hierarchy of gendered and sexed positions, yielding what Butler terms as 'stark consequences for gendered life' (Butler, 2000: 21). The problem is that if the incest taboo is seen as absolutely foundational to the social order, then sexual exogamy is forwarded as an important cultural norm. This exogamy tends to be conceived of as, necessarily, heterosexual in nature, as heterosexual relationships tend to be biologically reproductive (Butler, 1990; Rubin, 1975). In contemporary discourse, therefore, the incest taboo acts to legitimise and give primacy to a particular 'sex-gender system', one in which heterosexual, reproductive relations are perceived to be at the core of a functioning society (Butler, 1990: 93). This perception is upheld by a matrix of power-knowledge relations, as Foucault discussed in his analysis of the role of the state in sexual reproduction (Foucault, 1990). Foucault finds that the norm of heterosexuality is central to the economic well-being of the state, because it promotes reproduction and population growth. For this reason, the norm is continuously upheld by particular discursive regimes. As I pointed out in relation to phallogocentrism, above, the problem with such 'foundational principles' in any theoretical schema lies in the exclusions that result from them. In this case, consequences include an

attendant repudiation of same-sex desire and rendering of homosexuality as illegitimate (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1990).

### 3.2.1 The Incest Taboo in Lacan

Interestingly, a different reading of Lacan leads one to see the incest taboo as not universal, but radically contestable. Indeed, Lacan himself subsequently refuted many interpretations of his work in which the concepts described above were presented as somewhat foundational. For example, some scholars read Lacan as locating sexual difference in the Real. This means that it is never possible to fully capture sexual difference (Brennan, 1993; Stavrakakis, 2002, see also Lacan's example of the gendered separation of toilets in *Ecrits*, Lacan, 2002a). Every time we attempt to define, for example, 'woman' in opposition to 'man', this yields a surplus, a remainder that cannot fit into the relational, binary, definition of man/ woman. This surplus opens up a space for rethinking what sexual difference implies. If we can never absolutely grasp sexual difference, then perhaps there is space for rethinking the necessity of heterosexual relations as foundational to kinship and, in turn, to society. As Butler notes, perhaps such an interpretation shows us that sexual difference is, for Lacan, 'a truly empty and formal difference' and thus 'could not be identified with any of its given social formulations' (Butler et al, 2000: 146).

The problem is, however, that even if Lacan's work overturns the necessity of heterosexual kinship, its legacy remains in interpretations of his writings. For this reason, the problem lies in the ways that such ideas tend to persist, in psychoanalysis and in social discourse. The idea of the heterosexual kinship relation as foundational remains central, even to the work of cultural theorists considered to be somewhat 'radical'. For example, Žižek's privileging of this relation is described as an unfortunate aspect of his work (Bohm and De Cock, 2005; Butler et al, 2000). Here again, the persistence of particular categories as universal abstracts, as 'radically incontestable principle(s)', can lead to the

exclusion and pathologization of particular groups of people (Butler et al, 2000: 146). As with the discussion of the phallus above, it is useful to explore what the concept of the incest taboo can *do*, in its discursive operation.

### 3.2.2 The Incest Taboo: Evaluating the Dangers

Homophobia persists in contemporary ways of knowing. The *physical* violence which results from the exclusion of such ‘unthinkable’ sexual identities is discussed in, for example, Butler’s *Bodies That Matter* (1993). *Ontological* violence can also persist where homophobia comes to dictate what can be seen as a valid life (Butler, 2004; Lloyd 2005; 2007). Dominant discourses that hold heterosexual kinship as foundational to society contribute to these forms of violence. Media debates around gay marriage taking place in France in the 1990s, highlighted this. Discussions on extending legally sanctioned alliances to homosexual relationships centred on the relation between gender and kinship. Specifically, in news reports, heterosexual forms of kinship were posited as ‘normal’, and central to the functioning of society. Alternative forms, including homosexual alliances, were constructed as abnormal and holding the potential to yield ‘psychotic consequences’, should they be legitimated (Butler et al, 2000: 146). Commentators in the French media frequently backed up such assertions with reference to Levi-Strauss and, inappropriately, to Lacan (Butler et al, 2000). It is thus clear that current interpretations of psychoanalysis have political effects: in this case, helping to instil the notion that non-heterosexual forms of kinship may be pathological to the functioning of society and thus must be rendered ‘outside’ (Butler, 1990). Such exclusions promise to hurt a growing number of people, particularly with the increase in importance of ‘non-conformist’ forms of kinship relations today (Butler, 2004; Lloyd 2005). As the traditional kinship structure is disrupted by changes resulting from conflicts, natural disasters, demographic shifts, divorce and assisted conception, more and more people find themselves embedded within non-traditional families and support relationships. These ‘alternative’ families are increasingly important to

contemporary society (Lloyd 2005). By implicitly upholding the institution of 'exogamic heterosexuality' as a cultural norm, cultural practices such as psychoanalysis can exclude such people (Butler, 1990: 93). It would be dangerous, therefore, for practitioners engaged in organizational change interventions, to risk such exclusions. Hall (1990) points to the persistence of homophobia within management discourse (see also Clair et al, 2005, for a useful overview). As with the phallogocentric legacies described above, such exclusions are unwelcome and unnecessary within organization studies.

### 3.2.3 Kinship Relations and the Incest Taboo: Alternative Readings

Again, it is useful to explore ways of retaining the value of particular theoretical concepts, while trying to minimise their exclusionary tendencies. In this case, it is important to note that critics of the incest taboo do not query the centrality of *kinship relations* to the functioning of society, they merely question the necessity of a particular 'sex-gender system', in which heterosexual alliances are given primacy (Butler, 1990; Rubin 1975). Perhaps alternative readings of Lacan that eschew placing a primacy upon the 'heterosexual matrix of desire' could be useful. An example of one such alternative is advanced by Butler in *Undoing Gender* (2004). She draws upon Hegel and Spinoza to forward a concept of kinship relations that is based upon a passionate attachment to the other, regardless of the sexuality of that other, or the likelihood of the attachment to result in reproduction (Butler, 2004). For Butler, it is our inescapable, emotive dependence upon others that binds us to them. Her work on identification and subjectivity builds from Lacanian concepts of attachment, but eschews the necessity of binary masculine/ feminine positions, and traditional kinship relations. Rather, she focuses upon identifying and highlighting the many kinds of attachments that underpin the survival of the social order and make it intelligible. In this rethinking, we see the Lacanian Real encroaching on 'foundational truths' such as Levi-Strauss's kinship. Butler draws on the Real to argue for constant awareness of the 'ultimate impossibility' around which the

social is structured. This leads to a rejection of what she terms the ‘fantasy of closure’. The importance of the Real in understanding the social is echoed in work by Stavrakakis (2002: 299), Zizek and Laclau (Butler et al. 2000; Laclau and Mouffe, 2001).

My aim in this paper is to contribute to current debates on Lacanian psychoanalysis in organizational theory and change consulting. I argue that while this approach represents a way of problematizing particular troubling ‘givens’, including assumptions of control and a coherent, unified subject, it risks introducing a set of foundational principles which are equally troubling. I have shown how contemporary appropriations of Lacanian theory come with particular baggage, what Jones and Spicer term the ‘stained carpet’ underlying his work (Jones and Spicer, 2005: 229). Stains include the incest taboo and the phallus, which can have exclusionary effects (Butler et al., 2000; Stavrakakis, 2002). I have pointed out how these patriarchal and homophobic legacies can be refuted by a fuller reading of Lacan’s work, if there can ever be such a reading of this elusive writer whose entire corpus argues against notions of ‘fullness’. Even with this potential for alternative readings, however, the stains persist. These observations have a number of implications for perspectives on organization change, discussed next.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

So far, I have presented aspects of Lacan’s writing that have been critiqued for their foundational and exclusionary features. I have also shown how these aspects can in fact be read as revisable. Organization theorists and change consultants can ‘rethink’ Lacan and perform his concepts in new ways. Before doing so, however, the stains presented in this paper must be acknowledged.

## 4.1 Rethinking Lacan

On this issue of alternative readings of Lacan, however, some critics hold that his writing simply cannot be rethought outside of its foundational schema. Jameson (2002), for example, tells us that the Lacanian account of human development is ‘radically incontestable’ (Jameson, 2002: 35). He argues that the theory represents a cyclical and negative circle of continuous failure and inevitable subjection to the power of the law (see also Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, 1992; Vanheule, Lievrouw et al., 2003 for arguments against revisability in Lacan). However, it appears that a commitment to the full corpus of Lacan’s work, and his notion of the Real, illustrates the inherent contingency of the concepts that critics take to be foundational (Stavrakakis, 2002; Butler, 1993). In this article, I explored alternative readings of Lacan that are, in fact, supported by his own work. These readings highlight the radical openness of particular theories and show them to be, contra Jameson, radically contestable. ‘Technically speaking’, Lacan can be read as saying that the Phallus *is* transferable: merely a symbolization (Žižek, 2000). Similarly, Lacan can be read as saying that kinship relations, and thus society, are *not* necessarily grounded in heterosexual reproductive alliances. These are valid readings of his work, and authors have spent much effort demonstrating this. Rather than simply discarding the aspects of Lacanian theory represented by the phallus and kinship relations: signification and attachment, these concepts might be retained. Organization theorists might take on the project of ‘performing’ Lacan in ways that avoid exclusionary and deterministic remnants of the unfortunate ‘stains’ that persist in contemporary interpretations of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Alternatives such as the transferable phallus, and kinships based on attachment, present a valuable contribution to the appropriation of Lacan within the practices of researcher-consultancy, and organization theory more generally. If incorporated into such interventions, they would enrich the ways his writing is used. Choosing such alternatives would help to avoid assumptions of fixity, which risk trapping

people into particular categories (Borgerson, 2007). Butler and others show how we can rethink the Lacanian account of human development, in a way that eschews the ontologically violent categories and foundational principles that exclude some people. To do so, we must commit to remaining ‘at the edge of what we know, to put our own epistemological certainties into question and through that risk and openness to another way of knowing and of living in the world, to expand our capacity to imagine the human’ (Butler, 2004: 228).

This is, however, extremely difficult to do. If organization theory was to attempt such an ‘expansion’ of its capacity to imagine the human, in the context of Lacanian psychoanalysis, surely the first step would be to acknowledge that there is a need to put these ‘epistemological certainties into question’. Before arguing for alternative ways of reading Lacan, therefore, we need to admit to the problems that persist in the theory today.

#### 4.2 Addressing the Silences

Approaches to organizational change interventions need first to address the silence surrounding these problems, before alternative ways, such as those mentioned above, can be discussed and explored (Harding, 2007). In addressing this silence, two points regarding the power of language are important.

The first point relates to the problem of mediation. Lacanian interpretations tend to draw on only a small part of the author’s work, at the expense of the rest of the corpus. For this reason, Lacan’s continuing problematization of his own work, as briefly outlined above, is easily overlooked (Stavrakakis, 2002). Unfortunately, the proliferation of limited readings of Lacan has distinct effects. Notions such as the centrality of sexual difference are self-reinforcing in their very re-iteration. The use and misuse of Lacanian ideas in relation to debates on homosexual marriage in France was described previously, as was the persistence

of the Lacanian phallus in, for example, work by Arnaud (2003). As mentioned above, organization studies cannot really afford such an exclusionary theoretical approach, patriarchy and homophobia being among the discipline's own 'legacy stains' (Clair et al., 2005; Ferguson, 1984; Thomas and Davies, 2005). The problem of mediation is not aided by the fact that Lacan's work requires translation from French and can be misunderstood in this process. Alternative readings can be silenced, as particular 'versions' of Lacanian theory persist in the discipline of organization studies.

A second problem regarding the power of language, is that organization theorists tend to be somewhat unreflexive about the dangers inherent to the theories we use. For example, Driver (2003) tells us about the 'critical concerns' that she and her colleagues have, in relation to the use of psychoanalytic techniques by researcher-consultants (such as the Lacanian interventions of Arnaud, 2003, described above). Concerns include ethical dilemmas regarding the 'selling' of psychoanalysis to corporations, and the potential for harm where analysis is conducted on one part of the organization while ignoring other potentially problematic sites within the firm. It is interesting to note that in this list of issues, the theoretical assumptions underlying any particular psychoanalytic approach is not mentioned. The theory itself is not the object of reflexivity and critique, but presented as somewhat neutral. Indeed, this neutrality appears to underlie many of the interpretations of Lacan in organization studies outlined above. This neutrality equates to a silence surrounding critique of Lacan's writing.

The above examples, drawn from organization studies literature, show the power of language: language has material effects (Wittig, 1992). Even if Lacan *can* be read differently, this does not mean that he *will*.

### 4.3 The Danger of Multiple Readings

**Ironically, it is the presence of multiple readings of Lacan that can silence critique of the patriarchal and homophobic aspects of interpretations of his work. The fact that Lacan *can* be interpreted in many ways acts as something of a safety valve; critics can point to sections of his writings, cite phrases such as ‘transferable phantasm’, and feel that the task of avoiding exclusionary tendencies is complete. For many ‘defenders’ of Lacan against feminist critiques, therefore, it is the very presence of these multiple alternatives for reading Lacan, that inoculate him against the charge of phallogocentrism and homophobia. The argument holds that ‘Lacan can be read in many ways’, and that one should simply choose a reading or an interpretation that does not support misogyny.**

**This, however, is not good enough. Feminist critics who wish to retain valuable aspects of Lacan’s writings, but perform these in a new way, must first speak out against problematic aspects of his legacy, without apology. Holding on to a single truth, even where one acknowledges the contingency of this truth, is essential for bringing about change (Butler et al., 2000). During the French Revolution, Robespierre clung to the truth of his beliefs- his perception of the evils inherent to the existing regime. His unwavering persistence was his final, ‘fatal’ purity: fatal because of his refusal to let go, even where this purity was seen to give rise to violence and terror (Scurr, 2007). For Robespierre, however, there could *be* no revolution, no change, without revolutionary terror. One followed the other by necessity. Robespierre’s ‘Politics of Truth’, his ‘fatal purity’ and passion for his vision, was very far from the pluralistic, liberal thinking of today (Zizek, 2007). Robespierre continuously spoke against the ‘sensitive liberals’, who wanted change, but shirked from the idea of violent revolution, becoming mired in pluralistic thinking about which way might be best. Such thinking underscores the argument that if we can read Lacan in many ways, we need not upset ourselves with concerns about homophobia and**

patriarchy. However, as in the case of Robespierre, insisting on multiple perspectives can lead to paralysis and the loss of sharp critique. The possibility to read Lacan in many ways is not problematic in itself, in fact, as discussed in this paper, it is extremely valuable. However, when it leads to a negation of critique, it is dangerous. If change is to occur, people must cling to a truth and speak out against patriarchy and homophobia where we see it. Rather than being silenced by arguments about multiple readings of Lacan, therefore, perhaps the task today is indeed ‘precisely to reinvent emancipatory terror’ (Žižek, 2007). Even if such feminist critiques are not very fashionable, if one wants revolution, one has to speak up, and act without apology.

## 5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

We are still in the early stages of appropriating Lacan for the purposes of understanding and enacting organizational change. This means that we are in a fortunate position of being able to carefully consider how we wish to do this. The stains outlined above are not inevitable. Organizational theorists and practitioners are inescapably involved in the citation and re-citation of psychoanalytic concepts and categories. The question is how we wish to perform these concepts. In the context of organization studies, and organizational researcher-consultancy in particular, alternative readings of Lacan that eschew notions of phallogocentrism and the heterosexual matrix of desire should be considered. Before doing so, however, researchers who wish to engage with Lacan’s work must acknowledge the exclusionary baggage that may come with; the stains in the carpet to which Jones and Spicer (2005) allude should not be ignored. The first step is for critics to speak out. The written and the spoken have material consequences; language has power and this power must be addressed before alternatives can be conceived.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Arnaud, G. (2002). "The organization and the symbolic: Organizational Dynamics viewed from a Lacanian perspective." *Human Relations*, Vol 55 No 6, pp: 691-716.
- Arnaud, G. (2003). "A coach or a couch? A Lacanian perspective on executive coaching and consulting." *Human Relations*, Vol 56 No 9, pp 1131-1154.
- Bohm, S. and De Cock, C. (2005). "Everything you wanted to know about Organization Theory... but were afraid to ask Slavoj Žižek." *Sociological Review*. Vol 53 No 1, pp 279-291.
- Borgerson, J. (2005), "Judith Butler: On organizing subjectivities". *Sociological Review* Vol 53 pp 63-79.
- Brennan, T. (1993). *History after Lacan*. Routledge: London.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, London.
- Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. Routledge, London.
- Butler, J. (2000). "Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death", Welles Library Lecture at the University of California, Irvine. Columbia University Press, New York.
- Butler, J. (2004). *Undoing Gender*. Routledge, New York.
- Butler, J., Laclau, E., and Žižek, S. (2000). *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*. Verso Books: London.
- Casey (2004), "Contested Rationalities, contested organizations: Feminist and postmodernist visions", *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, Vol 14 No 3, pp 302-314.
- Catlaw, T. J. (2006). "Performance Anxieties: Shifting Public Administration from the Relevant to the Real." *Administrative Theory and Praxis*, Vol 28 No 1, pp 89-120.

**Clair, J., Beatty, J. and Maclean, T. (2005). "Out of Sight but not out of mind: Managing Invisible social identities in the workplace", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol 30 No 1, pp 78-95.**

**Driver, M. (2003). "Nothing Clinical, Just Business? Reflections on psychoanalytically grounded organizational diagnosis and intervention." *Human Relations*, Vol 56 No 1, pp 39-59.**

**Ferguson, K. (1984). *The Feminist Case Against Bureaucracy*. Temple University Press, Philadelphia.**

**Fotaki, M (2006) "Choice is yours: A psychodynamic exploration of health policy making and its consequences for the English National Health Service", *Human Relations*, Vol 26 No 12, pp 1745-1754.**

**Hall, M. (1990). "Private experiences in the public domain: Lesbians in organizations" in J. Hearn, D. Sheppard, P. Tancred-Sheriff and G. Burrell (Eds), *The sexuality of organization*. Sage, London.**

**Harding, N. (2003). *The social construction of management*. Routledge, London.**

**Harding, N. (2007). "On Lacan and the Becoming-ness of Organizations/Selves", *Organization Studies*, Vol 28, No 11, pp 1761-1773.**

**Hodgson, D. (2005). "Putting on a professional performance: performativity, subversion and project management". *Organization*, Vol 12, pp 51-68.**

**Jameson, F. (2002). "Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan." In Zizek, S. (Ed), *Jacques Lacan: Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory*. Routledge, London. (Vol 3: Society, Politics, Ideology, pp 3-43).**

**Jones, C., and Spicer, A. (2005). "The Sublime Object of Entrepreneurship." *Organization*, Vol 12 No 2, pp 223-246.**

**Laclau, E. and C. Mouffe (2001). *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Toward a Radical Democratic Politics*. Verso, London.**

**Lacoue-Labarthe, P. and Nancy, J.L. (1992). *The Title of the Letter: A Reading of Lacan*. State University of New York Press, Albany.**

- Lacan (1993). *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954-1955*, ed. Miller, J.A., trans Tomaselli, S. W.W. Norton, New York.
- Lacan (1968). "The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis", in *The Language of the Self*, trans. Wilden, A., Delta, New York.
- Lacan (2002a). "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud", in *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Fink, B. W.W. Norton, New York and London. pp 138-169.
- Lacan (2002). "The Signification of the Phallus", in *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Fink, B. W.W. Norton, New York and London. pp 271-280.
- Leeb, C. (2008). "Toward a Theoretical Outline of the Subject: The Centrality of Adorno and Lacan for Feminist Political Theorizing," *Political Theory*, Vol 36 No 3, pp 351-376.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. (1969). *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, Eyre and Spottiswoode: London.
- Lloyd, M. (1998). "Politics and Melancholia". *Women's Philosophy Review*, Vol 20, pp 25-43.
- Lloyd, M. (2005). "Butler, Antigone and the State". *Contemporary Political Theory*, Vol 4, pp 451-468.
- Lloyd, M. (2007). *Judith Butler: From Norms to Politics*. Polity, Cambridge.
- MacIntyre, A. (1981). *After Virtue*, Duckworth, London.
- Roberts, J. (2005). "The Power of the 'Imaginary' in Disciplinary Processes." *Organization*, Vol 12 No 5, pp 619-642.
- Rubin, G. (1975). "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex", in Reiter, R. (ed), *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, Monthly Review Press, New York.
- Scurr, R. (2007). *Fatal Purity*. Vintage, New York.
- Stavrakakis, Y. (2002). "Encircling the Political: Towards a Lacanian Political Theory", in Zizek, S. (Ed), *Jaques Lacan: Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory*. Routledge, London (Vol 3: Society, Politics, Ideology, pp 274-305).

Vanheule, S., Lievrouw, A. et al. (2003). "Burnout and intersubjectivity: A psychoanalytical study from a Lacanian perspective." *Human Relations*, Vol 56 No 3 pp 321-338.

Vanheule, S. and Verhaeghe, P. (2004). "Powerlessness and impossibility in special education: A qualitative study on professional burnout from a Lacanian perspective."

*Human Relations*, Vol 57 No 4, pp 497-519.

Wittig, M. (1992). *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*. Beacon Press, Boston.

Zizek, S. (1993). *Tarrying with the Negative*. Duke University Press, Durham.

Zizek, S. (2007). "Robespierre or the 'Divine Violence' of Terror", available at <http://www.lacan.com/zizrobres.htm> (accessed 3rd June 2008).

---

<sup>i</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2007 Critical Management Studies conference in Manchester. Thanks to all in the Psychoanalysis stream whose comments were invaluable. Thanks also to the editors of this special issue for their ongoing help with developing this paper.