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# **‘Someone big and important’: Identification and affect in an international development organization**

**Forthcoming (2012) at Organization Studies**

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## **Abstract**

Psychoanalysis has been widely used to develop our understanding of power in organizations. In this paper, I draw on a case study of a non-profit organization in the field of international development, in order to explore in depth how people engage with powerful discourses at play in this context. I use an ethnographic approach to do so, and find Lacan's ideas on identification and affect to be useful in the analysis of the case. I show how, at first glance, people appeared to readily alter their activities and goals in response to the wishes of an important donor. However, moving deeper to examine identifications on the part of people themselves reveals complex forms of recognition that were inscribed by affective relations. I discuss the implications of these findings for the study of organizations, including the contribution of the concept of affect for studies of identification and subjection in organizations, and the value of ethnographic research approaches that draw upon Lacan's work on recognition.

## **Keywords**

Lacan, affect, identification, organization, recognition, participant observation

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At work, we are often encouraged to do things that contradict our own ideals and values. For example, people who choose careers in international development from a desire to do good, can find themselves working for the benefit of powerful groups whose motives are questionable. The question of how and why people come to be ‘bound to power’ in such ways, is a recurring one in organization studies (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). In this paper, I explore this in relation to one non-profit organization, EWH<sup>i</sup>. My aim is to understand the ways in which staff members engage with powerful discourses within international development, and I focus on relationships with the donor UKD. I show how conflicts arose between the desire to serve what staff members referred to as ‘the poorest of the poor’, and the need to be held in positive regard by this important donor. Insights from psychoanalysis, via Butler and Lacan, prove helpful for understanding these contradictions. They highlight how discourses of power are psychically inscribed and how people come to be emotionally invested in these. While psychoanalysis has informed a number of studies of organizations, to date, in-depth, ethnographic accounts that draw upon this approach are rare. Moreover, issues of emotion and affect in relation to organizational power remain relatively unexplored, from this perspective.

I begin by introducing relevant concepts from Lacan’s work, showing how it has already been used within organization studies. Next, I describe the empirical and analytic methods adopted for this study. In presenting the case, I highlight the complexities and inconsistencies that characterize peoples’ accounts of their engagements with powerful others. The paper closes by outlining contributions to current debates in organization studies, which include theoretical development of

Lacanian approaches to the study of work via the concept of affect, insights for younger organizations in similar sectors that are heavily dependent upon reputation, and a reflection on the value of the methods adopted.

### **Lacan and organization studies**

Psychoanalysis enriches our understanding of organizations (Casey, 1991). It helps us see that we are not simply caught up in, and determined by, forces of power that relate to our workplaces. Rather, we are engaged in circuits of desire and fantasy that implicate us in the reproduction of dominant discourses (Gabriel, 1999; Schwartz, 1987). In particular, Lacan's ideas are valuable. While others provide a thorough overview of his work, highlighting its relevance for organization studies (Driver, 2009; Long, 1991; Stavrakakis, 2010), in the limited space that follows I elaborate on a number of concepts relevant to the case.

Lacan's work highlights the fragility of our sense of self. Beginning his account with the early stages of development, he sees the child identifying with the image presented to him by an other person, or in the mirror. While this image promises, momentarily, a sense of oneness and unity, this promise turns out to be an 'imaginary', impossible one, which nonetheless engenders a persistent desire to regain this pleasurable state (Lacan, 2006a). To alleviate the resulting sense of lack, as we develop into maturity we come to identify with certain aspects of our social world: those laws, norms, rituals and cultural beliefs that are prominent, along with the language that we use (Fotaki, 2010). Lacan terms this system the symbolic order (the big Other). In particular, subjects' desires come to be projected onto certain influential aspects of the symbolic; the powerful signifiers that dominate a given social context (Lacan, 2006a: 7; 2006b). Subjects seek

to identify with, and be granted recognition by, these ‘core symbolic elements’ (Vanheule & Verhaeghe, 2005: 301); seeking recognition from such dominant signifiers becomes something of a compulsion for the lacking subject (Driver, 2005; Pavon-Cuellar, 2010: 46). For some, the discourse of managerialism represents such a ‘core element’ in today’s organizations (Hoedemaekers, 2009; Roberts, 2005). Drawing on Lacan, authors show how people continually identify with the ‘images’ it offers (Hoedemaekers, 2009: 182), and seek the ‘existence-confirming recognition’ that managerialism promises (Roberts, 2005: 619). In a similar vein, authors have explored discourses of entrepreneurship (Jones & Spicer, 2005) and organizational spirituality (Driver, 2005) from a Lacanian perspective. By showing how desire drives identification with certain aspects of the social world, Lacan provides us with a way of understanding the interplay between subjects’ search for recognition, and powerful discourses that pervade today’s organizations (Fotaki, 2009; Glynos, 2010; Leeb, 2008; Parker, 2005b). Moreover, his work highlights the complexity involved.

Identification with elements in the symbolic order is never complete. Just as the child in the mirror stage seeks a unity that is finally impossible, so the mature subject finds that ‘something is always missing’ in her identifications with the social world (Stavrakakis, 2010: 63). Importantly however, this impossibility of total identification does not mean that subjects abandon the pursuit of wholeness within the symbolic; rather, they tend to actively cover over the gaps and flaws in the Other, holding on to the promise of final satisfaction (Leeb, 2008). Fotaki (2010) discusses the introduction of a ‘Choice for All’ policy in UK healthcare organizations, and outlines the problems that accompanied it. Despite these, she notes, ‘Choice for All’ persisted as a fantasy, with people involved in its development actively denying any negative associations.

For Driver (2005), the free, transcendent and fully complete self that is promised by proponents of organizational spirituality, represents such a fantasy. Moreover, it is one that necessarily represses the discrepancy between this ideal, and peoples' mundane experiences of the self as fragmented and struggling (2005: 1093). In summary, the 'credibility of the lacking Other' paradoxically remains in place even where this Other is acknowledged to be flawed (Stavrakakis, 2008: 1055). Imaginary identifications continue to mark the subject's engagement with the world; the childhood fantasy of becoming whole or complete by gaining a place in the other's desire, proves to be a persistent one.

Despite the above, Lacan avoids the determinist position of perceiving subjects as destined to endlessly repeat subordinations that are doomed to fail. While enmeshment in imaginary identifications is part of the human experience, we can change this by standing back and taking something of a 'meta-perspective' (Vanheule et al., 2003: 327). Potentially, we can go beyond the limitations of our 'miscognitions'. This involves relinquishing notions of a self that will someday be made whole either narcissistically by ourselves or through unity with an external other (Driver, 2005), and accepting that the self is, by nature, split, incomplete and struggling. As an illustration of this, Fotaki (2010) argues that UK healthcare policy-makers must move on from current approaches in which idealistic and disconnected policies are developed from a high level of abstraction. Drawing on Lacanian insights on fantasy and lack, she advocates an approach incorporating reflexivity, and awareness of the instability and conflict inherent to the policy development process. Relinquishing our comforting imaginary narratives of belonging is not easy however, and even where it succeeds, relations are always to some extent constituted by imaginary identifications.

Despite being repeatedly thwarted, we continue to *desire* recognition from powerful aspects of the social world; our identifications are infused with affect (Butler, 1997; Hook, 2007; Stavrakakis, 2002; 2010). This points to an important aspect of identification and subjection; we tend to experience our psychic ‘investments’ in power in emotional ways (Parker, 2005a: 106). These affective investments are ambivalent; while desire leads us to seek and gain recognition from important signifiers, this recognition can be experienced as hurtful, for example when we are compelled to identify with terms that are offensive, or threaten to cause us pain (Butler, 1993; 2004). The subject is a subject of lack, and desire persists even against this complex and ambivalent landscape. As Harding notes, relations with the other/ Other, in Lacan’s formulation, take the form of a ‘tug of war’: of desire for recognition, alongside fear of exclusion and alienation (2007: 1977). Unfortunately, there is no ‘opting-out’; failure to achieve recognition within the terms offered by the Other threatens the subject with ‘symbolic extinction’, and so it is preferable to ‘exist in subordination’ than not exist at all (Butler, 1997:7). A related idea from psychoanalysis, that subjects come to identify with a perceived aggressor, has informed previous studies of organizations (Kets de Vries, 2001; 2004; Tourish & Vatcha, 2005).

Stavrakakis (2008) argues that affective responses must take centre stage when considering how people in organizations are subjected to power. He illustrates this with reference to Milgram’s reports on his well-known experiments, in which Milgram puzzles over the ‘curious feelings of compassion’ and strong emotional ties that the subjects developed for the experimenter (Stavrakakis, 2008: 1051). This was surprising given the latter’s insistence that they go against their instincts and cause pain to other



people. Apart from this and other exceptions (Harding, 2007; Tyler & Cohen, 2008), to date, organization scholars have tended to downplay this issue of affect, where studies of power and subjection are concerned (Stavrakakis, 2008). I return to this point later in the paper.

Outside of organization studies, authors have pointed to the radical sociality of affect in Lacan's work. The political/ social and the psychic are normally kept apart in social theory; they are seen as separate realms. Lacan however refuses this 'ontological dualism' and views the two as inextricably interlinked (Butler, 1997: 19). This is because he considers language to be at the centre of human existence and, after all, the reach of language extends far beyond the psyche (Lacan, 1977: 54). In other words, because the psyche is linguistic, it is inescapably social, and this leads Lacan to problematize the commonly-held assumption that the psyche resides in some internal place within individual subjects (Lacan, 2006a: 19). Rather, it is radically external, inscribed by 'societal' norms (Long, 1991; Parker, 2005b: 172). As an 'ek-static' subject, one is always 'beyond oneself' (Butler, 2004: 1), and this is illustrated in a workplace context by Kenny (2010) who describes how discourses of altruism that persisted in an organization were necessarily social (see also Hancock & Tyler, 2007). Following this, the affective expressions described above can be seen as radically external, located outside of the self (Hook, 2007). Rather than being some 'original function of the psychology of its agent', Hook argues, affect represents part of the workings of 'a greater social whole' (2007: 270). Moreover, it is an important 'technology of subjectivity' that operates by engendering particular affective moments, in which the 'pulse of this charge' can be seen to briefly pass through subjects as they identify with powerful norms (2007: 270). These counterintuitive ideas around the

radical sociality of the psyche, and affect, have important implications for researchers drawing on Lacan's work (Parker, 2005a: 108), as will be discussed later. Overall, the above ideas on recognition, desire and affect proved useful in understanding the case of EWH, presented next.

### **Introducing the case and method**

This paper is based on a nine month participant observation study of EWH, a non-profit organization based in the south of England. EWH worked in the international development sector, and was focused on building useful I.T. software in order to help develop poorer regions of the world. Around the same time as I began research, the organization received a large grant from a well-known UK donor (UKD). This donation was vital, enabling EWH to pay salaries and meet costs for at least a year. The team was young; all members were in their twenties or early thirties and the organization had been founded only two years previously. I joined EWH in May 2004, entering a world where sandals and aid agency t-shirts were the unofficial uniform at work. Each morning, we cycled to our 'office' in a tumbledown building on the outskirts of town, which had been donated by a sympathetic supporter. Later in the day we would gather to lunch on organic, fair-trade falafel and pickles: my fifteen or so colleagues and I crowded around a battered kitchen table, debating the dangers of Diet Coke, four wheel drive vehicles, and the spectre of running out of funding. I tagged along when the management team attended meetings with our donor in their glass-fronted offices in central London, and when they visited shanty towns in Nairobi's Kibera district to test our latest software development. As a participant observer, my role was to carry out various bits of background research that the management team required for reports, including a country profile of Kenya and a literature review of intervention

methodologies in use at other international development organizations.

### *Data collection and analysis*

Participant observation was a particularly useful method given the research question at hand. I wanted to understand how staff at EWH engage with powerful discourses in their chosen sector, and participant observation offered a view of the informal side of working life that may not be available from interview data alone (Bergstrom & Knights, 2006). Field notes were gathered during the day at work and typed in the evening. These were augmented by semi-structured interviews with staff at EWH, carried out at the start and end of the nine month study. They lasted about an hour each. Interviews were recorded and later transcribed. I drew upon numerous other data sources (Eisenhardt, 1989), including documents, emails, meeting minutes and excerpts from EWH's intranet. These were all converted into electronic text files.

Analysis began with close reading of the electronic data. I followed a process of open coding in order to identify key themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Many appeared to be important (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002), but I chose to focus on UKD as it was continually referenced when people spoke about their engagement with the world of international development. In aiming to understand the case, I explored a number of theoretical directions with the help of literature (Karreman & Alvesson, 2004; Schultze, 2000), and found the emphasis on power, recognition and affect put forward by Lacan and those that have drawn on his work, both within and outside of organization studies, to be particularly relevant to the case. As Parker notes, Lacan's ideas are helpful for understanding how members of a particular 'community' assume and refuse representations offered by important others (2005a: 36), a central concern of the current study.

While psychoanalysis can help to ‘direct the gaze of the researcher’ and inform interpretations and analyses of data (Casey, 1999: 158), in the case of Lacan’s work, developed in the context of the clinic, this direction is somewhat vague (Parker, 2005b: 166). Nonetheless, Lacan frequently addressed wider questions of power and society, and so many have drawn on his theories to understand social settings, including organizations (Harding, 2007; Stavrakakis, 2002). In analyzing the data, therefore, it was useful to take guidance from such studies (e.g. Long, 1991; Parker, 2005a; 2005b), and a number of points are pertinent for the analysis of this case.

First, it is important for the researcher to pay attention to what the ‘core signifiers’ appear to be in a particular setting (Parker, 2005a), and as noted above, in the case of EWH, the donor UKD seemed influential. The researcher should then study how these elements relate to, and signify other aspects of the symbolic, for example, how particular ‘terms’ come to be ordered in a sequence (Parker, 2005b: 168). Next, it is useful to see how people identify with these important terms (Parker, 2005a) and in this, communication is key. When we communicate, we are always drawing on the discourse of the Other; it functions as a presence that ‘validates the subject's discourse’ (Parker, 2005b: 173). Through peoples’ interactions, the ‘structural determinations’ within a particular social world emerge (Pavon-Cuellar, 2010: 47). With this in mind, I returned to both the participant observation notes and individuals’ interview transcripts, and re-analyzed these in order to examine more closely the operation of UKD as a signifier, from such different perspectives. In doing so, I focused upon the ways people at EWH both drew on, and refused, certain representations and images perceived to be available from UKD (Parker, 2005a; b). Finally, under a Lacanian perspective, as detailed

above, it is important to remain attentive to the gaps and holes that emerge in peoples' accounts when they are engaging with the symbolic order (Parker, 2005a: 120). As Harding (2007) notes, exploring the inherent incoherence and incompleteness of peoples' representations, including moments of breakdown, might lead us closer to an understanding of the world we are studying, than would a falsely harmonious account. The task for the researcher, therefore, is to point out what the 'states of disagreement are' (Parker, 2005b: 175), rather than to search for an integrated perspective (see also Driver, 2009; Hook, 2007: 86).

### **Shifting position: EWH and its donor**

In order to study the relationship between powerful discourses at work, and peoples' engagements with these, it is useful to begin by focusing on the play of power in this setting. In what follows, I describe how EWH appeared to shift position in relation to the donor UKD, during my nine months at the organization. I show how staff members frequently responded to what they perceived to be the wishes of UKD. Drawing on ethnographic field notes, the following is structured around three significant occurrences.

The first event involved a shift in EWH's focus. It had been founded with the goal of developing software to help supply humanitarian relief to disaster areas. After much debate about where EWH should concentrate its efforts, staff members had decided that this goal most closely matched their own personal beliefs, which included making a difference in an unjust world and helping the poorest of the poor. When I first met with CEO Derek to discuss the possibility of carrying out research, he explained how EWH was a humanitarian organization. However, this label was put to one side when it

emerged that it was somewhat at odds with the donor's ideas on which projects were worthy of funding. When Derek learned that UKD, a generous donor, preferred to fund long-term *development*, rather than emergency aid projects, he proposed that his organization's declared focus should change. Others agreed. The website's 'About Us' section was rewritten, as was the mission statement. A revised set of organizational objectives were produced. EWH was now an international development organization. Upon applying for funding, the organization was granted almost a hundred thousand pounds by UKD, and staff members celebrated.

This was not the only time that the 'founding goals' of EWH were redrafted in response to UKD's wishes; the second significant event involved choosing a country in which to test the software, as part of the funded project. Given their earlier commitment to focusing on the 'poorest of the poor', staff members studied world poverty statistics to figure out which countries were most in need of long-term development funding. A number of potentials were selected. However, a catch-up meeting with UKD quickly changed peoples' minds about this choice. It became clear that Kenya, a former colony of the UK, was a strategically important country for government-backed UKD. The donor representatives made no secret of the fact that they would prefer EWH to carry out the pilot research there. Staff members were somewhat cynical about this, but relented and booked flights for Nairobi.

A third event of note occurred when the time came for an end-of-project report to be submitted to UKD; this would outline the success or failure of the project. It was not clear that the project had in fact been successful. Results had been ambiguous, and even the head of software development, Mark, had begun to express serious doubts about the

effectiveness of the technology that had been developed during the project. However, EWH staff wanted to impress the donor; they often discussed how they intended to seek repeat funding from UKD. The process of writing the report generated much debate around how to frame the work that had been carried out, and how to present the conclusions. The final report represented a manipulation of the ambiguous findings; it reflected positively on the software, and people agreed that it should be written more or less according to what, it was hoped, UKD's representatives wished to read.

Examining what form the 'core symbolic elements' within this social setting might take, on the surface, it appears that UKD represents one. EWH members regularly responded to what they perceived their donors wishes to be, realigning themselves and their organization accordingly. However, without delving deeper into their 'self-representations' with regards to UKD (Parker, 2005a: 36), it is difficult to understand how or why this occurred. Exploring these next, I present in-depth accounts from key decision-makers within EWH, and from myself. These accounts highlight the complexity of peoples' 'self-representations' and demonstrate how they were marked with imaginary relations and ambivalent affects.

### **Engaging with UKD: In-depth accounts**

#### *Mark, the Head of Software Development*

Mark joined EWH from an IT sector job, and had less experience of international development than his fellow managers. He supervised the software development team, which was made up of both volunteers and paid staff members. He was closely involved in raising funding, and decision-making. The following excerpts are taken from an interview with Mark carried out at the end of the project, and from field notes.

To begin, Mark described why he came to work at EWH:

To help people. That is what I have always wanted to do; as long as I can remember I have always wanted to help people. (Mark, Interview, 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2005)

He went on to talk about how EWH was helping him to achieve this dream, and discussed how he was using his software development skills as part of this.

As mentioned above, we had all travelled to Kenya in order to meet people working in I.T. for development. The trip involved showing the software to potential users and asking them to tell us what they thought about it. Mark mentioned that he began to have doubts about the usefulness of the software on this trip.

I guess initially I was sceptical. (Mark, *ibid*)

However, the support of certain organizations made him feel better:

I disguised my scepticism for a while when it looked like the British Government was going to fund the project, which they did (via UKD), and I got very enthusiastic and worked up about it. (Mark, *ibid*)

Mark had ‘disguised’ his scepticism because of the support of UKD. He continued to discuss his engagement with this donor.

Any time that somebody big and important feels that you are worth paying money for, then it reinforces your self-belief and self-confidence. UKD have a lot of money and they are quite tight with it, quite selective... and they have a lot of important projects to fund. I mean they fund a lot of big organizations like Oxfam and the British Red Cross. These are all incredibly important things. (Mark, *ibid*)



For Mark, UKD was ‘big and important’. It had many high-profile projects to choose from, and yet it had chosen EWH. UKD viewed EWH as worthy, implying that this big donor saw itself reflected in the young organization; it affirmed that there was a similarity, a connection, between the two organizations. Drawing on Lacan, Driver (2005) notes that in relationships with others, we construct imaginary identifications in which we believe that others see us in ways that we would like to be seen, which signal our unity with them (2005: 1097). Here we see Mark’s perception of UKD as marked by this imaginary order of identification. He continues:

They are willing to not only give us money but to take the time to listen to us, see how we are going and advise us, and even be outright friendly about what we are doing, and helping us. It really justifies, or seems to justify, what you are doing. (Mark, *ibid*)

We see warmth in Mark’s account of how being recognized by the gaze of the donor provides him with a sense of self-belief: the ‘friendly’ experience is an affective one. In addition, the support of UKD described above led him to becoming enthused and ‘worked up’ about a problem he had previously been worried about. Parker discusses the kinds of ‘unconscious and unbidden investments’ that compel people to subject themselves to discourses of power (Parker, 2005a: 106). Given UKD’s and EWH’s relative positions within the symbolic, it appears that Mark is engaged in an imaginary identification, marked by subjection to this powerful discourse. Moreover, it is inscribed by affect.

This is not a simple account of imaginary identification however. Already in the excerpt above, we see how Mark is slightly unsure of UKD, the bestower of recognition and warmth. He slips slightly in making his case, ‘...it seems to justify’, indicating

uncertainty. Further doubts about UKD emerge as the interview continues:

In Kenya, I changed my views on development very much because I saw a lot of development projects that were so wasteful and pointless, that I started to think that these donors were in a sense, not exactly corrupt, but self-satisfying. They existed to spend a certain amount of money on things that made them feel good, and that make us feel good as a country. (Mark, *ibid*)

He wondered whether donors were subject to vested interests:

These organisations must be under pressure from governments to give more money: to certain countries, to certain types of projects, to certain things that help them to raise money in the future. (Mark, *ibid*)

That Mark was sceptical about UKD was clear from observing daily life at EWH. Over lunch for example, he would discuss the difficulties he sometimes faced when trying to reconcile the fact that he worked for an organization whose donor might be tied to government interests, with his own motives for joining EWH in order to ‘make a difference’ to those less well-off in the world. Mark’s engagement with UKD was paradoxical; he did not simply identify with it as an all-powerful entity that promised fulfilment and warmth, but was also openly critical about it. This apparent incongruity points to something missing in Mark’s representation of UKD: a lack within it (Stavrakakis, 2008). Moreover, just as warmth accompanies his evoking of UKD, so also does Mark appear somewhat hurt that his engagement with this all-knowing, benevolent organization might represent a fundamental contradiction with deeply held values that were, after all, his reason for joining EWH. This show of affect appears bittersweet (Butler, 2004). Overall for Mark, it appears that his engagement with his donor was marked with struggle and conflict.

*Me the researcher*

By September 2004, after a summer of volunteering at EWH and socializing with the team, I had begun to feel part of the organization. Around this time, I started to enquire about careers in the development sector, considering that I might in fact leave academia to join EWH. I felt a little insecure about my qualifications for doing this; an important criterion for gaining a post in development work is to have a number of years' experience as a volunteer, and I had only a few months. In addition, while working at EWH, I had sometimes heard disparaging remarks about the impractical nature of academic work, when compared to development activities, and felt somewhat insecure about how I was viewed by my would-be colleagues.

One warm day in London, I was sitting with the managers of EWH in a café across the road from the UKD building. The towering, glass-fronted offices could be seen through the window. We were planning for the meeting ahead, at which we would present our interim findings to UKD representatives, the people who had authorized our funding and to whom we would probably apply for more. We were nervous. Sipping our drinks, we discussed how we might best present and justify the work we were doing. John, the Chairman at EWH, turned to me and warned me to be ready. I might, he said, be called upon to describe some of the background research that I had prepared on common development methodologies, as part of our description of the upcoming visit to Kenya. This made me even more nervous:

We plan for the meeting ahead... I am asked to organize my response to any potential questions on the (methodology), so I make some quick notes in my diary. (Field notes, UKD Meeting, 3rd September 2004)

In the meeting itself, I was called on to speak. For ten minutes, I described different

methodologies and how these might be suitable. In doing so, I kept referring to the notes I had made. Later, back in my room, I revisited these scribbles:

I see now, re-reading, that I had included the words ‘participatory approaches’ and ‘livelihoods’ in the hope of glancing at them and possibly throwing them into the conversation. (Field notes, *ibid*)

Reflecting on this, I realized that these notes were completely out of character. Normally, I was very sceptical of such terminology, viewing it as part of the language of efficiency and economic rationalization that frequently hampered effective development by privileging a managerial view. Such ‘buzzwords’, I knew, often acted for the benefit of those versed in their use, and excluded groups who were not (Cornwall, 2007). In the comfort of my office at the university, I would not normally have used these terms, except to critique them. However, despite my acknowledged cynicism, there I was, furtively scribbling the words in order to use at the UKD board table. On reflection, I had done so from a sudden feeling of panic about how I would be perceived, and a need to be recognized favourably by UKD. I wanted to be acknowledged as a serious ‘development person’ by the organization that might grant me a legitimate place in this new and seemingly inaccessible world. The need sprang up somewhat suddenly; I had not been aware of the desire and yet there it was: erupting in this nervous moment. It appears that there was something of an imaginary identification occurring here, with UKD coming to represent a reflection of how I wished to be perceived. Driver discusses such moments of ‘delusion’ where a subject imagines that it can finally attach itself to another larger entity (2005: 1093). In my case, a flash of desire marked this moment, perhaps illustrating what Hook describes as part of the ‘technology of subjection’: the pulse of an affective charge as it temporarily grips the subject (2007: 270). This was marked with ambivalence; my notes show how

I felt shameful after the event, realizing that my actions had effectively reinforced aspects of the development world with which I disagreed. We can see that as with Mark, this imaginary identification went hand in hand with a cynical perspective on the sector represented by UKD: international development; it was similarly tinged with pleasure and with pain.

*Derek the fundraiser*

Derek, introduced above, had been part of the original team of three that founded EWH and prior to joining, had sold his own digital media company for a good price. His gentle charm helped to win over potential donors. As chief fundraiser in a sector in which money was scarce, Derek's role was vital. Working upstairs in our 'outhouse-office', his days were spent identifying new sources of funding and maintaining relationships with existing donors. During my time with EWH, this largely meant engaging with UKD, whose grant was very important to the young organization. His optimism was compelling: Derek came across as passionate and sincere in his belief that EWH would make a difference to those less well-off in the world.

Derek's engagement with UKD was of a different order to mine or Mark's. When EWH switched its position from a humanitarian organization focused on the 'poorest of the poor', to a development organization operating in Kenya, as described above, Derek commented simply:

We have to focus now on African schools, African medical centres, and that gets us the money. The money for general disaster relief is small whereas the pool of money for development work is... well its larger by several orders of magnitude. So our focus has (also) shifted there. (Derek, Interview, 30th April 2004)

In relation to the shift that his organization had had to make in response to UKD's wishes, Derek's attitude was quite practical. This was simply the way things were. His position was similar in relation to allegations that UKD's aims were coloured by the needs of the UK government. Here, Derek calmly acknowledges what he perceives to be the reality of development:

Obviously the aim of UKD is to help Britain. It doesn't say that but it must be. Looking at it in a very cold way, I mean it must be. What else is it there for? Is it purely there so that everyone could feel better about themselves? I doubt it. If UKD are promoting peace and stability, then that improves the economy. So if you create good links, good relationships and stability in a country, then you are likely to have good trade there. I think that UKD is there ultimately to help Britain in one way or another. (Derek, *ibid*)

Here again, Derek is somewhat standing back from the situation and speaking directly about how he perceives it to be, signalling that he is ignoring any sentiment or attachment in order to 'look at it in a very cold way'. He went on to speak about how his perspective on this issue had changed since beginning work with EWH two years previously:

Once we had found out about it, you could understand it, you could see more obviously. You mightn't agree with it but you could see that that is understandable. (Slight laugh) I think we have mellowed on (our independent position) a bit, because partly we say that we cannot be associated too closely with one government or the U.N. or whoever it might be, and I don't think that that is true; I think that that is unavoidable because our funding. Our funding can only come from a certain number of places. (Derek, *ibid*)

Here we see Derek engaging with UKD in a different way to my own or Mark's expressions; he is openly and clearly admitting an acceptance with the way things are. Derek appears to have moved on from a past imaginary relation, having 'mellowed on' previous declarations of being independent. He now presents himself as standing apart from the operation of power in the symbolic order represented by international development, and UKD's involvement in it, taking the kind of 'meta-perspective' described by Lacan (Vanheule et al., 2003: 327; Driver, 2005). He recognizes that there are vested interests at work, but that this is simply 'unavoidable'. Derek appears to seek recognition from the Other, for no other reason than that it guarantees a 'name': a place in the symbolic order of development:

We now have approval from the development sector, in our contract with UKD.

This will help us position ourselves exactly where we want to be - and give confidence to future donors. (Derek, Email, June 2004)

This is just one example of many, in which Derek acknowledges the importance of 'signalling', or 'signifying', in relation to UKD. Rather than imagining and hoping that EWH and its staff might be liked or admired by UKD as did Mark and I, Derek largely acknowledges that the relationship with the donor is useful in terms of the legitimization it provides, and the money it yields, with some exceptions. Overall, we see a different way of relating to UKD. Unlike Mark's, and my own, Derek's engagement is on a 'cruder' level, acknowledging his position within the symbolic and pointing out that EWH's position within the development sector is dependent on a link with UKD.

As with his colleagues, however, Derek's position is not straightforward. Again we see slips, this time in the little laugh that prefaces his explaining how he and his colleagues have 'mellowed': perhaps implying a slight embarrassment at the incongruity between

this new perspective and his previous idealistic one. After all, Derek had helped to write EWH's mission statement two years before, a document that stressed the importance of impartiality and independence. In addition to this slight slip, on closer examination, his account appears tinged with the kinds of imaginary and affective identifications he professes to avoid. For example, he describes a desire to excel in the eyes of UKD, and to achieve beyond its expectations:

Our aim is: if UKD give us a pound, we give them two pounds of work and we give them two pounds worth of impact. So every time we go back to them with our impact assessments, we have done far more than they imagined we possibly could for the money. (Derek, *ibid*)

Here we see something of an affective relation; UKD represents an entity that Derek actively wants to impress. This was similarly evident when, describing EWH's relationship with its donor to a third party, Derek enthuses:

We got (the funding) in record time! Which was very unusual. They like us a lot! (Field notes, October 2004)

In the above, the notion that UKD might 'like' EWH and see it as carrying out 'unimaginably' impressive work inscribes Derek's references to his donor, somewhat beyond the simple, practical desire to have UKD fund his organization.

Finally, in a post-research interview, I asked Derek when he had been happiest during the nine month project. His response began by invoking characteristic coldness in relation to his engagement with this aspect of the symbolic:

There were certain obvious moments where I felt very happy, such as, well to be completely crude about it, when the money came in. (Derek, Interview, 11<sup>th</sup> May



2005)

‘Being completely crude about it’, Derek again forecloses any impression of an imaginary, deluded relation with UKD. However, he goes on to note:

It wasn’t just the money coming in, but that we got recognition from really major donors, places which just are known to be difficult to get money from and that’s who funded us. So that felt good. (Derek, *ibid*)

Derek’s account is marked with ambivalence and contradiction. Denying any notion of being blinded by illusions in relation to UKD, we nonetheless see how UKD represents an entity that offers him a desired reflection of himself and his organization. It must be noted that while these apparent instances of an imaginary relation with UKD may well simply represent Derek’s strategic outlook as described above, we see affect here too: recognition from a major donor ‘felt good’.

### **Discussing the case**

The data presented above offers a brief glimpse into the ongoing play of power and recognition in this development sector workplace. It demonstrates how a Lacanian perspective can help us understand the ways in which people in organizations engage with power. I began by showing, from a ‘macro’ perspective, how staff at EWH responded to UKD, an important element in the world of development. The team shifted position and moved away from its carefully thought-out plan a number of times: from being a humanitarian organization to reinventing EWH as an international development one, from serving the ‘poorest of the poor’ to testing software in better-off Kenya, and from reporting on the project’s activities, to manipulating results in the hope of receiving future funding. Each of these moves was a response to what people at EWH perceived the wishes of UKD to be. Going on to focus on how staff members

communicated their engagement with this donor, I examined three peoples' accounts. In these, I paid attention to the movement of the signifier UKD, and how it appeared to validate peoples' views of themselves in various complex ways (Parker, 2005b). This tells us something of the 'structural determinations' that preside in this particular, local setting (Pavon-Cuellar, 2010), aspects of which were introduced above, and which I will now discuss in more detail.

At EWH, desires for recognition appear to fluctuate between the symbolic and the imaginary. Both Mark and I seem to hold something of an imaginary relation with UKD. It offers each of us a pleasing reflection of ourselves, a desired self-image. In both cases, this hope of fulfilment from UKD is articulated alongside expressions of self-doubt and insecurity about our positions in relation to development: Mark's stems from concerns about the usefulness of his software and the ethics of development, and mine involves a desire for a career in a sector in which I felt I was an outsider. In both cases, these had powerful effects. However, it must be noted that these identifications are by no means straightforward. In relation to Mark, it is simplistic to argue that his identifications with UKD are of an imaginary order alone, they also involve what appears to be a more direct engagement with the symbolic. Specifically, he acknowledges that EWH stands to gain practically from being recognized and taken seriously by UKD. Not only does the donor represent a source of desired reflection, it holds the potential to grant EWH an elevated status within the world of development: an important name in the eyes of others. This recognition appears closer to the kind of detached acknowledgement discussed in relation to Derek's account, in which the presence and influence of power structures are simply accepted. The point to note is that Mark's own engagement is neither on the plain of the imaginary nor the symbolic,

but fluctuating between the two. Moving to Derek's account, the latter position is most clear here; he appears able to stand back from the way power works in development, and discuss it in a more objective way. He acknowledges the ethical issues inherent to accepting funding from government-backed UKD and he clearly accepts the conflict in which this places his and EWH's original goals. The recognition that Derek seeks is of a strategic nature- he admits that the young EWH is in a precarious position within the sector, and therefore simply needs recognition from the well-known UKD: an element that has the power to signify. Again however, we see that Derek's account is not straightforward, but sometimes touches on an imaginary relation with UKD.

In terms of the political impact of these complex recognitions, both 'levels' of identification appear to have powerful effects. Desiring the image provided by UKD, Mark took decisions along with his colleagues that led to EWH altering its goals, as described earlier. He himself notes that he 'disguised' his scepticism as a result of the enthusiasm he felt, due to UKD's support. In turn, I silenced my doubts about the problems of using development sector terminology, and deployed these very terms in the presence of key donor representatives and managers of EWH, effectively reinforcing this aspect of international development discourse. Both instances highlight our subjection to UKD, this powerful influence over our world. We can see how recognition and power are inseparable: this dependency on the recognition of an important other locates us 'outside of ourselves' (Butler, 2004: 32), caught up in the matrix of power-knowledge relations that inscribe our working environment. These examples serve as illustrations of how the level of the psyche and the political are inextricably linked (Butler, 1997), and how Lacan's ideas can help us to understand the flow of power in particular organizational contexts.

### *Implications for studying organizations*

It must be noted that the analysis and discussion presented here relates to the local and particular setting of EWH (Symon, 2005). The aim of the study is to develop a richer view of one organization; its generalizability to other settings is not an explicit goal (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000: 1134, Geertz, 1973). Nonetheless, some insights may be relevant beyond the case. First, in relation to existing debates on power and subjection, an important observation involves the power of affect in this case study; the various forms of identification with UKD described here are marked with affect. My own reflections on dealing with UKD highlight how I experienced an immediate desire for a positive acknowledgement by this important donor. I was almost unable to do otherwise, needing to be admired and respected. Mark's account was full of warmth and fondness, and for Derek, UKD was the source of 'my happiest moments'. We desired to be the focus of the desire of the other, in this case, UKD. Stavrakakis (2008: 1054) notes that such desire marks both symbolic and imaginary engagements, and indeed this appeared at EWH, both in relation to the warmth of promised recognition from the donor, but also to the pleasure of being granted a name, and a place, within development.

Drawing similarly on Lacan, a number of authors have argued that an attention to affect in studies of subjection can complement our understanding of the social. For Hook in fact (2007: 258), scholars interested in power and subjection, who omit considerations of the psyche and affect, are missing a part of the picture, and he cites Nikolas Rose's work as an illustration. Butler refers to this inescapable desire for recognition as a 'passionate attachment' to power, and notes that such attachments are integral to the reproduction of discourse (Butler, 1997: 7). Methodologically, she argues, it is

important for observers to remain attentive to displays of emotion and passion in the settings we study; these help us to apprehend the ways in which our subjections to particular norms play out (Butler, 2004: 235). Indeed, it appears that we at EWH came to be ‘passionately attached’ to recognition from UKD, a passion that underscored both Mark’s and my need for UKD’s reflection of ourselves, and Derek’s desire for a symbolic place in international development. In the case of organization studies, while many scholars have, to date, studied power and subjection by drawing on Lacan’s work, few have placed affect at centre stage (Stavrakakis, 2008). This paper represents one such attempt.

Adding to this, what the case shows is that these passions appear to emerge fleetingly, marking certain moments. We only come to be aware of them in particular instances, as seen in Mark’s reflections on UKD, Derek’s response to receiving recognition, and my tense moment in London. Here, it is interesting to return to the idea of whether these passions are ‘interior’ to each of us, or whether they might be part of the overall workings of the structure of international development. As noted above, subjects are always-already located in the symbolic order, given that our ‘place’ in society is constructed in language by others, even before our birth (Stavrakakis, 2008). For Pavon-Cuellar, people are therefore ‘retroactively positioned’ by discourse; recognition is something of a mutually understood ‘pact’ that ‘precedes and determines the signified social reality’ (2010: 46, see also Parker, 2005b: 170). This means that neither power nor psychic development can be considered prior in this relationship; the subject is always-becoming (Harding, 2007; Pullen, 2006; Tyler & Cohen, 2008). In the case of EWH, above, it appears that our very desires and passions in relation to UKD are somewhat pre-empted by norms that already exist within international development: a

sector in which for example, vested interests can cause concern, and a young non-profit without an established name is in a precarious position. Perhaps therefore these norms were *constitutive* of how my colleagues and I engaged with UKD, and of the passions we experienced. This relates to Hook's (2007) idea that the presence of affect in social relations should not be seen as evidence of an interior space but rather forms part of a 'greater social whole' (2007: 270). Affect, or rather the 'broader affective technology of subjectivity' works through such moments of feeling. One implication of this study is therefore the idea that, in relation to discourses of power in the workplace, affect resides in the social. Rather than existing prior to formation by power, the subject is 'always becoming' and this becoming is marked by moments of affective subjection.

In addition to this theoretical insight, the findings suggest a practical point in relation to young organizations, particularly those working in sectors in which reputation is important. At first glance, it appears that members of the start-up organization EWH are subject to the whims and wishes of UKD, albeit in different ways. Perhaps however it is simplistic to assume this based on a relatively short period of observation. It could be argued instead that the accounts presented here represent a story of an organization 'growing up', albeit in a messy and conflicted way, as people struggle with their engagements with international development and its important other, UKD. In Derek's 'little laugh', we see hints of the past failure of an imaginary identification with UKD. Similarly, Mark's account involves struggle. For Driver (2005) and others, these failures of identification, and the conflicts that ensue, represent an invaluable experience for the subject (see also Vanheule et al., 2003). They accompany the moment in which the dream of an imagined fullness is given up, in favour of accepting a fragmented, conflicted self that is more resonant with how people experience the world. The process

is creative (Driver, 2008), as it enables the subject to forge his or her own engagement with the world, somewhat more aware of the lure of illusory identifications. If so, it could be that these complex, contradictory engagements are valuable for a young organization in its formative years. The people in charge of EWH appear to be at different stages of moving beyond an imaginary relation with their donor. This process involves critical reflection about one's position, and about whether UKD could ever really offer a final, stable status. It entails a gradual realization of the internal contradictions within the world of development, and consideration of how to deal with this flawed Other. Perhaps, indeed, members of EWH were developing new positions in the fissures between those offered. For example, when the final UKD project report was being written as described above, Derek demanded that its authors omit the kinds of 'development speak' to which I myself was susceptible on my visit to the London offices. When someone recommended that we 'talk the UKD talk' in the report in order to impress the donor, he responded in an atypically passionate way, 'No! We are going to do things *better* than they were done before' (Field notes, June 2004). He went on to speculate about how EWH could, and should, move beyond the restrictions of development sector work, and forge its own language.

Ultimately, perhaps such struggles represent productive attempts by subjects to 'move beyond' certain illusory identifications that are, finally, debilitating (Pavon-Cuellar, 2010; Parker, 2005a; 2005b; Vanheule et al., 2003). In this way, complex, affect-laden recognition appears both to subject people to power but also to enable them, as it facilitates a negotiation among new positions. As noted earlier, however, the situation is never as straightforward as this; we are always somewhat caught up in imaginary identifications. Indeed, their presence, and fallibility, are something of a condition of

living: a structural impossibility that marks human existence (Driver, 2008: 189). Under this view, perhaps Mark, myself and even Derek remain in the thrall of the Other, and the ‘struggle’ described here is merely an illusion that supports this. Perhaps notions of attaining a ‘meta-perspective’ are merely fictional fantasies that ultimately reinforce the position of UKD and discourses pertaining to international development. As others have noted, such fantasies are powerful in helping the subject to accept and live with perceived flaws in the Other’s discourse (Fotaki, 2009; Stavrakakis, 2008). Rather than assuming the position of the researcher who ‘knows’, I leave these questions open and hope that the perspectives presented here prove relevant for young organizations in similar situations: working in a sector in which reputation is key.

A final contribution of this paper is a methodological one. While in-depth, ethnographic approaches are common in organization studies, ones that draw on the concepts above are not. This study highlights the complementarity of the two perspectives. An ethnographic approach is often chosen where a ‘thick description’ of a social setting is required (Geertz, 1973). Here, this was clearly valuable as it enabled observations of what occurred at EWH to be contrasted against peoples’ own accounts. Moreover, aspects of the study could only have been gained from a person closely involved in the organization. These include the ways in which Mark informally discussed his cynicism as part of day-to-day life, along with Derek’s comments on writing the final donor report. Another valuable feature of ethnography relates to its ability to represent the complexity and contradiction that often characterizes peoples’ lived experiences (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Kondo, 1990: 74; Watson, 1994). Other methods can hide, or at least downplay, these aspects (Knights & Willmott, 1999). Lacan’s ideas are particularly well-placed to further enhance this feature; the nature of



the analytic approach is that it inevitably yields representations that are structured by incoherence and disagreement (Parker, 2005b; Pavon-Cuellar, 2010). In the case presented here, for example, apparent inconsistencies were clearly in evidence, both between different people, and within a single person's narrative. Moreover, the affective attachments to UKD that inscribed these accounts appeared in conflict; the donor was variably referred to warmly as an entity that provided desired recognition, but also as one that stood to wrench people from their long-held beliefs. Rather than addressing such discrepancies in the usual way: as a footnote implying that they represent an inconvenient obstacle to the production of a falsely coherent story, the Lacanian-inspired analysis demands that they are brought to the fore (Parker, 2005a; 2005b; Pavon-Cuellar, 2010). Under this approach, emergent 'states of disagreement' can usefully be explored in order to see what we might learn about the relation between power and subjectivity (Butler, 1998; Driver, 2005; Pavon-Cuellar, 2010; Parker, 2005a). In this way, Lacan's ideas further enhance an already valuable feature of ethnographic methods.

In addition to foregrounding inconsistencies, this approach aims to assist with two problems that persist in qualitative research: the over-reliance on subjective meanings, and the issue of researcher power. First, qualitative data collection in social research tends to focus on subjective meanings; it involves reporting on peoples' phenomenological interpretations of the world they inhabit (Geertz, 1973; Watson, 1994: 6). Given the fact that we are continually beset by illusory engagements with the world we encounter, however, this can pose a problem (Parker, 2005a: 108). For Parker, the 'research findings' that emerge from much qualitative research frequently relay little more than an imaginary relationship with the social world, both on the part of the

respondent, and of the researcher (2005b: 167). In contrast, for reasons presented above, a Lacanian approach emphasizes that there is little to be directly ‘revealed’ by an analysis that is based exclusively on subjects’ imaginary accounts (Driver, 2005). Rather than work solely at the level of expressed meanings when studying peoples’ experience of a particular social situation, therefore, it is important to remain attentive to the level of the symbolic (Parker, 2005a; b; Pavon-Cuellar, 2010). Of course this is never fully possible as all representations are somewhat imaginary, but the Lacanian researcher can attempt to avoid taking accounts at face value, downplaying the imaginary where possible (Pavon-Cuellar, 2010). This informed the ‘macro-level’ overview of the operation of the signifier UKD, presented at the beginning of the paper.

A second problem that this approach aims to help with, is the issue of power in the research relationship. Qualitative researchers are criticized for occupying an unfair position of domination (Wray-Bliss, 2003), exerting ultimate control over which bits of data are selected for ‘collection’, for example, and which insights constitute ‘findings’. This criticism particularly relates to ethnographic work, given its unstructured and subjective nature (Geertz, 1973). To compensate, researchers are required to be ‘reflexive’: to write openly about the details of the research engagement and one’s influence upon the setting (Van Maanen, 1979). Even so, reflexivity is seen as problematic; it is difficult to achieve in a meaningful way, and in some cases, acts as a panacea that ultimately reinforces the problematic hierarchy between researcher and researched (Pullen, 2006). The power imbalance persists. Here again, Lacan’s work is helpful. As noted above, he sees imaginary relations as inscribing all forms of interaction. In clinical psychoanalysis, for example, the patient tends to develop an imaginary response to the analyst, inscribed by past experiences, relationships with

others and so on (Lacan, 2006d). The patient is often seen to place the analyst in a particular position: as expert, or ‘subject supposed to know’ (Parker, 2004: 76). In turn, imaginary relations underscore the analyst’s own response; she is tempted to accept this status, and assume that she does in fact possess the knowledge to diagnose and ‘name’ the problem at hand (Parker, 2005b: 177). Developed in the clinic, this concept of transference can usefully inform social research (Stavrakakis, 2008). Awareness of transference implies acknowledging how the imaginary realm emerges in different settings, for example in the organizational research engagement (Parker, 2005a: 120; 2004: 77).

Returning to ethnographic approaches to the study of organizations, acknowledging this relation helps the researcher to steer away from being assigned a status of ‘knower’ by others, and from assuming it. For example, as the clinical analyst attempts to leave particular issues open for interpretation (Parker, 2004: 77), so the researcher can try to avoid discursive closure in her communications, and resist making pronouncements about the situation. In the discussion of the relevance of this case for other young organizations, above, I avoided imposing closure on emergent questions around the nature of power and resistance at EWH. In addition, acknowledging my own enthrallment with imaginary identifications, I elaborated upon these experiences within the research findings.

### **Concluding remarks**

This paper highlighted how the approach adopted for the study yielded some interesting insights that would not have been available otherwise. Drawing on Lacan’s work to analyze an ethnographic case study enabled a nuanced theorization of how peoples’

identifications are infused with affect, and how powerful organizations are implicated in this. Overall, the case presented here highlights the ambivalent passions that underscore our identifications with particular aspects of the social world; it points to the importance of researching the affective, painful ‘tugs of war’ that embed us in the reproduction of particular forms of power in our organizations.

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1. Individuals’ and organizations’ names have been changed to protect anonymity.

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