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Volvo for life?

An Investigation into Identity Work at Volvo Cars

Torslanda

Abstract

Title: Volvo for life? –An Investigation into Identity Work at Volvo Cars Torslanda

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Purpose: The purpose of our study is to identify regulatory discursive influences on identity work as well as to describe different self-identities of shop floor workers at Volvo Cars Torslanda.

Methodology: The methodology comprises a hermeneutical reading of the empirical material as well as the assumption of a moderate social constructivism.

Conceptual framework: The chosen conceptual framework is the identity regulation model put forward by Alvesson and Willmott (2002).

Empirical foundation: The empirical material was generated by means of semi-structured interviews on site with workers, HR representatives and union officials.

Summary of the findings: From the empirical material it was possible to create a matrix configuration along two dimensions: affiliation towards Volvo and locus of control. Based on this matrix and the discernible discursive influences it was feasible to describe four types of self-identities. These four types of self-identity were discussed and evaluated. Additionally the findings were contemplated against the backdrop of Labour Process Theory which accentuated the need for a dialectical approach to the discussion of labour processes.

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Table of Abbreviations

| | |
|--------|---------------------------|
| ed(s). | editor(s) |
| et al. | et alia |
| HR | Human Resources |
| HRM | Human Resource Management |
| LP | Labour Process |
| LPT | Labour Process Theory |
| p(p.) | page(s) |
| UAW | United Auto Workers |
| USA | United States of America |
| VCC | Volvo Car Corporation |
| VCT | Volvo Cars Torslanda |
| vs. | versus |

1. Studying Identity Work at Volvo Cars Torslanda

“If a man [sic] spends at least a third of his life in direct contact with a mass production environment why shouldn't we consider as important (to him and society) the hours of living time he spends inside the factory – as important and valuable for example as the product he [sic] produces which is consumed outside the factory? [...] Man [sic] consumes in his leisure but fulfils himself not only in his leisure but in his work. Is our mass production environment making this fulfilment possible?” (Walker and Guest, 1952)

Even though in the middle of the last century the conditions surrounding assembly line work were somewhat different than these days, the research question put forward by Walker and Guest seems as relevant today as it was back then. The basic essence of their question underpins as well as informs our study and we aspire to contribute some insights to their general musings over fifty years ago by studying identity work and identity construction of workers at Volvo Cars Torslanda (VCT) in Göteborg, Sweden.

1.1 Background – From Mass Production to Lean Management

As opposed to the 1950ies, work organizations in present times face many challenges stemming from a fast-changing and increasingly complex global business environment. These conditions, it is argued, can leave their mark on organizational structures. Many scholars claim that the present era is characterized by the demise of conventional hierarchical work structures based on the division of labour in favour of flexible adaptable work designs (Child, 2005; Sennett, 2006). Others are doubtful about these conclusions and claim the persistence of the standardization of labour processes disguised in various forms of bureaucracy (Alvesson and Thompson, 2005). These disputes are particularly mirrored in the car manufacturing industry which underwent drastic changes over the course of the last century notably with regard to production systems and related work designs. It seems that working in a car manufacturing plant during the post-war years was a rather unpleasant experience as Milkman (1997) states in her study about shop floor workers in an US car manufacturing plant:

“The combination of mindless, monotonous work, unrelenting regimentation, and inhumane supervision made the workers feel like prisoners [...]” (p. 27).

The increased competition from Japanese car manufacturers and declining sales led to a drastic transformation of the industry during the 1980ies. It was the advent of the Japanese lean production systems which was rapidly adopted throughout the auto industry (Muffatto, 1999).

In a nutshell, lean production systems aim at reducing superfluous work processes and provide workers with greater autonomy in their everyday work (Womack et al., 1990).¹ At the same time, by claiming to “push responsibility down the organizational ladder” (Womack et al., 1990, p. 14) the need of increased identification and loyalty of the workers with the organization is seen as a fundamental variable. Drawing on the Japanese role model attention to a distinct corporate culture and a normatively driven “people approach” is proposed (Womack et al., 1990). Workers are supposed to be controlled by values and beliefs of the organization rather than economic incentive or coercion furthermore traditional, direct forms of control are sought to be replaced by managing the hearts and minds of the employees (Kunda, 1992).²

Despite the efforts to alter the working conditions in the car manufacturing plants, it is still a monotonous routinized work experience. This view is, as anticipated, not supported by the advocates of the lean management philosophy. They claim that the workers under a lean management production regime will face new challenges and be able to contribute to improvements in the production processes which will consequently reduce the monotony of assembly line work (Womack et al., 1990, pp. 100-103). Remarks in the empirical material of this study and other scholars, however, contest this claim by pointing to the continuing standardization of tasks and its inherent Tayloristic principles (Altmann, 1995; Alvesson and Thompson, 2005; Berggren, 1992; Milkman, 1997).

Hence, in the potentially conflicting areas of, on the one hand rationalized, monotonous assembly line work and on the other hand the explicitly expressed wish of VCT’s management to increase the identification of the worker’s with the organization³, the fundamental question arises how the workers actually cope with the management’s efforts to establish favourable identities towards the organization.

¹ See chapter 4 for a detailed description of lean manufacturing.

² Due to pressures from a satiated labor market and relatively small differences in wages across sectors, Sweden had an even higher need for an “anthropocentric production systems” (Berggren, 1992, p. 11). At the beginning of the 1990s Volvo developed innovative production systems at the plants in Kalmar and Udevalla. At the latter the most revolutionary development in form of autonomous workgroups assembling whole cars at so called non-moving “docks” was introduced (Ellegård, 1995). At VCT those concepts were discussed but never fully implemented.

³ See chapter 4 for a detailed description of the cultural change program “Our Tomorrow” at VCC.

1.2 Previous Research and Aim of the Study

The interest for the subjectivity of workers can be traced back to the debate surrounding Labour Process Theory (LPT) which aimed at explicating the properties of the labour process and illuminating the triad of resistance, control and subjectivity in work organizations. The earlier strands of the theory (Braverman, 1974) assumed the dominance of objective structures in the labour processes and completely disregarded human agency. This was criticised by many scholars and a debate about the “missing subject” in the labour process ensued (Thompson, 1990). The quest for inserting the missing subject is an ongoing debate among scholars and it also underpins our study at VCT.

In addition to research explicitly occupied with LPT there are various other studies examining identity which have mainly investigated the experiences of employees in managerial positions (Andersson, 2005; Carroll and Levy, 2008; Watson, 1994) focusing on knowledge intensive firms (Alvesson and Robertson, 2006; Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003; Covalski et al., 1998; Ibarra, 1999; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003) or professional and public services (Kuhn, 2006; Thomas and Davies, 2005). Other studies, however, have centred specifically on the experiences of manual workers on the shop floor (Casey, 1995; Collinson, 1992; Lupton, 1963; Milkman, 1997). Milkman (1997) for instance focuses on the car industry and the impact of production changes in a particular plant in the US. She describes the journey of different workers through the dramatic changes at the plant. She does not focus explicitly on identity work but remains on a more general level. A big part in her study is devoted to the role of the auto industry union (UAW) in the transition of the car plant. Collinson (1992) and Casey (1995) adopt a framework inspired by post-structuralism and the dominance of discourses to analyze the experiences of shop floor workers. Casey (1995) focuses thereby on the effects of the conditions surrounding a post-industrial era on the worker’s sense of self whereas Collinson (1992) concentrates on gender and power asymmetries and their respective effects on identities. A recent study by Patriota and Lanzara (2006) examines the institutionalization of identities in the process of establishing and constructing a green site automotive plant.

Although there is an array of studies concerning identity, as shown above, we are unaware of any study which has been specifically focusing on the process of identity work of assembly line workers and the discursive regulation fuelling it. Moreover, there seems to be no study

attempting to grasp distinctive self-identities of blue collar workers. Hence we aspire to close this identified knowledge gap. To that end the study aims at providing general interpretations about regulatory influences on identity work and the establishment of self-identities. Another goal is to illuminate the present-day experience of shop floor workers at a car manufacturing plant, specifically at VCT. In addition, the findings seek to contribute to the debate surrounding Labour Process Theory (LPT) and provide some additional observations. To that end particular research questions emerge inducing a correlative disposition, which will be dealt with in the next section.

1.3 Research Questions and Disposition

Against the backdrop of the study's aims, two broad research questions emerge which will guide the research endeavour:

- How do the regulatory efforts of the management affect identity work?
- Are there distinct workers' self-identities based on the regulatory efforts of the management?

To provide informative insights to these research questions the following structure of the study seems apt. At the outset theories related to identity construction will be discussed in chapter 2. To provide a structured overview over the vast field of approaches to identity in organizations the debate surrounding LPT seems an appropriate framework to use. Based on the presented ideas about identity in organizations the conceptual framework of the study, the identity regulation model proposed by Alvesson and Willmott (2002), will be described. Chapter 3 discusses the adopted methodology by firstly presenting the epistemological and ontological underpinnings of the study followed by a description and an evaluation of the applied method, namely interviews. Having laid this essential groundwork chapter 4 provides an analysis of identity work. To that end a matrix structure, which emerged out of the empirical material, is proposed capturing self-identities along two dimensions. Subsequently this model is elaborated on by relating the empirical material to it as well as discussing the content in detail in chapter 5. In addition the findings will be put into the context of LPT and possible contributions are discussed. The discussion is rounded off by a critical evaluation of the findings as well as the overall approach of the study. Chapter 6 summarizes the main findings, suggests practical implications and proposes further research areas.

2. Approaches to Identity – Theorizing about the Subject in Labour Process Theory

In the following section an overview of theories and concepts related to self-identities in organizations is presented. This serves on the one hand as a way to establish an acquaintance with important concepts but also as a means of an informed justification for the choice of a conceptual framework of the thesis. The account will have to focus on particular aspects since there is an array of concepts, theories and models relating to identity (Gecas, 1982; Hammersley and Treseder, 2007). To present such a targeted account, approaches related to manufacturing work processes seem to be the most suitable choice as it will be shown in the following.

2.1 In Search of the “Missing Subject” in the Labour Process

Identity⁴ construction in organizations and work processes cannot be satisfactorily examined and analyzed without considering influences of management to manipulate identity work (control) or reactions of the employees to these efforts (resistance) (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Bearing these conditions in mind the intense discussion surrounding LPT seems an appropriate leitmotif for approaching the complex issue of identity. There is no generally accepted theory about labour processes but rather different perspectives in the debate emphasizing distinct aspects (Thompson, 1990).⁵ Yet, the central, closely intertwined notions of the labour process debate are management control, worker resistance and the relationship with the workers' identity (Edwards, 2007).

Drawing on the vast amount of literature on this subject it is possible to roughly categorize two opposite “camps”: one that emphasizes structural constraints and is built mainly on Marxist ideas and another which stresses individuality, human agency and subjective consciousness. The discussion surrounding LPT mirrors the wider debate in sociology concerned with the question if reality is determined by objective causal structures or human agency (Giddens, 1979; Knights and Willmott, 1989; Storey, 1985). The following discussion is inspired rather than determined by these opposite poles and intends to provide an overview of the concepts surrounding identity construction in organizations. It aims at facilitating a

⁴ For a detailed discussion of identity see chapter 2.2.

⁵ The labour process is not synonymous with occupation or work. Understood in its original sense put forward by Braverman (1974) the labour process is the mode of the production that produces surplus value. He was thus concerned with the valorization of work and the ensuing struggle and possible exploitation.

profound understanding of the interplay between the various influences in identity construction.

The origins of the discussion and the increased attention among scholars from various disciplines for labour processes can be traced back to the ideas put forward by Braverman (1974) (Littler, 1990; Spencer, 2000). Braverman argued:

“The mode of production we see around us, the manner in which labour processes are organized and carried out is the product of the social relations we know as capitalist” (p. 23, emphasis removed).

This quote illustrates the notion of the inherent determinism and hegemony of social structures in the labour process. Braverman concluded that there is a continuous de-skilling of workers as the complexity of production increases and the division of labour is enhanced. The claimed increase in the average skill of the worker does therefore not take place (p. 425). He revitalized the “objective” notion of class struggle, the degradation and alienation of the worker which

“are for *bourgeois social science* artefacts of consciousness and can be studied only as they manifest themselves in the mind of the subject population” (p. 28 emphasis added).

Relating his ideas to identity construction in organizations the formation of a distinct worker’s identity is impossible since it is superimposed by the capitalist system leaving no space to manoeuvre. The orthodox view on the labour process

“eschews consideration of working class consciousness and organization in favour of studying how the working class is shaped by the process of capital accumulation” (Willmott, 1997, p. 1341).

Naturally, these provocative ideas initiated criticism and contestation among scholars. One main criticism, which Braverman himself anticipated, was the fact that the neglect of subjectivity would “hopelessly compromise the study in the eyes of some of those who float in the conventional stream of social science. (p. 27)” And indeed the “conventional floaters” heavily criticized his ideas (Armstrong, 1989; Knights and Willmott, 1989; O’Doherty and Willmott, 2000, 2001; Storey, 1985; Thompson, 1989; Willmott, 1997). The main thrust of criticism was directed towards the total disregard of subjectivity in the labour process.

On the other end of the structure-agency continuum lies then the individual capable of acting completely independent of inequality, class struggle or capitalist control issues (Willmott, 1997). Subjects are depicted as free agents able to decide over their sale of labour power. Human agency becomes the dominating force in the labour process. Thus the labour process itself can be said to be largely socially constructed by the individuals and determined by human agency (Storey, 1985, p. 205). These principles and ideas are to various degrees taken into account in (soft) approaches to Human Resource Management (HRM).⁶ Furthermore these notions are also inherent in economic approaches such as principal-agency theory or transactions cost theory whereby context-dependent variables are completely blacked out for the benefit of rational calculated behaviour in the work process (Jensen and Meckling, 1976; Spencer, 2000, p. 225; Williamson, 1975). In contrast to the notion of the “homo oeconomicus” other concepts draw on a psychological approach such as social identity theory (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Tajfel, 1981). Connected are all these approaches through the acceptance of human agency rather than structural determinism.

As mentioned above, it is not satisfactory to assume the totality of human agency and entirely neglect structural constraints. The search for the “missing subject” while paying attention to structural constraints became thus one of the focal points of the discussion around labour processes (Thompson, 1990). It seems that the dualism of structure and agency has endured over the course of the debate even if some attempts have been made to reconcile the positions, scholars tended to fall back on either one of the poles (O'Doherty and Willmott, 2001). It is not fruitful in our view however to reduce the struggle in the labour process and the question of control, resistance and identity to two extreme positions. It is necessary to shift the attention to an approach which overcomes this dualism which has been attempted by some scholars (Du Gay, 1996; Ezzamel et al., 2001; Knights and Willmott, 1989; O'Doherty and Willmott, 2000, 2001; Willmott, 1997).⁷

⁶ Approaches to HRM can be distinguished into hard and soft approaches which vary in their respective view of human nature. Hard approaches to HRM view employees as means to an end whereas soft approaches depict them as valuable assets (Legge, 2005). Hard approaches to HRM come close to the idea of commodification of employees and Tayloristic management control as described by Braverman (1974).

⁷ For a critical evaluation see Armstrong (2008).

One influential concept, inspired by Foucault⁸, was put forward by Knights and Willmott (1989). It seeks to incorporate the “missing subject” into the labour process by not neglecting objective constraints. To that end the authors draw on the notion of power proposed by Foucault. He saw power as dispersed in social relations rather than an objective thing held by people. Power is closely related to knowledge and this tandem exerts its constitutive influences on individuals’ identities (Mills, 2003). This subjective constitution of individuals through power/ knowledge can be used to explain labour processes in a different way. Workers are not suppressed by the power deriving from their predetermined position in a capitalist system but their identity is constituted through disciplinary mechanisms such as power/ knowledge strategies. However the worker’s subjectivity and his/her related identity is not cemented as Knights and Willmott (1989) state that:

“[...] our reflexivity exerts a highly conservative effect, an effect that is exploited by those whose own identity is most strongly invested in, and dependent upon, the reproduction of relations of power which bestow upon them the material and symbolic privileges. [...] On the other hand, precisely because our subjectivity is open, any solidified sense of identity is vulnerable to disconfirmation.” (p. 542)

This concurs to some extent with the notion of “ontological security” proposed by Giddens (1991). Individuals have to cope with the anxieties and insecurities stemming from the vast possibilities of modern times they reflect upon. They seek a stable identity but are nevertheless prone to identity disruptive influences. Thus even if identities are produced by power/ knowledge strategies there remains an emancipatory capability to resist. Knights and Willmott (1989) reject the notion of a deprivation of an inner essence but rather see it as the “malfunction” of a power strategy in disciplinary action resulting in a negative perception by the employee.

In simple terms the labour process could be said to be determined by subjectifying structures such as power/ knowledge strategies but these do not pose a cemented structure and can be challenged by the reflexive capability of the worker. In this respect the worker’s subjectivity is brought into the labour process by acknowledging the possibility for emancipation on a micro-level. (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992).

⁸ The use of Foucauldian ideas is a debated topic among scholars. See Newton (1998), Thompson and Ackroyd (1995), Alvesson and Kärreman (2000a) and Fairclough (2001).

As Newton (1998) observes:

“From a Foucauldian perspective, the dualism between the subject and 'objective' structures is misplaced, since the subject herself is not some independent, bounded and fixed unity, but, instead, is intimately bound to power/ knowledge relations which *traverse* both subjects and (what are conventionally seen as) social structures.” (p. 418 emphasis added)

These general and abstract ideas of language driven influences on subjectivity and identity construction underpin and inform the conceptual framework of the thesis. This more practically oriented framework will be presented in detail in the following section.

2.2 Identity Regulation, Identity Work and Self Identities

Identity construction in organizations has increasingly gained interest and importance over the last decades as the present times are characterized by fluidity, increased social connectedness and a greater instability of selves (Gergen, 1991; Giddens, 1991). These developments leave their mark on the individual's struggle for a coherent self. In organizational settings employees become more and more susceptible to managerial “manipulation” of identity constructs. Against this background Alvesson and Willmott (2002) devise a model which aims at elucidating the process of managerially induced identity work in organizations. They emphasize the constitutive nature of discourses circulating within and outside the organization which fuel employees' identity building. Discourses are understood as a means of structuring the social world as well as informing social practices through the use of a particular form of language (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000b; Fairclough, 2001). Based on this view Alvesson and Kärreman (2000b) go on to systematize different positions within the study of discourse along two dimensions: the meaning of discourses (how much impact does it have on people's meanings) and the range of discourses (should they be studied locally or on a global level). With regard to the meaning of discourse Alvesson and Willmott (2002) avoid the notion of a omnipotent ability of a “muscular” managerial discourses to shape employee's identity.

“Organizational members are not reducible to passive consumers of managerially designed and designated identities. Nor do we assume or claim that the organization is necessarily the most influential institution in identity defining and managing processes.” (p. 621).

Managerial identity regulation refers to the practices in the organization that have a direct or indirect bearing on the identity work of employees. Examples of these regulatory efforts are for instance HRM instruments and practices, cultural change initiatives or organizational

development programs. The authors provide nine possible modes of identity regulation summarized in table 2-1.⁹

| Focus | Organizing Practice | | |
|---|--|---|---|
| <i>The Employee</i> (employee is directly targeted) | Defining employees directly by using certain characteristics or titles (e.g. through appraisals) | Defining other individuals in a manner that enhances the self-identity of the employee | |
| <i>Action Orientation</i> (defining appropriate work orientations) | Providing specific motives for the employees by stressing for instance instrumental motives (pay, career) or social motives (teamwork, flat hierarchy) | Devising stories imbued with strong morality and values to provide a sense of superior morality by adopting “the right value” (e.g. stories about charismatic founders of the organization) | Providing specific skills and knowledge which define the employee (e.g. management training in different areas) |
| <i>Social relations</i> (targeting the feeling of belonging and difference of the employee) | Categorizing and defining groups and affiliation which divides roughly into “us” and “them” | Hierarchical positioning of employees | |
| <i>The Scene</i> (referring to the context of the organization) | Defining the rules of conduct in the company | Setting the context by pointing to the outside development (e.g. market situation) | |

Table 2-1 Modes of Identity Regulation following Alvesson and Willmott (2002)

Alvesson and Willmott go on to explain and describe three interrelated patterns or “sources of input” of identity regulation: managerial, cultural-communitarian and quasi-autonomous. The

⁹ These modes are used to depict processes of regulation and shed light on complex organizational processes which means the distinction serves analytical purposes. The different modes might contradict, reinforce or overlap each other in organizational reality (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002, p. 632).

managerial relates to management theory and efforts in the corporation to provide employees with a sense of self. Cultural-communitarian sources of identity regulation find their roots in the wider social and cultural environment in which managerial efforts of identity regulation take place. Quasi-autonomous patterns of identity regulation refer to the emancipatory space of the individual as it was also elaborated on by Knights and Willmott (1989). The individual retains a sense of emancipatory potential in the midst of various discursive influences and might thus be in parts unaffected by managerial discourses.

The susceptibility of employees to managerial regulatory efforts results in *identity work* which means that

“ [...] people are continuously engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a precarious sense of coherence and distinctiveness” (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002, p. 626).

In other words identity work can be described as the search for the individual for closure and the reduction of anxiety induced by modern times (Giddens, 1991).

The outcome of identity work is a precarious *self-identity*. Self-identity refers to a discursively and reflexively created sense of self. Casey (1995) states:

“[...] the self is a compilation of processes and constituent events, both conscious and unconscious. A sense of self provides an agency, continuity and coherence over time. There is no “hard core” or unified, monad self [...] but there is a sense of identity and personness that is socially acquired and recognized.” (p. 23).

In her view on identity the author thus points to the temporary as well as the discursively constructed nature of the identity. This sense of self or self-identity acts as the answer to the question “who am I” and by implication “how should I act” (Alvesson, 2004, p.189). Identities are commonly characterized by multiplicity; that is the existence of different competing and shifting self-identities of an individual (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003).¹⁰

The whole model by Alvesson and Willmott (2002) with its linkages is summarized in the following figure 2-1.

¹⁰ There are other ways of conceptualizing identity. For an overview see Hammersley and Treseder (2007) or Alvesson et al. (2008).

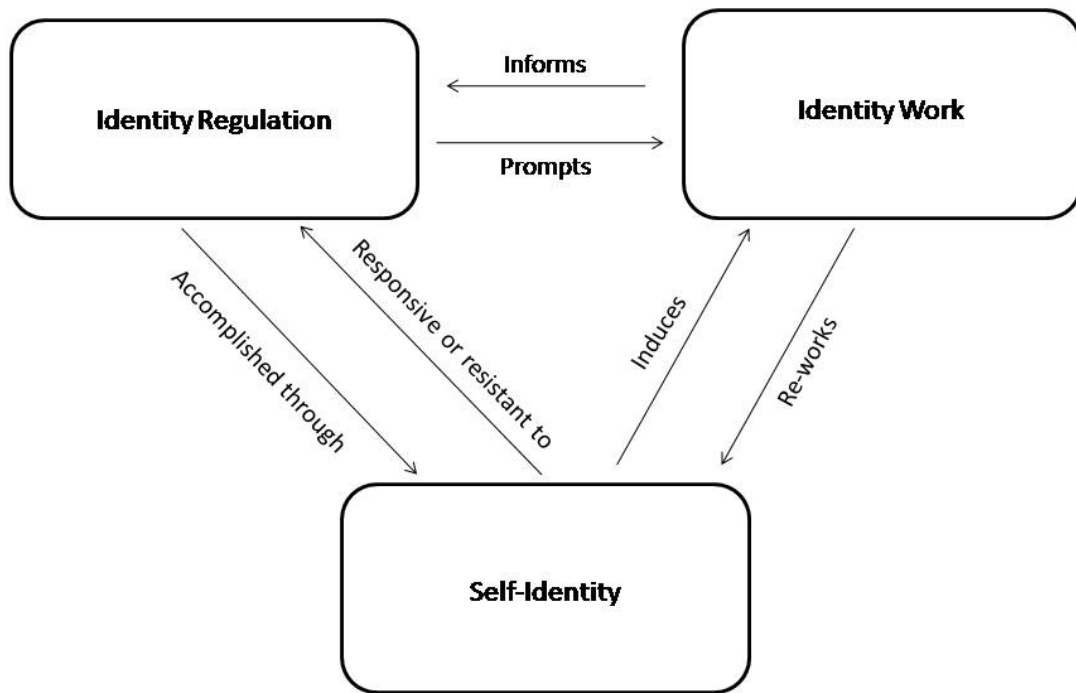


Figure 2-1 Identity Regulation, Identity Work and Self-Identity (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002, p. 627)

As stated at the beginning of this chapter in relation to the debate around LPT, identity is closely intertwined with resistance and control. These different facets are condensed and consolidated as well as connected to each other in the framework presented above by Alvesson and Willmott (2002). It is for this reason that this model of identity regulation seems apt to be employed as the conceptual framework underpinning the following analysis of identities at VCT. The conceptual framework functions as a guiding device and as will be made explicit in the following description of the methodological approach the aim of the study is not to verify or falsify the assumptions of the conceptual framework but is rather inspired by its ideas and assumptions. This needs further elaboration and for that reason the methodological approach of the study is elucidated in the following chapter.

3. Methodological Considerations – Understanding the socially constructed

Methodology is concerned with the scientific approach to a research question (Schnell et al., 1999, p. 48). This mainly comprises epistemological and ontological considerations. In the following these positions connected with the study at VCT will be described and discussed. With regard to epistemology the emphasis is based on understanding phenomena rather than explaining them. This refers to a hermeneutic approach. The hermeneutic approach is discussed in detail and is followed by a description of the abductive principle inherent in reflexive methodology. This serves to augment the hermeneutical position and adds further meta-theoretical strands to the epistemology on which the study is based. With regard to the study's ontological underpinning the concept of a moderate social constructivist approach is introduced. Finally, the chosen method, namely, interviews will be described and evaluated.

3.1 A Reflexive Approach

There is a vast amount of differing concepts and theories about the appropriate way to approach the study of organizations (Turner, 2006). The main points in these debates concern on the one hand the way knowledge is generated about organizational reality (epistemology) and on the other hand the essence or state-of-being of the organization itself (ontology).¹¹

The study of identity work on the shop floor at VCT calls for a methodology supportive of a “thick” account of organizational life. To create such a “thick” account the emphasis must be placed on understanding and interpreting the meanings of social action (Geertz, 1973). Knowledge should therefore be based on the result of interpretations of the actions of agents in a social world which varies according to their subjective frame of reference. The *epistemological position* could consequently be characterized as the understanding rather than the explanation of phenomena. This position is related to the concept of “Verstehen” (Schwandt, 2000). The notion of “Verstehen” is anti-positivist or anti-naturalist as it negates the existence of objective knowledge based on rational insight and assumptions as well as the transferability of methods from the natural science to the social science (Martin, 2000, p. 42).

¹¹ The classification and labeling of these approaches are far from clear-cut. Sandberg and Targama (2007) make the overall distinction between rationalistic and interpretative approaches whereas Bryman and Bell (2003) distinguish between positivism and interpretivism with regard to epistemology and objectivism and constructivism in terms of epistemology. Burrell and Morgan (1979) categorize broadly into subjective and objective viewpoints and subsequently differentiate in terms of epistemological, ontological, assumptions about human nature and methodological standpoints.

Understanding entails interpretations and one theoretical train of thoughts within this area is hermeneutics. There are various positions within the hermeneutical approach which can be roughly categorized into objective hermeneutics and alethic hermeneutics (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2000). The main theme of hermeneutics is that the meaning of something particular can only be understood if it is seen in the context of the whole. Objective hermeneutics propose a circular relationship between the part and the whole, while alethic hermeneutics see a relationship between pre-understanding and understanding. The main difference between these approaches is that in objective hermeneutics the interpreting subject and the interpreted object can be separated whereas in alethic hermeneutics the interpretation is always based on a conceptual frame of the interpreter. This leads to a certain pre-understanding which “dissolves the polarity between subject and object into a more primordial, original situation of understanding, characterized instead by a disclosive structure” (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2000, p. 57). At first sight these two conflicting strands of hermeneutics seem to be irreconcilable. However, there are ways of integrating the two differing schools thereby creating a revised hermeneutic circle which is shown in the figure 3-1.¹²

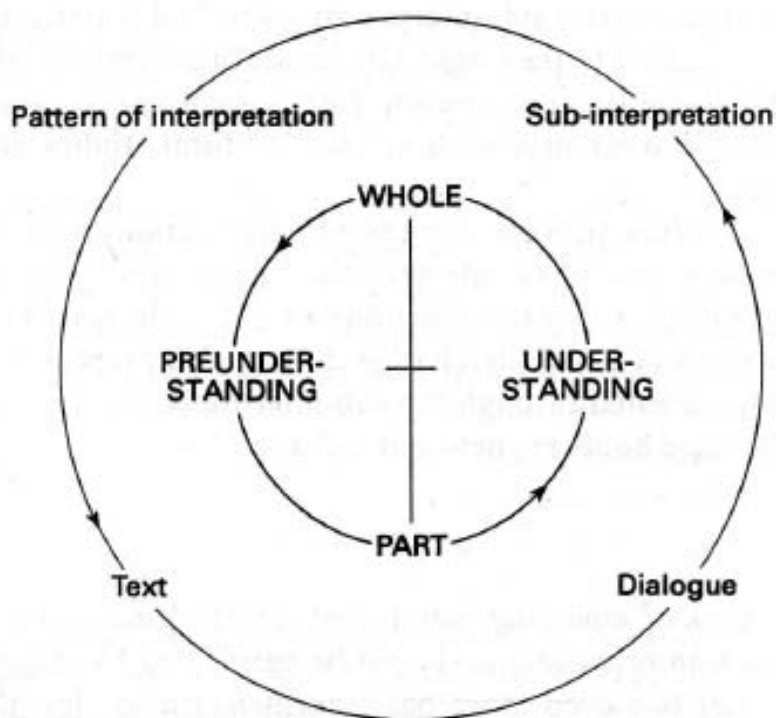


Figure 3-1 The Hermeneutic Circle (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2000, p. 66)

¹² Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2000) create an even more advanced model of a hermeneutic circle which incorporates different themes of interpretation. Lack of time and space, however, do not allow for the application for this elaborate model in the interpretation of the empirical material.

At its core lies the fundamental hermeneutic circle of part-whole and pre-understanding-understanding. On the intermediate level lies the pattern of interpretation which is related to the concept of the totality of the interpretation (the theoretical frame of reference of the study) which in turn relates to the text which consists of the empirical material such as observations, statements, secondary material and the like. The text is then scrutinized in a dialectic manner in the form of a close interrogation. Lastly, during the process of interpretation we form sub-interpretations which will be reflected back to the total interpretation (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2000, pp. 61-65).

The hermeneutical logic of reasoning described above can be referred to as abduction or the “inference to the best explanation” (Harman, 1965). This line of reasoning is based on a synthesis of inductive and deductive principles and states that an inference should be made based on the superior explanatory power of a hypothesis among others. “Science depends, not on the inductive accumulation of proofs but on the methodological principle of doubt” (Giddens, 1991, p. 21). This reasoning is inherent in a reflexive methodology, which combines the elements of the above described hermeneutics as well as critical theory and postmodernism. The central proposition of reflexive methodology is the dynamic shifting between different interpretative levels and the aim to achieve a greater depth in the understanding of empirical material. The first level is the close interaction with the empirical material in form of interviews, observations etc. The second level aims at the interpretation of meanings and a broader understanding described in the principles of hermeneutics above. Shifting the perspective away from a focused theoretical interpretation to a higher meta-theoretical level such as critical theory or postmodernism allows for a critical reflexion upon possible dominant ideologies, power relations and social desirability. The production of the account should then be also scrutinized with regard to one’s own authorship and language use which marks the fourth level of interpretations. The shifting between interpretative levels enhances the researcher’s repertoire of interpretation and allows for a careful analysis of the empirical material and the formulation of possible hypotheses about the understanding of the observed phenomena (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2000, pp. 247-257). However, due to the limited scope of our study and time constraints the levels of interpretations will remain largely on the first, second and occasionally shift up to the third level.

The hermeneutical epistemological stance described above can be closely connected with the ontological position that the reality of social actors is produced through social interaction and that there is no single independent objective reality. “Truth” then is constructed among the actors. This view is commonly referred to as (social) constructivism (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Patton, 2002, pp. 96-98). The position of constructivism however can be pushed to extremes by adopting a relativistic stance claiming that all phenomena are exclusively socially constructed and hence in a constant state of flux. This view is somewhat attenuated in the study of identity work insofar as there is some appreciation of the pre-existence of an object under study which is nonetheless socially constructed (Bryman and Bell, 2003, pp. 22-24). These perspectives are commonly associated with qualitative research methods as these provide the apt means of investigating. After the discussion of the philosophical underpinnings of the study the attention now turns to the practical method applied in the study. To generate empirical material the method of interviews will be used. The specific design of the interviews in the study will be described and evaluated in the following section.

3.2 Evaluation and Description of the Method

As an appropriate interview design semi-structured interviews were chosen using a “very general interview guide [...] and never discourage anyone from going off target” (Milkman, 1997, p. 198). To gain a comprehensive impression and include as many points of view as possible five workers, two union officials, two management representatives from HR and one corporate HR executive were interviewed. Aiming at obtaining a comprehensive picture in terms of the overall population of workers a stratified sample was drawn. Criteria for the sample were: Swedish - non-Swedish, male-female and Post-Ford - pre-Ford. In total five workers were interviewed two women and three men. Two of the men were non-Swedish. Three of the five workers were hired after the Ford takeover.¹³

The questions for the applied general interview guide are derived from the research themes bearing in mind that:

“The academic research questions need to be translated into an easy-going, colloquial form to generate spontaneous and rich descriptions” (Kvale, 1996, p. 130).

¹³ For a more detailed description of the takeover of VCC by Ford see chapter 4.

The questions are related to the issue of identity regulation and the efforts of management to support the worker's identity work as well as the self-identity of the worker (see appendix).

The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. They were mainly conducted in English, however, whenever the interviewees felt uncomfortable with the English language they switched to Swedish. The interviews were subsequently translated acknowledging the possible distortive effects of the translation (Temple and Young, 2004).

The subsequent analysis of the interviews can be roughly sequenced into two stages: the first stage is to condense the empirical material and sort it into categories or themes. This stage is inspired by the underlying principles of grounded theory (Prasad, 1993, p. 1409; Strauss, 1987). The second analytical stage is the deeper penetration of the empirical material and an in-depth hermeneutic reading as it was described above.

One crucial point in designing a study is the evaluation of its method (Kvale, 1996, p. 229). The most common criteria for such an evaluation are the reliability and validity of the method which are mainly used in quantitative research. Reliability refers to the consistency of the method whereas validity evaluates the applied method with regard to the accuracy of measurement (Schnell et al., 1999, pp. 143-150). Since the measurement and instruments used in quantitative research differ fundamentally from qualitative "instruments" there cannot be a mere transferability of the concepts of reliability and validity to qualitative research (Guba and Lincoln, 1985).¹⁴ Qualitative research methods should then be judged by using different criteria than in quantitative research. Patton (2002) usefully distinguishes different sets of criteria for evaluating the quality and credibility of the inquiry. He divides them into traditional scientific research criteria, social construction and constructivist criteria, artistic and evocative criteria, critical change criteria and evaluation standards and principles (pp. 544-545). For the purpose of our study social construction and constructivist criteria become pertinent.

Guba and Lincoln (1985, 1994) propose two sets of criteria for evaluating a qualitative study under the banner of social constructivism: trustworthiness and authenticity. Trustworthiness comprises credibility (fit between observations and proposed interpretations), transferability (applicability in other contexts), dependability (well documented proceedings) and confirmability (research is not overtly subjectively affected) (Guba and Lincoln, 1985, pp.

¹⁴ For a different point of view on this subject see LeCompte and Preissle Goetz (1982).

301-327). In addition authenticity refers to issues with a wider political impetus such as reflecting about one's perspective, acknowledging other perspectives and fairness in collecting data, i.e. taking into account different point of views.

Using these criteria to critically evaluate our interviews it is first of all apparent that the results of the analysis have to be carefully matched with the propositions of the frame of reference which acts as the anchor of interpretation. This is essential since

“Without a theoretical understanding, any use of interview material risks being naïve and interpretations of it rest on shaky ground” (Alvesson, 2003, p. 14).

It is, however, imperative to not let the frame of reference narrow the scope of interpretative efforts too much by pressing those into a tight theoretical corset. Only by carefully balancing the frame of reference and the possibility of contrary observations the credibility of the interview analysis can be enhanced. The transferability of the findings is somewhat limited due to the limited focus and the aim to acquire a “thick description”. It can, however, function as a reference guide for similar situations. The dependability of the study will be ensured by thorough documentation and transcription as well as an awareness of a moral and ethical responsibility of the researcher not to plagiarize.

With regard to the criterion of confirmability, the general problematic nature of the common assumptions about qualitative research including interviews comes to the fore (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000). The interview as a means to produce empirical material is far from problematic as there are, among others, problems of language mirroring objective reality and the inability to assess the intention of interviewees in terms of power plays and favorable identity construction (Alvesson, 2003). These problems are acknowledged in a reflexive methodological approach to interviews. A reflexive approach “open[s] up and acknowledg[es] the uncertainty of all empirical material and knowledge claims, but also offering alternative lines of interpretation for how to use the interview material in thoughtful and creative ways” (Alvesson, 2003, p. 25). As described above the reflexive approach underpins the interpretations of the empirical material. With regard to the criterion of confirmability the aim is thus not to reduce subjectivity and bias but rather illuminate the empirical material in a reflexive manner.

Authenticity is aimed at through the inclusion of different levels of interpretation and a reflexive approach which assist in assessing the overall impact of the research and matters of

fairness. In addition the research results will be presented to the management at VCT which will hopefully serve as the basis for further action by the management.

The following figure summarizes the overall methodological approach of the study and depicts the interconnectedness of the various levels:

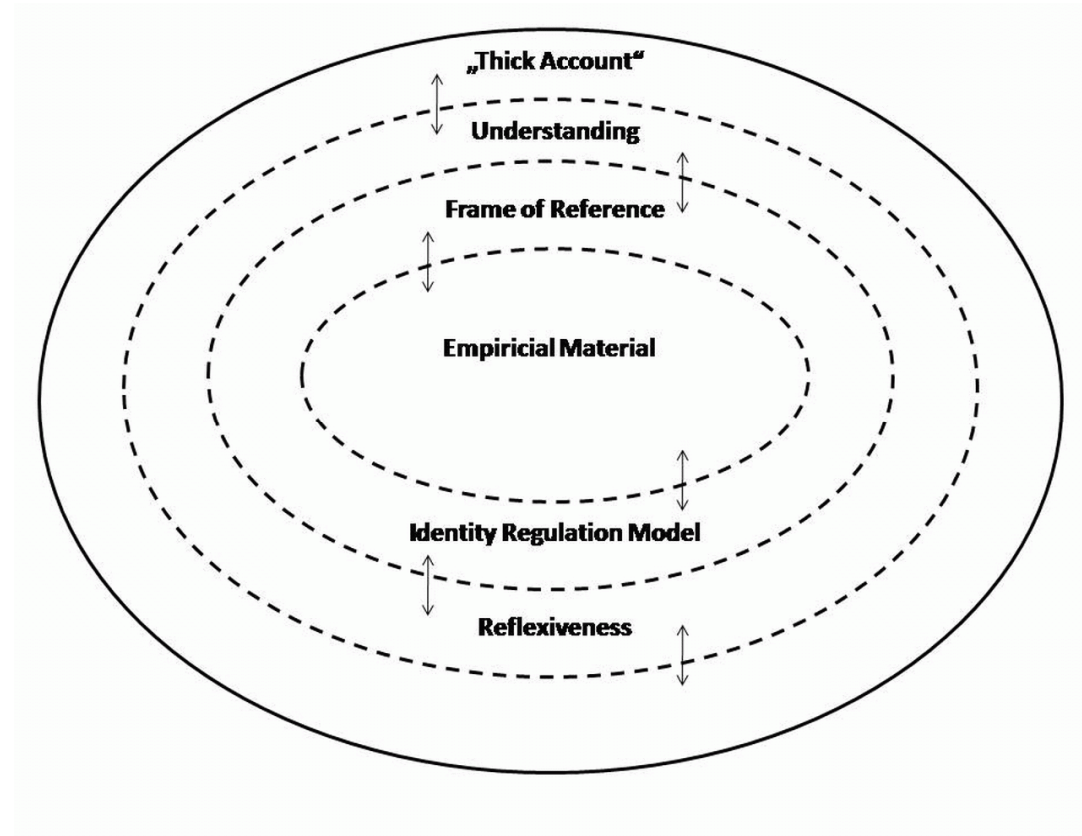


Figure 3-2 The Methodological Approach

The figure shows the core consisting of the empirical material gained from the interviews. These will be illuminated with the help of the theoretical frame of reference in the form of the identity regulation model put forward by Alvesson and Willmott (2002). The use of the theoretical frame of reference is underpinned by a reflexive-hermeneutic position aimed at inferring the most suited interpretation and enhancing the interpretative repertoire. All these efforts are geared towards a thick account of identity work. As can be seen from the figure 3-2 there are lines separating the different levels but these lines are permeable which reflects the interaction between the various different levels.

Backed up by the theoretical approach the philosophical underpinnings and the methods for acquiring the empirical material, the ground is now set for the analysis and interpretation of the identity work at VCT which will be covered by the next chapter.

4. Identity Work at Volvo Cars Torslanda

In the following section the empirical material gathered at VCT will be analyzed and used to propose a model which emerged from it. The proposed model is based on a synthesis of recurrent themes present in the empirical material, the ideas underpinning the conceptual framework as well as a popular concept from social psychology.

The aim is to provide a well-structured account of identity work at VCT and to carve out a model which captures distinct self-identities.¹⁵ To that end, the elementary structure of the suggested model is first described and then elaborated on by relating it to the empirical material gathered at VCT. To set the scene the object under study, VCT, is presented and some background information provided.

4.1 Background

Volvo Car Corporation (VCC) was founded in Gothenburg 1927 by the accountant Assar Gabrielsson and the engineer Gustaf Larson. Today, VC sales and service network covers about 100 countries, comprising some 2,400 sales outlets and service workshops around the world, including about 1,500 in Europe and 400 in North America and the rest in other countries. Their four largest markets are in the USA, Sweden, Germany and Great Britain. VCC has major production plants in Sweden and Belgium as well as assembling plants in China, Malaysia and Thailand. The production of vital components, such as engines, and body components, is mainly based in Sweden. The Volvo Car Corporation's headquarter and other corporate functions are based at Torslanda near Göteborg, Sweden. There are currently 4763 employees working at the Torslanda plant (VCC, 2008).

The plant at Torslanda is divided into three sections: the A, B and C-shop. At the A shop the bodies of the cars are put together and then sent on to the B-shop where they are painted. In the C shop the cars are finally assembled installing elements such as the instrument panel, ceiling, seats and wheels.

The C Shop is the object of this study although observations were made in the A shop, too. 1796 employees are currently working in the C shop. The working hours comprise three shifts: day, evening and night shift. During a shift approximately 50 cars are produced an hour.

The workers at the assembly line are grouped into 50 teams per shift and each team consists of 7-12 people.

¹⁵ See chapter 5.3 for a critical evaluation of this approach.

Over the last few years the automotive industry has experienced major changes such as the formation of strategic alliances or merger between competitors with VCC not being an exception as it was bought by Ford in 1999. Ford aimed at achieving a symbiosis between the companies without jeopardizing the brand value of Volvo and its Swedish heritage (Lundbäck and Hörte, 2005). Today there are various speculations in the media about the current state and future of VCC. There are rumours about significant downsizing and layoffs and even closing the Torslanda plant near Göteborg moving it to North America. Others claim that the Ford Corporation is considering selling VCC to the Indian-owned Tata that previously bought Jaguar and Land Rover from Ford (Sawyer, 2008). As one of the corporate HR executives expresses the uncertain situation at VCT at the moment:

“I think that Volvo overall right now is in the waiting mood”.
(Corporate HR Executive)

VCT has been going through a rationalization process over the last few years and created a global change program called “Our Tomorrow” accompanying these efforts. The content of the program builds upon the existing Volvo culture and adds the necessary information and dimensions directed towards the aim of becoming a premium car manufacturer. To that end a book containing a description of the aspired culture has been created and been sent to all employees worldwide. The book is simple in format, with images and easily digested information about the cultural change program with the clear emphasis on “we”. In addition to the book the HR management provided the middle management (production/team leaders) with a booklet and organized seven workshops for them to go through with their teams. This was the second part of the programme where they “deep-dived the culture” as stated by the corporate HR executive. The managers were supposed to take “fluffy” and more abstract messages from the book changing it into practical solutions and explaining what it implicated for each and every team. Moreover managers were provided with instruments to anchor the new culture and incorporate into everyday work processes:

“We have these modules that they can run whenever they think it is suitable for each manager. It is not mandatory. Then the thing is culture isn’t an activity culture is a behaviour so we need to build it into all our processes in the company” (Corporate HR Executive)

The focal points of every presentation about the new culture are two pyramids which are interrelated. The first pyramid comprises the brand values which translate into the work culture values as figure 4-3 shows.

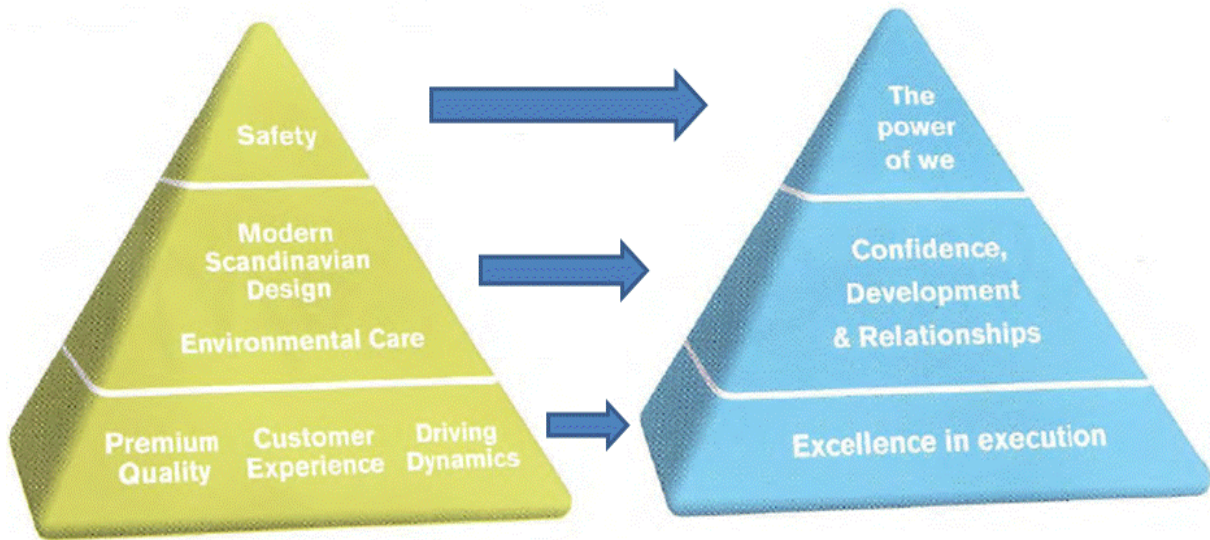


Figure 4-3 The VCC Brand Value and Work Culture Pyramids

The above described developments form the background of our study of identity work and the scene is now set to plunge deeper into the analysis of the discursive influences on identity work as well as the establishment of self-identities. At the outset a matrix configuration will be constructed which models the basic process of identity work at VCT.

4.2 Identity Work along Two Dimensions

During our analysis of the empirical material a structure surfaced which allowed for the construction of a two dimensional matrix configuration. This configuration consolidates recurring themes of the empirical material, interrelations and augmentations of the conceptual framework and ideas from social psychology. More specifically, the matrix combines and merges the theoretical ideas of the conceptual framework and related ideas about identity work proposed by Beech (2008) with the basic concepts of attribution theory taken from social psychology.

The first dimension of the matrix is grounded on a concept relating to identity work developed by Beech (2008). Among others, he proposes the idea that there are different meanings inherent in individuals, which influence their struggle for a coherent self-identity. For instance there could be a polarization between being a good and a bad father as well as being a good and a bad worker. The meaning attached to one particular part of one's self-identity

lies in between these poles and discursive influences from outside can shift these meaning-giving tensions either to the positive or to the negative side of the spectrum.¹⁶

Applying these ideas to the case of VCT the meaning-giving tension-filled spectrum of a part of the self-identity of the workers ranges from a positive to a negative affiliation¹⁷ toward VCT as it is shown in figure 4-1.



Figure 4-1 Spectrum of Meaning-Giving Tensions at VCT

Beech further proposes that:

“More radical changes can occur either where there is an accumulation of micro changes such that there is an impact on self-identity, or where there is a revolutionary change in which one set of meaning giving tensions is supplanted by another (p. 68).”

His idea is supported by a statement of one of the HR managers at VCT:

“When I came here [...] I had an introduction for three days. First day I come home there was a big, big bouquet of flowers “welcome to our company”. I was able to lend a car for a weekend during the first six months. And after a while I worked here they asked me how you think it is; is there something you need, do you like it or? They cared a little bit and I was visible – they saw me. And I felt important. I think that is very important when you start here that you not only a little piece in the big puzzle.”(HR manager)

The second dimension of the matrix is related to the causal attribution of behavioural outcomes which has been the focus of a long lasting debate among (social) psychologists. Heider (1958) initiated this debate and is usually regarded as the founder of attribution theory (Shultz and Schleifer, 1983, p. 38). The ensuing debate around his ideas has generated an array of approaches to solving the question how individuals attribute causation to their

¹⁶ The two poles of the spectrum could be misleadingly seen as constituting the tension between an identity and an anti-identity. Carroll and Levy (2008) argue that an anti-identity could be also used as a default identity on which individuals can fall back and which is securely held. The default identity thus functions as a baseline from which the individual strives for the desired identity. These ideas are also inherent in Beech’s conception as the shifting between the poles relate to a progression-regression movement and hence a fallback on a default identity.

¹⁷ The interview statements revealed that there is a positive attitude towards VCT but not the feeling of oneness and belongingness expressed by for instance Asforth and Mael (1989) in their definition of identification. Thus affiliation seems a more apt term to denote the dimension of the matrix.

behavioural outcomes.¹⁸ In the context of the study the original distinction by Heider (1958) between internal and external attribution - commonly referred to as the “locus of control” - is chosen as the second dimension of the matrix.¹⁹

“In common-sense psychology (as in scientific psychology) the result of an action is felt to depend on two sets of conditions, namely factors within the person and factors within the environment.” (Heider, 1958, p. 82).

Thus the basic idea about the locus of control is that an outcome of an action can be perceived as either being due to the ability one possesses or external factors that lie outside the realm of influence (Rotter, 1975). Paraphrased, an individual can blame himself for an unfavourable behavioural outcome or the circumstances surrounding it.

Consolidating the two dimensions described above generates the matrix set out in Figure 4-2.

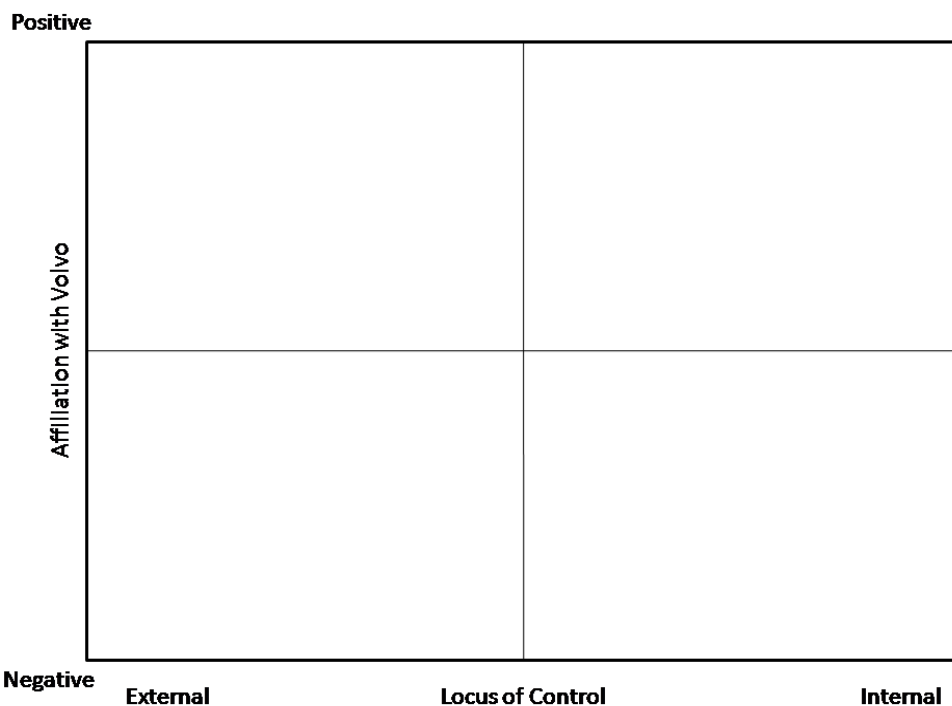


Figure 4-2 Model of Identity Work at VCT

The underlying logic of the proposed model could be described as follows. Discursive regulatory influences form the background or the “input” of the matrix which is related to the ideas of identity regulation introduced in the conceptual framework. These discursive

¹⁸ For an overview see for instance Martinko et al. (2006).

¹⁹ Some authors acknowledge the mutual dependence of internal and external attribution and locus of control but also contend that the two concepts have found to be empirically independent variables (Peterson and Stunkard, 1992). For the purpose of our study this empirical distinction, however, is irrelevant.

influences stimulate identity work which involves the shifting of meaning-giving tensions in either positive or negative directions. In the presented case that entails moving either towards a positive or negative affiliation with Volvo. Identity work is also informed by the causation of behavioural outcomes to either external forces that cannot be influenced or internal capabilities and skills which can be controlled to some extent by the individual. The interplay of these various processes and influences subsequently lead to the establishment of certain self-identities at VCT.

By no means is it implied that this is a sequential process. The processes, influences and interrelations inherent in the model overlap, reinforce and obstruct each other. In addition the described self-identities are not meant to portray overarching, dichotomous identity constructs but rather one self-identity construct among a multiplicity of other identities a person can possess (see also 2.2).

However, for analytical purposes and a coherent description of identity work and self-identities at VCT the model proposed above will be elaborated on working under the assumption of a structured process. To that end some empirical material is presented that support the claims of the model. Due to being assigned the role as “input” into the model, the discursive influences prevailing on the shop floor at VCT will be described at the outset.

4.3 Discursive Influences on Identity Work

“Anything the management does now is coming from Toyota. At Toyota they have this kind of “bible” how to build a car as fast as possible and they try to introduce this bible here. Lars Danielsson [the factory manager of Torslanda] has been studying Toyota and implemented this at Saab and now Volvo.” (Union Official)

As this quote reveals the production regime at VCT is inspired by the principles of lean manufacturing developed and firstly applied by the Japanese Toyota Car Corporation. Its production “prescriptions” spread around the world and were enthusiastically adopted throughout the car manufacturing industry (Muffatto, 1999). The underpinning philosophy of lean production is the removal of any waste in the automobile production process by either rationalizing, de-layering or outsourcing. This attitude should inform every division and function of the car manufacturing plant (Womack et al., 1990). One cornerstone of lean production for instance is Just-in-Time (JIT) production referring to a demand-driven manufacturing regime which aims at minimising inventories and machine set-up times (Sewell, 1990). There is, however, severe criticism relating to the concept of lean manufacturing. The main points being the increasing surveillance and control it entails

(Sewell and Wilkinson, 1992) and the false pretence of lean manufacturing to offer an alternative to the Tayloristic division of labour (Berggren, 1992). These notions are also shared by the workers at VCT (see below). With regard to the single worker, the lean manufacturing regime entails a managerial effort to influence the attitudes of the shop floor workers towards becoming a responsible team player with an increased degree of sensitivity to quality and improvement.

The *lean manufacturing discourse* at VCT forms some sort of “umbrella discourse” and is flanked by various related discourses. Referring back to chapter 2.2 and the characterization of discourses by Alvesson and Kärreman (2000a) the discourse of lean management can be said to be embedded in a global macro context with a strong emphasize on meaning determination whereas the flanking discourses are myopic yet also determining the meanings of the employees (p. 1130). Hence the umbrella discourse informs and presupposes the sub-discourses circulating at VCT forming an encompassing structuring device for the flanking discourse. This also concurs to some extent with the notion that in organizations discourses could be either collapsed into one grand discourse or co-exist with each other adding to an ambiguous and polysemic organizational environment (Boje, 1995).

One dominant discourse among the employees relating to the umbrella discourse is connected to the consequences of the *merger with Ford* and the allegedly increased efforts to “rationalize” and slim the organization after the takeover.

“[...] it becomes worse and worse. Ford’s policy towards Volvo is a real capitalistic one. You work a lot and you earn as little as possible. (Worker)”

“All this downsizing is because of Ford and 2-3 years ago when we made lots of money, we were the milk cow in the Ford concern. Every dime we earned went to Ford and we had to save even more...” (HR manager)

In addition the lack of management’s appreciation for the employee’s efforts and generally the *detachment of the management* from the shop floor can be detected as another discourse.

“We work with corporate staff. We are as far away from the operation as you can be as a matter of fact (Corporate HR Executive)”

The perception is that there is no room for any extra appreciation of the employees that would make them more attached and feel appreciated by the company.

“For the first line managers if they have employees that work really hard and that come here extra on a Saturday they have nothing extra. It doesn’t need to be much at all but there is nothing, nothing, nothing. Everything is rationalized.”(HR manager)

Another important discourse is connected to the *increasing surveillance and control* of the workers. There are two types of controlling measures related to the rationalization at Torslanda. On the one hand the management increasingly controls if people on sick leave are not in fact shirking and trying to avoid the pressure and stress that is built up through the rationalization measures.

“People have no days off, it’s very difficult to get away from work. They are being “hunted” if they are away. The management calls you all the time if you are away. [...] They also go home to the people to check on them. They spy. The work leaders check out if the workers actually are sick” (Union official)

In addition there are control measures on the line which aim at maintaining a high level of quality and trying to locate quality problems. This is done by setting the rule that every line worker has to stamp a form on the car in order to be able to trace back who was working on which car. The rationale for the introduction of this measure is to increase the quality of the car. These measures add to a feeling of increased control and surveillance of the assembly line workers and singling out workers who do not perform accordingly.

“The system can be used wrongly. The thought is not to do that but we know that it happens. [...] They [the workers] maybe have to pay if they have done a lot of mistakes. Ten percent of the salary can be taken.” (Union official)

“You are controlled all the time. You can say that. You are supposed to do this, this and this all the time.” (Worker)

It is here that Ford comes into play again and the switch from a consensus-driven towards a more controlled-driven organization is mentioned.

“The control structure and the bureaucracy have increased in Volvo after Ford. The question is how much we have to have needed to increase it anyway because Volvo was built on I know you and you know me and that doesn’t work in Ford since American companies are more control-driven due to legislation.” (Corporate HR Executive)

Furthermore the rationalizing measures at Torslanda are also connected to *external market pressures* and economic factors.

“Of course it is a difficulty when you have this pressure. You work at the same speed and you do the same job but instead of having black figures you have red figures. And it depends on the dollar. [...]” (Union official)

The need for a high degree of flexibility has also led to an increase in the *hiring of temporary workers* who are perceived as a sort of protecting shield against one's own possible layoff.²⁰

“Now we have a lot of recruitment companies providing workforce, and if someone would be laid off, it would be them that would go first.” (Worker)

In addition to the introduction of lean management principles and the ensuing rationalizing measures VCC initiated a new cultural change program based on a new company philosophy called “Our Tomorrow”. It is an ongoing global process and a response to the rapidly changing external environment.

VCC aspires to become a premium car manufacturer. “Our Tomorrow” is a long term plan with the aim of influencing the mindset of the employees as well as the external perceptions of the brand. The cultural change program seeks to influence and shape the employees to become more conscious about the positioning of being a premium car manufacturer and have a stronger focus on the values and expectations of the premium customers.

“I think there is something we really do not understand and that is what premium is and since we really don't understand it – this is my personal opinion - is sometimes hard for us to understand how we can contribute towards premium” (Corporate HR Executive)

The management acknowledges the difficulties in circulating the new culture discourse but is optimistic about the success chances.

“I think you easy get attached to Volvo. It is in the environment, in the area in the walls it is really the culture. So therefore we need to work with resistance and it is nothing that really scares us. And we can overcome it. I am pretty sure but it takes time. That's the thing.” (Corporate HR Executive)

Due to the novelty of the program, discourses surrounding it are not overly pronounced. However the interviews and the observation of the introduction of the program by Lars Danielsson, the plant manager, revealed some characteristics of possible reactions. The presentation by Lars Danielsson was held in every shop at VCT. He was standing on an elevated platform with two flanking big screens. The shop floor workers showed no or little engagement and the speech seemed to go up in smoke with no enthusiasm or positive response. However, there was no open resistance or negative comments about “Our

²⁰ Davis-Blake et al. (2003) report different findings related to the reaction of standard employees in a blended workforce, namely a decrease in loyalty as well as an increased desire to leave the organization or unionize.

Tomorrow”. It seems that the workers are overly concerned with the rationalization at VCT so that this discourse wins the upper hand and exerts more influence right now. However, there are some workers who have adopted the discourse related to the new culture and aiming at integrating these into their daily routine as it will be shown below.

Relating these discourses back to the modes of regulation described in chapter 2.2 it can be stated that the lean management discourse is strongly driven by defining the meso and macro context the organization is working in. The management clearly aims at establishing a set of rules and modes of operation. The cultural change program on the other hand uses different modes of regulation. It defines the employee as a part of a larger “we” which indicates the desire to define oneself by distinguishing from others by creating a certain group affiliation.

“When it comes to the premium segment we have decided where we want to niche ourselves. We would want to niche ourselves more towards the “we” oriented customers rather than the “I” oriented customers. The “I” oriented customers segment is more of a BWM or Mercedes kind, while we would want to niche ourselves more towards the “we” - the more environmental educated reflecting kind of customers.”(Corporate HR executive)

This intention expressed by the corporate HR executive is strongly related to the establishment of a group categorization as well as defining oneself by defining others and thereby create a distinctive characterization. In addition, “Our Tomorrow” stresses certain motives in work processes such as quality and teamwork.

The discourses of lean management and “Our Tomorrow” are in a *tense contradictory relationship*. It seems that the claims and the content of “Our Tomorrow” do not correspond with the day-to-day experience of the workers. Hence the conflicting messages and experiences increase the prominence of one discourse over the other and thus triggers different responses of the workers. The intertwined mutually dependent web of causal attribution, discursive regulation and the prominence of a discourse consequently leads to the possibility of identifying differing self-identities. These self-identities will be closer described in the next section.

4.4. Self Identities

The *first self identity* that can be distinguished is largely influenced by the discourses surrounding the cultural change program “Our Tomorrow”. One of the workers responded when asked if there is a “we” feeling at VCT.

“Sometimes the bosses are really angry about something and they try to get it out on us but we know it is like our problem too - it is a problem when we are just working four days a week and we know something is wrong when they are cutting off people. So for us it is a “we” when someone has to go from work. I don’t know if they are doing that yet ... It is always a “we” though (Worker)

This quote reveals a communitarian feeling among the shop floor workers and a positive team spirit desired by the creators of the cultural change program. Secondly quality and the improvement of the work processes are a focal point of discussion among some of the employees.

“We try to work together and then if we have ideas or something we try to talk about it, like, I sat here with a girl earlier and we exchange how we can do better in a better way. [...] We talk about quality a lot; about how to make the best quality cars.” (Worker)

The quality system where the worker has to stamp a form on the car is seen as necessary to improve the processes. One of the worker responded when asked if she thinks it is necessary and if it is perceived by her as too much control:

“Sometimes when I stamp the paper I feel like why? But it is because they say it is a quality control and they have to know why the quality is bad.” (Worker)

“Yeah, some people may feel unhappy about that. On the other hand, it is easy to find out which people who do bad work and one can find out who do good work, so in this respect it is good. Today, we are building quality but earlier it was not so good and it was stressful.” (Worker)

These discursive influences push the meaning giving tensions towards a positive affiliation with Volvo. A positive perception of Volvo was affirmed in unison by the group of workers positively affected by the cultural change program and the quality discourse.

Naturally, the rationalization discourse was also discussed but the workers expressed their ability to change the situation and improve the situation. As one of the workers articulated her opinion about the situation and the way one should take responsibility:

“And if there is something new that comes up then one constantly tries to make them [the team members] think in a better way and all the time try to see the positive in everything.”(Worker)

A spirit of loyalty and a “can-do-attitude” is prevalent among this group of workers.

“We are working together for Volvo. For the company.” (Worker)

The perception that one's opinion is taken seriously and considered to make a difference in the way the company tackles problems adds to the notion of being able to contribute to Volvo's success.

“And they listen and we have discussed. On the other hand I don't know everything either. But they let me raise my voice and add information that I feel is important. I don't have the whole picture but they know the whole picture. But if there is knowledge and areas I know I can contribute to I let them know.”
(Worker)

The combination of these positive meanings attached to the discourses about quality and the cultural change program with the recognition of one's own responsibility for the company's success generates a type of worker which could be accordingly labelled “*Volvoite*”.

Based on the positive affiliation towards Volvo but with a different outlook on the attribution of causes another type of worker's identity can be described. When asked about his perception of the situation at VCT an union official expressed the opinion that the current situation is mostly due to the prices of raw materials and the dollar exchange rate which form an uncontrollable external environment. The same argument was reiterated by an HR manager. However, when asked about the loyalty of the workers, the union official went on to state:

“Most of them are proud to build Volvo cars” (Union Official)

Here we thus have the combination of a positive affiliation with Volvo combined with the notion that the external environment controls the actions and the outcomes of events. These self identities could be appropriately named the “*Optimistic Loyalist*”.²¹

Drawing the attention away from self-identities which are largely positively influenced by the discourses about the cultural change program and the lean management principles the attention now shifts to the self-identities which are impacted by negative discursive resources.

One worker talks about the effects of rationalization and the subsequent decrease in loyalty.

“[The loyalty] gets less and less. I come to work, I do my job, I get my wage and I give a shit about the rest” (Worker)

²¹ Loyalist in this context should not be associated with the commonly negative notions evoked by the use of historians for instance loyalists associated with the attachment of the UK in Northern Ireland. In this context loyalist is to be understood in its neutral meaning which refers to individuals being committed and loyal to a certain institution.

Another worker who talked about previous times and the better conditions back then states when asked if he is proud to work at VCT today:

“For me proud is not the right word. Proud... I only come here to pay my bills.”
(Workers)

A worker displaying a negative affiliation towards VCT stated:

“I only trust myself. The job I do I do to 100 %. But I mean earlier that was a sure thing. The company wanted me to develop all the time, but now I can’t develop. [...] if one says something they reply “no that doesn’t work”. (Worker)

As this quote reveals there is an internal attribution as the workers trust in their abilities to control behavioural outcomes and with the right training he could help to improve the situation. Another of the workers describes an experience within her team regarding the new quality system and the resistance of some of her team members to stamp the car.

“Some people cannot; they are just skipping the paper and taking the consequences. The quality guy just looks up ten cars so some people only stamp when they see the guy is there.” (Worker)

An HR manager describes a similar attitude towards work and skipping responsibility by “soldiering”²² or shirking. These workers hence could take on the responsibility and they know that they could contribute to the improvement of the situation but they exhibit recalcitrant behaviour which is based on their negative perception towards VCT. This attitude is aptly expressed in the following statement by a worker.

“Why think about Volvo if Volvo doesn’t think about me any longer” (Worker)

These types of workers could be consequently characterized as “antagonistic selves” (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999). They are aware of their misbehaviour and believe to be able to improve but they openly resist the management’s improvement efforts.

Lastly, building on the notion of a negative perception towards VCT but shifting the causation of attribution to external factors, another distinct worker’s identity emerges. The quintessence of these identities is illustratively described by an HR manager.

“There is, in my opinion, tiredness. There is no energy in the organization and both the employees and the supervisors and also in the support function like HR there is no energy. [...] Even if we make improvements we still lose money. Then it doesn’t matter what you do... It is based on external factors. [...] I am surprised that the employee doesn’t say more. Now it is so quiet in the organization that

²² The term was first used by Taylor (1911) to describe the behaviour of worker who do not perform according to the level they could perform.

scares me.[...] I don't see the storm coming. Sometimes you wonder doesn't anyone care." [HR manager]

The same HR manager further stated that the workers identified with Volvo less and less. Taking this view on identity construction it is apparent that there is the blame on the external factors and a strong feeling of resignation. There is no engaged attitude anymore and the workers are becoming less and less attached to the well-being of VCT. In some sense these workers feel isolated maybe stranded on an island with no apparent or immediate opportunity of escaping. Drawing on this metaphor the identities could be accordingly labelled “*stranded selves*”.

The description of the different self-identities and the respective dimensions of identity work are summarized in figure 4-4.

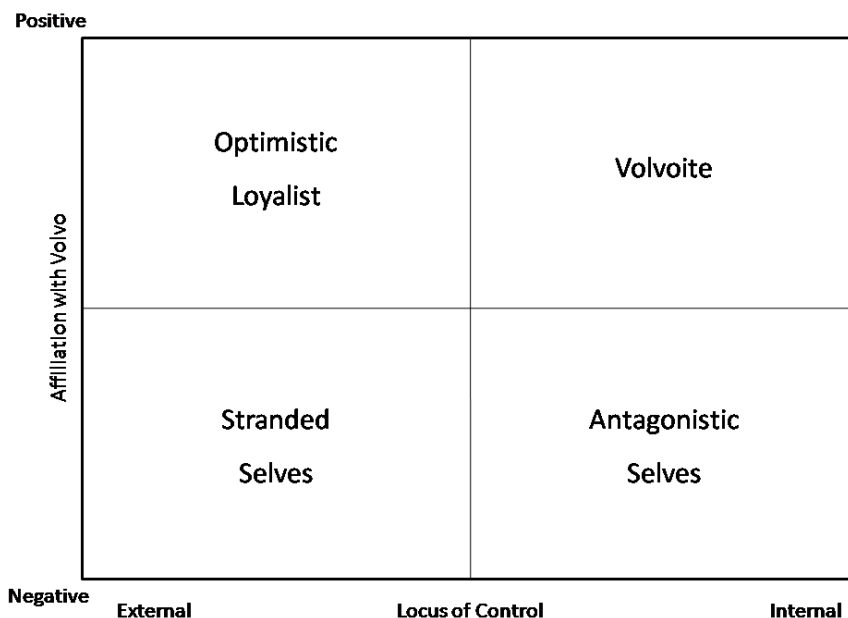


Figure 4-4 Self-Identities at VCT

After outlining the discursive influences on identity work and identity construction at VCT and an attempt to make sense of the ensuing processes surrounding the establishment of self-identities, an in-depth interpretation of the findings is called for. The ambition is to fathom the different self-identities along with contemplating the findings against the backdrop of LPT in the next chapter. To conclude the discussion of the findings the limitations and some critical issues of the study are pointed out and evaluated.

5. Analysis of the Findings

In the following section the findings at VCT are discussed. The first part of this section is related to the self-identities at VCT and encompasses an evaluation of the findings as well as a further exploration of the individual categories. The second part aims at putting the findings at VCT in the context of LPT which mainly involves a discussion of a contribution to the debate around determinism vs. voluntarism. To round off the discussion, the findings as well as their descriptive power is critically examined.

5.1 Contemplating the Self-Identities at Volvo Cars Torslanda

A first immediate, eye-catching observation related to self-identities at VCT is the *multitude of identities*. Noticing this seems obvious to the point of banality nevertheless some studies report strong alignments between aspired “corporate selves” and norms and values of the corporate culture (Bunting, 2004; Kunda, 1992; Peters and Waterman, 1982).

Yet one of the identity constructs relates to the above mentioned aspired favourable identity construct, namely the “Volvoite” and the “Optimistic Loyalist”. It is precisely this pro-active team player who is depicted in the managerialist literature on lean management - an identity congruent with the aims and goals of the company and largely controlled by its norms (Womack et al., 1990). However, there could be trouble looming in paradise. Asked about a loyalty change for Volvo if there was a family to be taken care of, one “Volvoite” responded:

“Yes I would think so. It depends if I would still working on the same line here and then it would probably not be that important to me.”(Worker)

Due to the precarious nature of self-identities (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002) the alignment of the worker’s identity with the corporate culture could thus be supplanted by other identity constructs derived by drawing on other dominant discursive influences in this case cultural-communitarian (see 2.2). Hence following Beech (2008) a constant impact on meaning giving tensions can slowly push it in a negative direction.

Notwithstanding this, there is another interpretation implicit in the above statement: the worker’s hopes and aspiration to be rewarded by VCT in terms of transferring to another department or another function.

These remarks relate to the concept of “delayed gratification” based on the ideas of Max Weber and described by Sennett (2006):

“Instead of judging whether your immediate actions matter to you, you learn to think about a future reward which will come if you obey orders now.” (p. 31).

This prospect brings about workers’ compliance with the organizational norms. In the current period, however, as it was revealed during the interviews, the current flexibility of organizational structures and work designs as well as the principles of lean management eschew considerations of a future reward in favour of rationalization.

“Now, you can’t really see any bonuses or rewards. Previously, you received bonuses, and then you could feel more motivated. If we displayed good results we could receive an extra amount of money, but all of this is gone now.” (Worker)

This notion gradually enters the awareness of the workers at VCT and accordingly the “Volvoite” and “Optimistic Loyalist” identities are built on shaky grounds and are easily impacted by the rationalizing measures and the perception of a broken implicit contract of delayed gratification. The discourses about the pitfalls and hardships of lean management at VCT presented in chapter 4.1 gain the upper hand and the pendulum gradually swings from a positive to a negative affiliation with VCT. Consequently the workers’ self-identities are affected and shift towards recalcitrance or resignation which will be discussed in the following.

As hinted at above the resistance encountered at VCT is twofold. It is on the one hand passive – a sense of resignation and tiredness in work behaviour – (stranded) and on the other hand it takes the form of openly obstructing work processes and requirements by the management (antagonistic). The former evokes associations with a concept in psychology, referred to as “learned helplessness” which adds some more illuminative insights.²³ The basic concept claims that humans could learn that they are helpless in certain situations and that no matter what they strive for, they will not be able to change the situation even if the situation is seemingly controllable (Peterson et al., 1993). This simple idea was found to be too narrowly considered and was thus augmented by the incorporation of three parameters of causal

²³ There is a vast amount of studies on this topic which discuss possible modifications and possible outcomes of the concept. For an amalgamation of the findings see Peterson et al. (1993). Even if the concept of “learned helplessness” is largely based on a generalization of findings derived from experiments and thus neglects the context-dependency and social constructedness of reality, the concept provides some useful ideas related to the findings at VCT.

attribution: locus of control (see above), stability and scale. Stability refers to the recurrence and duration of episodes whereas instability points to the intermittent nature of events. Global attribution implies that an attribution could be made referring to a variety of outcomes or simply one particular event (Abramson et al., 1978).²⁴ Referring these ideas back to the “stranded selves” at Volvo it is apparent that next to the external attribution a union official expresses an uncertainty about the intermittent character, the instability, of the causes of events, specifically the precarious economic situation:

“I hope it is temporary. But I am not sure. It depends on – as I said before if you have red figures you have this kind of problem and you have in every company everywhere you will see that and that is what causes the problem.” (Union official)

Further the scale of the attribution among the stranded selves is extended not only to local outcomes but on a global scale as expressed by the HR manager (see 4.4). Hence it could be argued that there is a global, stable and external attribution relating to the behavioural outcomes. Seligman and Peterson (1986) examining the behaviour of insurance sales agents found out that stable, internal and global attribution leads to a decrease in productivity and less persistence in work behaviour. Relating these findings to VCT it could be assumed that workers exhibiting the characteristic of a stranded self are less likely to show persistence and motivation in their work behaviour.

The second form of resistance is more active and connects with antagonistic behaviour. To systematize the resistance encountered at VCT the classification by Ackroyd and Thompson (1999) assists us in developing a plausible interpretation of resistance at VCT. The authors map resistance across two dimensions. The first dimension is related to the area of resistance which could be work (activities during the labour process), time (time spent on work tasks), product (materials used in the labour process) or identity (identification with the work process). Product and time are strongly interrelated with the work processes which thus form the fundamental basis of the first dimension. The second dimension relates to the intensity of resistance which ranges from commitment via withdrawal to open hostility. Using this framework to map the resistance of the antagonistic self, it could be said that in terms of work

²⁴ An example would be the attribution of rejection among insurance salesperson. A global, stable and internal attribution would be equivalent to blaming oneself, expecting failure to occur over a long period of time as well as in many situations. An external, instable and local attribution refers to blaming the external circumstances, relate it only to the specific situation at that point in time and to this specific attempted sale (Seligman and Schulman, 1986).

behaviour the resistance is just on the verge of withdrawal but is still characterized by an active, engaging element. One HR manager draws the comparison between children who want to draw attention to themselves and the workers who are not heard by the management:

“[...] if you don’t give kids attention they do anything to get attention and the worse thing is that they smash your window.” (HR manager)

The same HR manager goes on to state:

“[Resistance is] not to corrupt other workers but it is not so important to come every day; you can come a little bit late. It is small things.” (HR manager)

It is apparent from this statement that during work processes the work time is not strictly adhered to and workers resist by working more slowly or fail to appear for work. The resistance against the quality measurements could be seen as a decrease in diligence which affects the materials used and consequently the quality of the product. However, there is no open withdrawal and no damage of the work product that was reported during the study. As was already described in chapter 4.4, the self-identities at VCT with regard to the antagonistic selves are characterized by a negative affiliation and also withdrawal. Figure 5-1 summarizes the categorization of the self-identities relating them to the framework by Thompson and Ackroyd (1999).

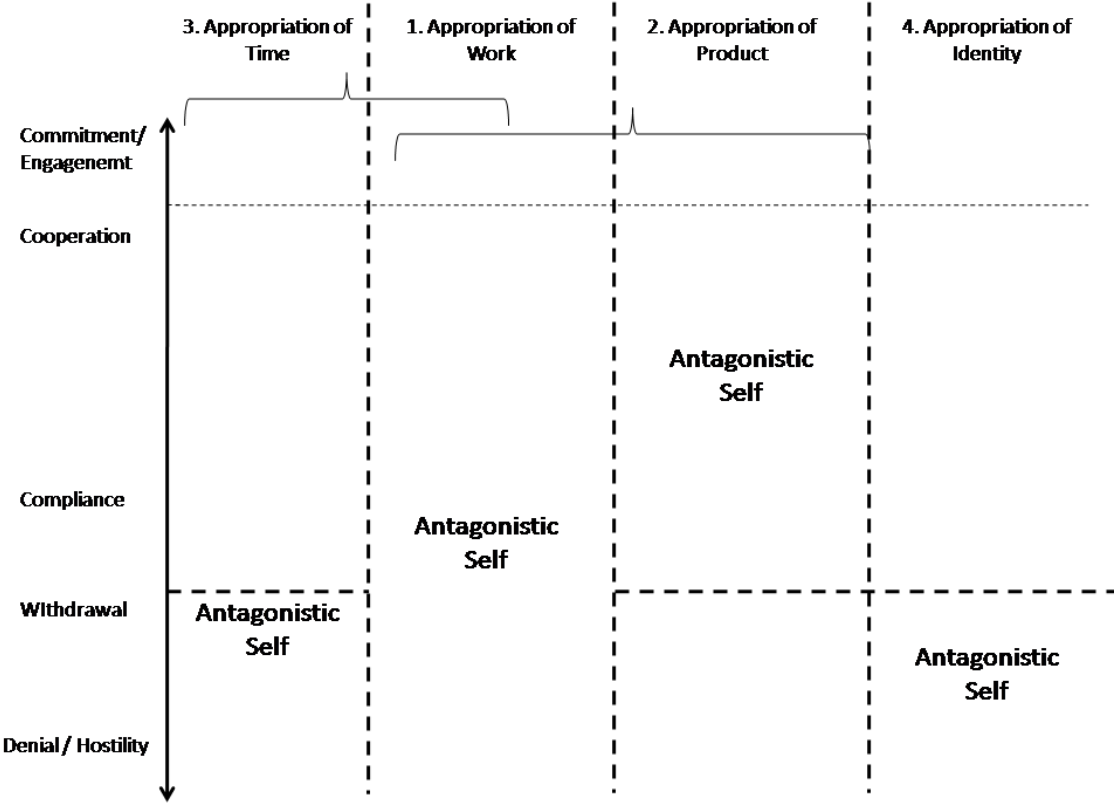


Figure 5-1 Mapping Misbehaviour at VCT following Ackroyd and Thompson (1999)

Drawing the attention away from the specific self-identities some other interesting general interpretations concerning other possible impacts on the workers' self identity at VCT can be made.

Some studies of shop floor workers reported the display of a strong masculine "working-class" attitude which served to elevate the worker's status above white collar employees, managers or even women. (Collinson, 1992; Sennett and Cobb, 1977). This display of a strong class consciousness sprinkled with a strong masculinity was not witnessed during our study of VCT. Another noticeable related notion was that of the nostalgic dwelling on glorious former times; "a time when they didn't mind or enjoyed coming to work; when it was a laugh" (Ezzamel et al., 2001, p. 1062). As one of the workers at VCT expressed:

"I loved being at Volvo, it is actually true. There were several mates we were together, I remembered Volvo - that is okay. Perfect, everything was great!"
(Worker)

This points to the fact that the workers' resistance is not driven by the notion of a structural-ideological class consciousness but by the circumstantial factors, namely the rationalization measures. This was a general attitude among all the workers' interviewed and is also supported by the comparatively soft statements of the union officials regarding their role.

"The relations between the employee and the employer have always been quite good. Even if it was sometimes not so good if you take on an average for some years you can say for the most of the time you try to solve problems to a better shape, try to find negotiations around the table. Not by fighting." (Union Official)

Contemplating this further the empirical material does not provide strong evidence that the union is taking a pro-active role, for instance increasing the employability of its members through training, which is required to prevent further rationalization and even relocation of production facilities abroad. It seems to be stuck in its comfortable positions dealing with the pay and conditions (Huzzard, 2000).

"The management of Volvo informs us about what is going on, and we express our opinions if it's something we think is wrong we let them know. Although, it is not always we can change their decisions taken. The biggest work we do is basically to ensure peoples salaries and that they stay healthy at work."
(Union Official)

Contemplating upon the self-identities at VCT has revealed some interesting points as well as enabled conjectures about prospective developments. Shifting the attention away from a

somewhat close reading of the empirical material onto a more abstract level the findings can be viewed against the backdrop of LPT which provides some more insights.

5.2 An Attempt to Insert the Missing Subject

The following quote captures aptly the nature of the findings related to the self-identities at VCT against the backdrop of LPT.

“An appreciation of how investments are made in measures and practices that construct and sustain a sense of self-identity goes some way to explaining why, on occasions, managers and workers develop “understandings” and pursue courses of action that make little rational sense in terms of the respective objectives ascribed to them by orthodox labour process theory.” (Ezzamel et al., 2001, p. 1057)

The first general observation is that the findings at VCT neither lend support to the voluntarist nor the determinist position of LPT. To recapitulate, the debate around LPT is characterized by a dualism of two opposite positions. Theorists sympathetic towards orthodox labour theory emphasize structural constraints and disregard human agency whereas the subjectivist position within LPT foregrounds autonomy and creativity over determinism (see 2.1).

It seems that there is, according to the workers’ perception, a different notion of the labour process. More concretely; the notion that a worker assumes she/he is able to exert influence on the work processes and that there is room for changing the situation is mirrored in the subjectivist ideas that the labour process is indeed constituted by human agency. On the other hand the finding that some of the workers surrender to their external circumstances and feel that they are not in control of the labour process seem to strengthen the assumptions that outside structures are prevalent. Thus it seems that there is the equivocal notion of a juxtaposition of the orthodox and the subjectivist view on the labour process consolidated in just one dimension of identity work namely the locus of control. The co-existence of the two seemingly contradictory poles is aptly explained by Knights (1990):

“Subjects are as much constituted as constituting and structures are mere institutionalised outcomes of the aggregated practices of historical and contemporary subjects. Necessarily, structures depend for their reproduction on social practices that reflect and reinforce both the constituted and self-constituting character of subjects.” (p. 308).

This explanation relates to the notion that action presupposes structure and structure presupposes action. Paraphrased, individuals will create social structures through their actions at the same time as being dependent on the social structures to provide rules and conventions

to guide the action (Giddens, 1979).²⁵ Hence the first important conclusion which can be drawn from the findings in the study is that they support the notion that there is an exclusive focus on neither objective nor subjective determinants of the labour process. It emphasizes the importance of a dialectical approach to the labour processes (Willmott, 1990) rather than a reinforcement of the prevailing dualism.²⁶

Against the backdrop of a dialectical approach another interpretation, which sheds light on the properties of the labour process and clarify the findings at VCT, is required. As the depiction of the labour processes by the workers is equivocal, the focus has to be shifted to the point of origin of these descriptions. Consequently the individual seems to be the apt level of analysis. The individual “black box” might reveal a possible explanation for the constitution of the labour process.

Obviously, the individual’s perception of their capabilities and attribution of causation is one pivotal variable in depicting work processes. By placing the locus of control either externally or internally the individual simultaneously assigns certain properties to their work modes. Hence by engaging in identity work and seeking answers to the questions “who am I and by implication how should I act?” (Alvesson, 2004, p. 189) the individual is more or less forced to categorize the labour process in either way. The assigned status of the work process is vital for the perception of a coherent self-identity. This interpretation includes the missing subject in the labour process as it is given the role of the medium which ultimately assigns the features to the labour process.

The incorporation of subjectivity into the labour process in such a way is largely reflected in Foucauldian inspired analysis of the labour process (see chapter 2.1). To reiterate, the subject in this context is completely caught up in power/ knowledge strategies which exert their influences on the individual but at the same time “freedom provides for an emancipatory potential and virtually guarantees a measure of resistance to subjugation” (Knights, 1990, p.

²⁵ For a critique of Giddens’ structuration theory see Willmott (1986)

²⁶ This statement might be perceived as contradictory as our model reinforces a dualistic approach to the study of the labour process. We rebut this claim by pointing to the fact that our analysis has two purposes. One is to describe distinct self-identities and another is to contribute some ideas to LPT. We are aware of the pitfalls of oversimplification related to the former aim and discuss these in chapter 5.3. With regard to the latter the distinction of the two perceptions of the labour process reinforced the necessity of a dialectical approach and thus provided some insights to the debate around the dualism in LPT but does not aim at deepening the chasm between the two positions.

326). Hence there is no totality in subjugation under power/ knowledge strategies. Additionally to the Foucauldian ideas, Gergen's (1991) suggestions, inspired by postmodernism, augment and underscore the above described interrelations. He coins the expression "social saturation" which relates to the increasing influence of media and communication devices which contribute to the "population of the self" (pp. 48-80). In other words, the individual is exposed to an increasing amount of "knowledge" which shapes and forms perceptions of the context the individual is entangled in. These influences on the perceptions of the individuals are associated with the notion of discourse discussed earlier but can be seen as a somewhat distinguishable concept. They are bits and pieces, incoherent fragments of information so to speak, which are fed into the awareness of the individual and support possible explanations of the world surrounding them. These influences, however, do not directly guide the actions of individuals as a discourse would but rather reinforce or enfeeble its meaning power.

Against this background a reference to the emancipatory potential, which relates to the quasi-autonomous patterns of identity regulation (see 2.2), is deemed. Drawing attention away from the notion of a large scale grandiose view of resistance and opposition, micro-emancipation emphasizes a sort of ephemeral break-away from oppression (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992). Hence the increasing influence of knowledge can also fuel workers' emancipation rather than pushing the individual in a pre-determined direction. Other authors claim that this input could also act to cement and support pre-existing knowledge and thus contribute to the institutionalization of pre-existing notions and subsequently the self-identity (Patriotta and Lanzara, 2006).

5.3 Limitations of the Findings

The areas of limitations of the study encompass the methodology, the applied method as well as the interpretations.

As was already described at length in chapter 3.1 the methodology is based on an anti-positivist approach. Thus the motivation of the study was not to describe or explain an objective reality but rather provide interpretations of the subjective experience of the workers. It was not the ambition to generate a de-contextualized, universally applicable concept nor was the goal to explain causes and effects. That said, the wish is that the findings do provide some sort of inspiration for further elaboration and guidance in organizations. As Alvesson and Sveningsson (2008) note related to their findings about organizational change:

”We refrain from producing lists of n-steps to take or technical recipes for how to do things. There is more than enough of this already and we are more interested in themes for reflection and encouraging thinking through the pitfalls and complexities of change work.” (p. 165).

A further area of criticism refers to the applied method and more specifically the sample size. As there was a relatively small sample size the possibility arises that other voices directing the attention to different interpretations are not heard.

Furthermore, the assessment of the source of information reveals some critical points. Source criticism, a historiographic approach, proposes guidelines for assessing the value, authenticity and possible distortion of information (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000, pp. 69-80). The main problem stems from the fact that the union officials and HR managers were secondary sources and provide interpretations themselves which could lead to a response bias based on misinterpretations or social desirability. Social desirability is the tendency of the interviewee to portray her-/ himself in a socially desirable way which leads to a bias in their answers (Richman et al., 1999). However, these possible pitfalls were dodged by picking interview subjects, who were assumed to be diametrical positioned (management vs. union). This choice of interviewees combines extreme positions and thus contributes to the creation of a broader and more coherent picture (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000, pp. 72-73). The fact that there were recurring statements about rationalization and resistance coming from all interviewees reduced the possibility of bias. Related to the accounts given by the sources the problematic of linguistic representation becomes prevalent which is discussed in chapter 3.

Last but not least there is a limitation concerning the findings of the study. Two points are particularly vulnerable to criticism, which are the study’s theoretical scope and categorization. The latter refers to the classification and systematization of findings. As Alvesson (2004) argues the case for classifying knowledge into distinct categories can be highly problematic and might be misleading (pp. 44-48). Nonetheless, the creation of the matrix of distinct self-identities enabled a clearly structured and readable account. It served analytical purposes yet it is acknowledged that it could be an oversimplification of the interpreted “reality”. It can only be reiterated that the account merely aims at providing themes for further reflection.

A last area of limitation concerns the theoretical scope of the study. A conceptual framework acts as a structuring and guiding device but at the same time narrows the interpretative repertoire. Theories simplify and by simplifying neglect other possible interpretations

(Morgan, 1997). In that sense, an interpretation will always be incomplete and the claim to totality futile. There can only be the ambition to enhance the interpretative repertoire and infer the “best explanation”. In the present study this was attempted by applying multiple concepts to support the interpretative propositions.

6. Conclusion

To conclude the account it is useful to revisit the research questions and reflect on the answers provided by the findings from VCT.

The first research question referred to the regulatory effects of management on identity work. Due to our chosen theoretical framework the regulation was assumed to be discursive in its nature and thus the effort was made to detect the dominant discourses which influence identity work (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Two dominant management discourses were laid open during the study.²⁷ They relate to the introduction of lean management and the ensuing rationalization as well as the introduction of the new cultural change program, “Our Tomorrow”. Connected to these official “umbrella” discourses various (sub)-discourses that circulate among the employees were discernible. Those related to rationalization were mainly negative in their undertone and thus affected identity work in a negative way whereas the cultural change program was either received with ignorance, resignation or acceptance.

With regard to the regulatory influences the empirical material enabled the generation of two dimensions along which the regulatory influences impact on the self-identity construction. The first dimension was derived from the ideas proposed by Beech (2008) which are related to meaning-giving tensions inherent in individuals, which influence identity work along a bipolar continuum. In our study the spectrum ranged from a positive to a negative affiliation towards VCT. The second dimension is based on the attribution of causation to behavioural outcomes and is commonly referred to as the locus of control. The locus of control can either be internal which refers to the attribution of behavioural outcomes to her/his ability or external which relates to the ascription of events to extraneous causes (Rotter, 1975).

²⁷ The research question forcedly narrows the view to a specific subject as well as the inability to conduct a long term study allowed only to detect these two dominant discourses. It is acknowledged that there are other discourses circulating at VCT due to the polysemic nature of narratives and stories in organizations (Boje, 1995).

Consolidating these two dimensions allowed for the derivation of four types of self-identities which thus provided insights to the second research question. Depending on their characteristics the individuals exhibiting a positive affiliation were respectively labelled Volvoite (internal locus of control) or Optimistic Loyalist (external locus of control) whereas the ones showing a negative affiliation were called Antagonistic Self (internal locus of control) or Stranded Self (external locus of control). A further in-depth scrutiny of the self-identities revealed possible negative influences on the “Volvoite” self-identity when the prospect of future rewards is taken away. This interpretation was based on the ideas related to “delayed gratification” which functions as a sort of incentive to work hard and seek a reward by climbing up the career ladder (Sennett, 2006).

The negatively attuned individuals were separately discussed. The antagonistic self was further examined by breaking the exhibited resistance down into different areas and intensity and mapping it along these dimensions (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999). The stranded selves are an interesting case as their behaviour can be related to a widely popular concept in psychology, namely the “learned helplessness” concept. Basically, this concept claims that individuals, who have learnt that they cannot influence behavioural outcomes, are exhibiting a resigned attitude and decrease their work efforts (Peterson et al., 1993; Peterson and Stunkard, 1992). Using some of the ideas of this concept, conjectures about potential future developments concerning this type of self-identity were possible.

Shifting the attention away from the immediate interpretation of the empirical material to a more abstract level the findings were reflected upon against the backdrop of LPT. It was claimed that the findings do not lend support to the alleged dichotomy inherent in LPT. Moreover an attempt to explain the findings was made which revealed that the constitution of the labour process is determined by the individual perception which in turn is strongly influenced by an ever-increasing “social saturation” (Gergen, 1991).

Even if the study was not driven by a normative approach there are some practical implications that can be drawn from our findings. These implications can be divided into *communication* and *action*. In terms of communication it is important to highlight the need for increased quality and safety for the company’s success even more than it is already done. Some workers still feel that quality measures are merely there to control them. Moreover, the

emphasis on external factors dictating the situation might reinforce feelings of helplessness. It would be advisable to reinforce a “can-do-attitude” so that the workers do not fall into a state of resignation. In terms of action a recurrent theme that makes the rationalization measures hard to bear is the feeling that appreciation is also “rationalized”. Workers expressed their need for appreciation which positively affects their work efforts. This might also help in creating a more positive affiliation with VCT.

“The company wants me to be a part of it and they try but I don’t receive any appreciation for instance: “you are very efficient”. No, it is money and I believe money is steering everything” [...] (Worker)

Another implication concerns the prospect of a career within Volvo. As shown above the prospect of reward is one important factor in keeping a positive affiliation towards the company.

In sum, it can be stated that the findings reveal some interesting insights into the process of identity work and the establishment of certain self-identities. It goes without saying that the findings are limited by the analytical need of oversimplification of social reality however it was the ambition to point out possible developments and moreover stimulate new thinking about the process of identity work and self-identities.

Bearing these aspects in mind the agenda for further research should concentrate on two areas, namely the continuation of the research on site at VCT and the augmentation of the general research agenda concerning identity work. The former should be carried out over a longer period of time and should include more interviewees supplemented by observations to be able to gain a comprehensive picture. One interesting area would be to accompany the further implementation of the cultural change program and see how it impacts the employees specifically with regard to their negative attitude towards the rationalization measures. To that end it would also be of interest to fathom success respectively failure factors of “Our Tomorrow”. In addition the possible change of ownership could be an incisive factor on identity work which would be interesting to investigate.

Drawing our attention away from following up on the object under study further research efforts should concentrate on the actual processes underlying identity work as it was initiated by Beech (2008). Especially interesting is the question what changes are necessary to shift meaning giving tensions or what other characteristics influences might possess which impact

identity work in a significant way. Socialization for instance could be an interesting point of departure in that area of research. An interdisciplinary approach drawing on ideas from psychology or other areas could be fruitful in that respect as it allows gaining more insights and possibly opening up the “black box” a little more as it was attempted in our study at VCT.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide (Management and Union)

What is your position?

How long have you worked here?

How old are you?

Where do you come from?

When did you join Volvo?

How do the regulatory efforts of the management and the union affect identity work?

- What is your job exactly?
- What could be improved in you work and in general?
- How do think your work/strategies are affecting the employees?
- Do you measure the impact of your work?

Is the management aware of and do they consider the workers' identity work?

- Did you contribute to the cultural change program devised by the management? (Union)
- How would you assess the general mood of the employees?
- Do you do surveys or questionnaires?
- Do you use success indicators?
- How flexible are you with your strategies/instruments?
- Have you change your efforts due to employees discontent?
- Do you think employees are satisfied?
- How do you feel about the honesty to speak out among the employees?
- How is your relationship with the management?

Are there distinct workers' self-identities based on the regulatory efforts of the management and the union?

- Why do you think people work here?
- How would you characterize the general shop floor worker at Volvo?
- Do you think they identify with Volvo?
- What would they base their identification on?

Appendix B: Interview Guide (Workers)

What is your position

How long have you worked here?

How old are you?

Where do you come from?

When did you join Volvo?

How do the regulatory efforts of the management and the union affect identity work?

- Are you aware of the efforts by management and union to establish a common culture? If yes, how do you perceive it?
- Do you feel that these initiatives impact yourself? How?
- Do you think about work often when you are away?
- What do you think of the unions at the plant?

Are the management and the unions aware of and do they consider the workers' identity work efforts?

- Do the management and the unions take your point of views seriously?
- Are they considerate of your needs?
- What do they do to make you feel a part of VCT?
- What could they improve?

Are there distinct workers' self-identities based on the regulatory efforts of the management?

- Do you consider VCT a big part of your life?
- Why do you work here?
- What motivates you?
- Are you proud to work here?
- How long have you worked here?
- Would you consider changing your job if it entails the same pay and the same conditions?
- How would you answer the question: who am I?

- Is this compromised by being at work?
- If so what do you do about it?
- With what do you most strongly identify? Union, product or company?
- How do you see your future?